

Thursday, October 24, 2019

Higher Ed Performance Audit Bill Picks Up Amendments

A proposal allowing the state auditor to conduct more performance audits of higher education institutions picked up a pair of changes before clearing a House committee Thursday.

The House Higher Education Committee accepted two amendments to the measure (**SB 120**), one dealing with College Credit Plus and the other addressing public-private partnerships for the construction of student housing. (Updated **Bill Analysis**)

Democrats on the panel questioned the addition of the new language to what was a "clean" bill regarding performance audits, as ranking member **Rep. Catherine Ingram** (D-Cincinnati) put it. Nonetheless, both amendments were accepted, and the bill was reported without objection.

An amendment offered by **Rep. Craig Riedel** (R-Defiance) requires public high schools participating in College Credit Plus to allow any college within 30 miles that participates to attend annual information sessions for students and parents about the program. Rep. Riedel said current law only requires schools to invite higher education institutions that partner with the school.

Rep. Ingram asked how the change would affect schools that don't partner with the other institutions.

Rep. Riedel said there is no direct fiscal impact on the school districts.

"In current law, the high school has to hold one of these information sessions every year with the partnering college that they're working with," he said. "This would make it a requirement that when they're having that informational session, they would have to allow other already participating CCP schools to also show up to that informational session."

Rep. Joe Miller (D-Amherst) asked if school districts would be required to pay for students who choose institutions that aren't partnered with districts.

"Who is on the hook for that child going to these independent colleges or any other state or community college?" he asked.

Emily Tully, vice president of government relations for the Association of Independent Colleges and Universities of Ohio, said students can already choose to enroll in any college credit plus class, from any institution they want. The amendment simply prevents high schools from excluding nearby institutions that they don't specifically partner with.

"You want parents and students to have all the options so they can make the best choice for their family," she said.

The other amendment, offered by **Rep. Haraz Ghanbari** (R-Perrysburg), would extend the lease term for student housing built through public-private partnerships and preserve property tax exemptions. It extends the allowable time on the lease from 30 years to 75 years, specifies that campus housing facilities included in those lease agreements would remain tax exempt and that the universities would still own the property.

"I think that this would build in the flexibility in order to get lower rates so that we can build better buildings that will last longer. The tax exemption is already in place," Rep. Ghanbari said. "The assets would remain the property of the university as there's no transfer of ownership."

Rep. Ingram said the proposal deals with an issue at the University of Cincinnati, but she said she was concerned about oversight of the contracts.

"My concern is making sure that somewhere in the agreements, someone is monitoring and keeping up with what is actually happening with those developers," she said.

Rep. Miller said it makes sense to encourage universities to form public-private partnerships such as this.

"The university has property. They want to get together and partner with an entity that will come in and build a dormitory, housing facility," he said. "They will be doing it at the prevailing wage. On the public assets of UC, there will be a construction that takes place, and this building will become the property of UC."

"To me it makes sense. I'm just a little curious as to how they're going to set up the lease agreement," he added.