

THE UNIVERSITY OF AKRON

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GARY L. MILLER
PRESIDENT

Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee
Chair Jerry Cirino
Testimony of President Gary L. Miller, The University of Akron
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Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Smith and members of the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee, thank you for allowing me to testify as a proponent of House Bill 33 on behalf of The University of Akron. My name is Gary Miller, and I am the president of The University of Akron.

The University of Akron is one of Ohio's most influential public urban research universities and is located in one of America's truly great legacy cities.

We serve nearly 15,000 students from across the country and around the world who come to the University because we offer unique, top-ranked and in-demand academic programs. A University of Akron degree positions graduates to make an immediate impact on Ohio's biggest and fastest-growing industries, including engineering, polymers and advanced materials, health care and education.

Indeed, graduates of The University of Akron go to work or other experiences—95% of 2021 graduates who reported their status six months after graduation were working full- or part-time, participating in a voluntary service program or the U.S. Armed Forces, or continuing their education—and the businesses and industry around us rely on the University to educate their future employees.

We have accomplished all of this while becoming a leaner institution. The University of Akron has reduced its full-time employee headcount by nearly 1,000 in less than a decade.

However, we continue to offer world-class academic quality. Last year, the University was ranked No. 1 in the world among polymer science and plastics engineering programs.

A PUBLIC URBAN RESEARCH UNIVERSITY, INSPIRED BY OUR PEOPLE, PLACE AND PROMISES.

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While exciting, the news of our global ranking was not unexpected. The University has for nearly 115 years played a key role in the development of advanced materials. When the rubber tire industry in Akron needed to grow in the early 20th century, businesses supported the creation of the world's first academic rubber chemistry laboratory at The University of Akron. When more synthetic rubber was needed during World War II, the U.S. government contracted with the University to establish the Rubber Research Laboratory to help with the war effort.

We continue to be ahead of the curve. A few weeks after the news of our global ranking, we announced the only undergraduate degree in polymer science and polymer engineering among Ohio's public universities, adding to the graduate programs we have offered for many years.

This academic program, and our other in-demand programs, and therefore the success of our students, depend on state financial support. I testified before the House Finance Subcommittee on Higher Education on March 28 as a proponent of HB33, which at the time was the governor's proposed budget. The governor's version included a robust investment in programs that are critical for student success and workforce development in Ohio. These programs include State Share of Instruction (SSI), Ohio College Opportunity Grant (OCOG), the Regionally Aligned Priorities in Delivering Skills program, known as RAPIDS, and the Innovation Hub Program. The current House-passed budget reduced funding for these programs, and I am asking for restoration of the funding to the levels in the governor's proposed budget. Two other areas that are important to The University of Akron—the Choose Ohio First Scholarship Program and the Mental Health funding—remained in the House version at the governor's proposed funding level, which I support. Finally, I commend the House for increasing the funding for the Co-op Internship Program, which includes The University of Akron's Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics, where we educate and train present and future political leaders with hands-on experience in Columbus and beyond. My testimony will discuss the critical nature of these programs.

State Share of Instruction (SSI) is essential to maintaining the quality of our academic programs, expanding student opportunity and growing student success. A restoration of the governor's proposed 3% increase in SSI will allow The University of Akron to innovatively grow our programs, enrollment and degree completions, which improves student success and prepares them for the work force.

The Ohio College Opportunity Grant (OCOG) provides grant money to Ohio residents who demonstrate the highest level of need, including those from historically underrepresented backgrounds, first-generation students and non-traditional students. During the 2021-22 academic year, approximately 22% of The University of Akron student body received a grant through this source. A restoration of the governor's proposed increase in OCOG funding will ensure that students are able to achieve their higher education goals and transform their lives.

Our students also benefit from the Ohio Department of Education's Choose Ohio First program, which supports scholarships for students in the STEM areas of science, technology, engineering and mathematics. The University of Akron's program has long been one of the largest and strongest in the state.

Seventy percent of Choose Ohio First scholars are engineers with a year-to-year retention rate of about 90%. More than 75% graduate within six years, well above the national average of students in these academic areas. We appreciate the proposed increase in these funds that will allow us to continue providing opportunities for students.

In addition to OCOG, The University of Akron is also grateful for the enhancement in other need-based financial aid programs such as the new Ohio Work Ready Grant Program for community colleges and university regional campuses. We know both programs will keep Ohio students in Ohio for higher education and career opportunities.

Another way in which we can achieve student success is by putting the right tools in their hands. I mean tools quite literally, thanks to the Regionally Aligned Priorities in Delivering Skills program, known as RAPIDS. This is a program in which the Ohio Department of Higher Education (ODHE) makes strategic regional investments in equipment and facilities to develop and support postsecondary institutions' workforce development projects that enhance the economic growth of students and businesses.

These funds have helped us build relationships with businesses in Northeast Ohio, particularly among the polymer industry. I noted earlier our world No. 1 ranking in polymer science and plastics engineering, which makes us a strong partner for this booming industry. The University of Akron asks for the program to be funded at the governor's proposed budget level of \$150 million.

The University of Akron is a member of the Polymer Industry Cluster, an initiative led by the Greater Akron Chamber, which includes more than 50 partners, 33 of which represent private industry. A state-recognized Innovation Hub focused on polymers and advanced materials in Akron will benefit the 500 polymer-related companies in Northeast Ohio. Funding for this proposal would transform the sector, supporting both existing projects and new, shovel-ready initiatives that position Ohio as a global leader in advanced materials. I ask that funding be restored to the \$150 million level proposed by the governor.

Although The University of Akron has received global attention for our engineering and polymer science programs, the University is also a place of opportunity in the arts and sciences. We are home to the nationally renowned Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics, a bipartisan research, teaching and experiential learning institute dedicated to increasing understanding of the political process with special emphasis on political parties, grassroots activity, civility and ethics, and hands-on learning through internships and events.

The Institute educates and prepares students to engage politically at the local, state and national level. Many of these students serve as interns here in Columbus and then remain here after they graduate.

Historically, the University has received funding for the Institute through the state operating budget. The University of Akron is grateful for the House's funding of the Co-op and Internship Program at \$1,365,000, which includes funding for the Bliss Institute as well as 11 other public policy institutes at Ohio public higher education institutions.

Although we provide many opportunities, students cannot take full advantage unless they are taking care of themselves. One of the top priorities at The University of Akron is the health and welfare of our students and to be responsive to their mental health needs. According to the National College Health Assessment Survey, 42% of students nationwide report distress, which makes it difficult to function. We are appreciative that the House's proposed budget provides funds to help colleges and universities continue to offer these services for students and build healthy communities.

At The University of Akron, we are always looking ahead to the future, and we have many reasons to be optimistic. We saw a positive trajectory in our new applications for fall 2023, and we see that trend continue with growth in the number of students who have accepted our offers of admission.

We are also moving forward on a project that will transform the University and downtown Akron. Thanks to a \$20 million commitment from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and in partnership with the City of Akron, we will create a new and dynamic space in a University-owned building, with opportunities for entrepreneurship, community collaboration, artistic performances and learning. This project will contribute to the economic prosperity of the University and the City.

We are grateful for Governor DeWine's strong support for state institutions of higher education across all sectors, the recognition of the value of a post-secondary degree and the effort to maintain the quality of academic programming and instruction we provide our students without compromising either access or affordability. We are also grateful to Chancellor Randy Gardner for his support of institutions of higher education and his quick and helpful responses whenever we contact him. The University appreciates that the Governor's proposed version of budget represents a solid foundation in funding both in terms of state subsidy for higher education and for student need-based financial aid. These items are the IUC's and The University of Akron's top priorities for this operating budget, and both directly affect student access, affordability and success.