

Testimony before the House Finance Committee on House Bill 64
Michelle Johnston, President of the University of Rio Grande & Rio Grande Community College

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Thank you, Chair Smith, Ranking Member Driehaus, and members of the House Finance Committee, for allowing me to testify on behalf of Ohio's institutions of higher learning and the students that we serve. My name is Michelle Johnston, and I am honored to serve as the president of the University of Rio Grande and Rio Grande Community College, a place we affectionately call "Rio."

Nestled in the rolling hills of the southeastern corner of the state, Rio is a one-of-a-kind institution: a combined public community college and a private master's level institution. We serve over 2200 students from 15 states and 10 countries and offer more than 70 academic programs, from certificates, to associates degrees, to a wide range of undergraduate and graduate majors. If you have a chance to read our mission statement, you will see only one keyword mentioned twice: "learner" is repeated in our mission, and I believe that says it all. We are focused on the development, well-being, and long-term success of our students. Decisions, large and small, center around the value and benefits for this singular purpose: our students.

It is for that reason – our students – that I am here today. To our campus, for our students, the Ohio College Opportunity Grant program is about access and about opportunity. As significant as those fronts are, the OCOG program represents even more. As costs have increased and debt levels of graduates have escalated throughout the nation, OCOG funding stands out as a strong statement for the state of Ohio that we care. We care about the long-term success of our citizens, the need to lessen the financial burdens that hold graduates back and keep them from contributing to our communities and our economies in the ways that they otherwise could.

At Rio, we rank fourth among the AICUO, private institutions in the percentage of our students who receive OCOG funds. Almost 40% of our students are impacted by OCOG – very positively impacted as you will hear from one of our best and brightest students, Carole Armstrong. In FY14, \$302,000 were awarded to Rio students. The financial needs among our students are very real, and in many cases severe. I applaud you for recognizing the value of this program and for taking this courageous and important direction to increase OCOG funding. Our hope is that all of our constituencies – students at our public and private institutions – benefit from this increase. Thank you for your thoughtful leadership and your clear and deep appreciation for need-based programs like OCOG that help us serve students who have the talent and the determination to change their communities, our state, and the world.

I am happy to answer any questions, but, in closing, please know that -- as citizens of Ohio -- Rio is YOUR College, YOUR University. Our gates are open and our hospitality is warm. Please visit us at any time. You will find that it is an extremely unique and special place.