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Wayne State University

**House Appropriations Subcommittee  
on Higher Education and Community Colleges**

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## Broad overview of the university

Chairman Huizenga, members of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Higher Education and Community Colleges, it's an honor to address you today.

A few years back, we introduced the phrase "Warrior Strong" to describe the tenacity and dedication of the Wayne State community. Throughout the past year, our students, faculty and staff have brought new meaning to that concept, and I'll provide some examples today.

Wayne State University has a unique mission: We are a premier, public, urban research university. The only one in Michigan.

We are classified by the Carnegie Foundation as "research extensive," the highest classification for research.

Wayne State also ranks in the top Carnegie classification for community engagement. We are proud to be one of only a few institutions in the country to hold the top classifications for both research and community engagement.

## COVID-19 response

A year ago, all of that was called into question, and we entered an entirely new world in response to the pandemic. I am proud of the way we responded.

Before the first case was confirmed in Michigan, our coronavirus committee and several subcommittees — including a public health subcommittee of epidemiologists and other health experts — were meeting on a daily basis. We were guided by three principles: 1) ensure the safety of our community, 2) continue our mission, and 3) hold people harmless, particularly financially, to the extent possible.

Along the way, we adopted a fourth principle to guide us as we planned our return to campus: to adopt what we learned from the pandemic to become a better university. We exercised creativity and care in adapting to this crisis, but also showed the heart of Wayne State Warriors in helping others within and around our campus.

Like every other university you've heard from, we quickly shifted teaching, learning and working online.

That enabled us to continue our academic mission, but we didn't stop there.

Our faculty members Drs. Paul Kilgore and Marcus Zervos are serving as co-principal investigators on the Moderna and Johnson & Johnson vaccine studies in Detroit. For both studies, Detroit was among the lead enrolling sites and was the leading enrolling site of minorities.

The education and research opportunities we provide to our students also planted a seed that contributed to development of the COVID-19 vaccines. Dr. Jason McLellan earned a bachelor's degree in chemistry with an emphasis in biochemistry from Wayne State in the early 2000s. He obtained his Ph.D. from the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine and then carried out postdoctoral research at the NIH.

Through research on coronavirus spike proteins, Dr. McLellan and his team were able to map the structure of the SARS-CoV-2 spike, an important initial step toward development of a vaccine for COVID-19. His work was essential in the development of three of the four major vaccines currently in use.

It was Wayne State that set Dr. McLellan on his career path, and 20 years later his work is saving lives.

## Community engagement

Over the last year, Warriors have contributed to our community in almost every way imaginable, from sewing masks for first responders, to manufacturing hand sanitizer in labs for police officers, to creating virtual engagement opportunities for families sheltering at home.

Perhaps our most impactful contribution was the launch of a COVID-19 mobile testing program in April — almost one year ago — that the state is now building upon by increasing the mobile testing infrastructure that can be extended for other health services, including vaccine administration.

Through a coalition of Wayne State, Wayne Health and the Ford Motor Company, the mobile testing units have visited close to 200 locations in the state and tested more than 33,000 people. The units go to multiple sites every

day but Sunday, including schools, churches and nursing homes throughout Southeast Michigan, and started doing so at a time when accessible community testing was virtually nonexistent. Because of the success of the program, the state has committed to providing three additional mobile units to Wayne Health.

This is a prime example of Wayne State leading the way for something that was greatly needed and directly benefits our community.

### **Excellence, access, affordability**

While Wayne State has shifted resources and focus to respond to the pandemic, we have also remained committed to student success and doing our part to meet the needs of employers and the state's goal of having 60 percent of working-age Michiganders holding a certificate or degree by 2030.

Wayne State exceeded its strategic plan goal of a six-year graduation rate of 50% one year early. The six-year graduation rate for Black students has tripled to 25%, from 8% in 2011. Wayne State's progress on boosting degree attainment and improving graduation rates has become a national model.

Given the pandemic, our ability to forecast numbers is not as precise as usual. However, based on the metrics we are monitoring, the five- and six-year graduation rates seem likely to improve again, both overall and for students of color.

While many colleges and universities around the country have experienced falling enrollment, in fall 2020 our overall enrollment was relatively flat, dropping slightly overall, but we grew our freshman class by 5%, making it our largest ever. And this came on the heels of our second and third largest freshman classes the previous two years. We have done this while maintaining our admission standard averages of a 3.4 high school grade-point-average and a 24 ACT score.

Specifically, in fall 2020, our African American freshman enrollment grew by 55% and our Latinx freshman enrollment grew almost 18%. Our enrollment gains are a testament to several innovative programs that broaden access to students and are now being emulated by others around the nation. I'll briefly mention two of these programs.

### **Warrior Way Back**

It's estimated that 1.4 million people across the state have some college education but no degree. These former students cannot return to school or get a transcript until their debts are paid. It also deprives our state much-needed college-educated talent.

The Warrior Way Back is a first-of-its-kind debt forgiveness program that allows stopped-out Wayne State students to earn their way to good financial standing by resuming their education. The program helps us reconnect with qualified adult students who can "learn" away their debt while working toward their bachelor's degree. Since the Warrior Way Back program began in 2018, 247 students have signed on and 59 have already graduated or applied to graduate.

Our enrollment management team is now looked at as a national model for debt mitigation and is now assisting other institutions and foundations in the creation of their own programs.

### **Heart of Detroit**

The Heart of Detroit Tuition Pledge helps to keep a Wayne State education within reach for Detroit residents. It offers free tuition for graduates of a Detroit high school or Detroit residents earning a high school diploma. Students have zero out-of-pocket expenses for tuition and standard fees for up to four years of full-time study. In just its first year, this life-changing initiative has already helped 569 students pursue their dreams of a college degree.

### **Funding/Finances**

COVID-19 has had a significant financial impact on university operations including international enrollment, housing and parking operations, conferences, and on-campus services.

The university has also incurred expenses resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, including the costs to transition to online learning and teleworking, COVID-19 testing and vaccinations, personal protective equipment, and enhanced cleaning and maintenance.

Merit increases remain suspended, and many employees are being furloughed between six and ten days.

Senior leadership has taken pay cuts. We are continuing university-wide restrictions, including limiting spending to essential purchases only, funneling all hiring decisions to me for my approval and consolidating information technology functions.

We support MASU's call for increased investment in higher education. While, we appreciate the governor's recommendation for a 2% one-time appropriation in the FY2022 budget, Wayne State remains more than \$10 million below its FY2011 funding level — the only university that has not yet been restored to the FY2011 level after the legislature instituted a 15% cut to higher education funding.

We also are very concerned with the recent bill seeking to reallocate all state university operating support appropriations for FY 2022 on a resident undergraduate Fiscal-Year-Equated Student (FYES) basis. While a model like FYES can seem like a good simplification for budgeting purposes, it fails to account for the wide differences among universities. Our MPUs have different missions, serve different student needs, have different models of access and success. Some have large research portfolios that may seem like a luxury, but are actually solving some of our state's and nation's most difficult issues, the pandemic being one example. Universities with graduate and professional schools would suffer from this approach, yet they are developing high-level, professional talent that serves this state. This proposal would devastate schools like Wayne State, and the students and community it serves.

### **Student testimony**

As I noted earlier, our faculty and students have been on the front lines in the battle against COVID-19. They gain invaluable experience while contributing greatly to our state's response. I would now like to introduce one of our nursing students, Madison Wiljanen, who stepped up during the pandemic while continuing her studies, and is a shining example for students all over our great state. Madison?

*[Student Madison Wiljanen testifies.]*

Thank you President Wilson, and thank you all for the opportunity to speak on my experiences at Wayne State this past year.

In March last year, when the world was shutting down, I was faced with a lot of difficult decisions. At the time, I was a resident advisor on campus, I was working as a nurse extern at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit, and I was completing my junior year in the nursing program. There was so much fear of the unknown, and to be frank, I truly believe that I witnessed some of the most tragic outcomes of the pandemic. The ICU at Henry Ford was understaffed and on the first day of the shutdown, I showed up to work and was told that I would be needed on the unit. I was really nervous. That day, I was in every room with every patient, I had burn marks on my face from the masks and it was the closest thing I'll probably ever see to a warzone. I put four patients in body bags during that 12-hour shift. After that, I signed up to work the next three weeks in the ICU and ended up working roughly 60 hours a week.

That experience alone was life changing. I remember walking out that first day and thinking to myself that I wouldn't be able to see my family if I kept working, that there were a lot of sacrifices I would have to make. But there was a sense of fulfillment that reminds me to this day, that I chose the right career.

Flash forward to the start of a new school year, and there is new information coming out every day on what is safe and what isn't safe. There are more difficult decisions being made on behalf of safety at the university, and as a member of the Student Senate, I was witnessing how complex these situations were. I was given the opportunity to join the Public Health Restart Committee as a student rep. Normally, as a student senator, I am advocating for students in whatever capacity I can, but I really didn't even need to because the leadership of Interim Provost Clabo made it clear that safety is priority. I really felt that there were people looking out for us and making sure that we weren't putting ourselves and our loved ones in positions of demise. I never felt that I was being pushed into returning to in-person classes and there was always communication on where the university was standing that gave me a lot of peace of mind. I believe that if the members of these committees had relaxed when other universities were relaxing, that we would have had many more cases and ultimately contributed to the already poor outcomes that the city of Detroit has faced throughout the pandemic.

My experience has truly come full circle because I started out in the ICU where there was no light at the end of the tunnel, no vaccine, no understanding of this virus, and now I have been giving the vaccine through Wayne State's partnership with the Detroit Public Health Department. Our nursing program has been deploying students to work alongside community leaders and deliver the vaccine to the most vulnerable in the city; my last experience was with developmentally disabled adults in group homes all over Detroit. We went to six different locations, and at every place, you can see the hope, you can see the light at the end, and it has been so rewarding. I feel prepared to graduate from Wayne State and do good — do better for the people who need it. I can't thank the university enough for keeping us safe while supporting us to make a difference.

Thank you.

*[President Wilson closes.]*

Madison is a great example of what it means to be "Warrior Strong." We are proud of her and the many students Wayne State who go beyond the classroom and even beyond themselves to help others and make our campus and community a better place. Their efforts, and their success, is good for Wayne State, and good for Michigan.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to address you today, and I will be happy to take your questions.