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Cut Redundancy, Waste Resulting From Too Many Schools in Ohio

By Matt A. Mayer

With all of the death and economic destruction wrought by the pandemic, it is hard to see silver linings. One silver lining, however, is the opportunity presented by the total shutdown to reform Ohio's public higher education system for the 21st century. For too long, policymakers have adopted former Gov. James Rhodes' view that putting higher education establishments all across Ohio provided them with public relation political wins.

As a result, by my count, Ohio annually funds 15 four-year public colleges and universities and another 40 two-year institutions. These public entities join another 58 privately funded four-year and 29 privately-funded two-year institutions. No one ever seems to ask whether Ohio needs 142 colleges, universities and tech schools. Of Ohio's 15 four-year schools, only Ohio State University (No. 54) and Miami University (No. 91) rank in the top 100 nationally, according to U.S. News & World Report, with the University of Cincinnati (No. 139) and Ohio University (No. 185) making the top 200 ranked schools.

In terms of medical and law schools, Ohio publicly funds 6 of 8 medical schools and 5 of 9 law schools. Only OSU's and UC's medical schools rank in the top 50, as only OSU's law school makes the top 50 mark. The other schools fall far down the list of ranked programs, with some so bad they are among the worst in America. Our medical system may need more doctors so public support might be warranted, but does anyone really believe Ohio needs more lawyers, especially coming from academically weak schools? Perhaps it is time to permanently shut down a law school or two.

All of these schools have exploded their administrative staff and all too often many professors spend little time teaching and more time conducting research or doing consulting contracts with the private sector. Taxpayers and students would be far better served by streamlining Ohio's higher education system and making sure professors do what they were primarily hired to do: teach.

Theoretically, the free market will take care of the privately funded institutions. It is up to taxpayers to determine the fate of the 55 publicly funded entities and graduate programs. With the just-announced cuts to higher education totaling \$110 million, the time is now for policymakers to take the time the shutdown has provided to fundamentally reform Ohio's publicly funded higher education system.

When I wrote "Taxpayers Don't Stand a Chance: Why Battleground Ohio Loses No Matter Who Wins (and What to

Do About It)" in 2012, one of the seven key reforms I identified was the need to reform Ohio's higher education system. Specifically, I wrote, "Ohio must reduce the number of programs offered and invest more resources in the better programs to keep those programs among the best in America."

My aim was that with better programs, Ohio would attract the best and brightest minds from across America who could be part of reinvigorating Ohio's perpetually laggard economy.

In the book, I noted: "By leveraging technology, Ohio's top professors can teach online courses to all interested students at all colleges and universities thereby providing more students unique learning experiences and reducing the number of professors (and their lucrative pensions) and costly physical space needed to teach the same course at a dozen or more locations."

With the shutdown, professors have been forced to take this approach anyway. Why not adopt it more broadly by identifying the best professors to teach the courses across Ohio?

In terms of two-year schools, I talked about the frustration business leaders had with the bias toward four-year programs when they needed more technically adept workers for their companies. I argued that "a stronger two-year and trade school system would allow (students) to gain valuable skills that could be used to fill the high-skill jobs needed by Ohio companies."

With the opportunity provided by the pandemic, policymakers should launch a task force composed of key academic and business leaders with the goal to redesign Ohio's higher education system so it is the crown jewel of America. Doing nothing will mean too many academically inferior schools will continue to produce academically under-prepared graduates for an ever-increasing competitive job market. Policymakers owe taxpayers a better bang for the bucks.

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