



KANSAS BOARD OF REGENTS

House Committee on Appropriations

Neutral Testimony on HB 2402

March 12, 2025

**Blake Flanders
President and CEO, Kansas Board of Regents**

Good morning, Chair Waymaster, and Members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide written neutral testimony on HB 2402 on behalf of the Kansas Board of Regents.

HB 2402 establishes a 17-member Blue Ribbon Commission on Higher Education to study and make recommendations to the Legislature on higher education in Kansas. The Commission may meet at any time and at any place in the state upon call of the chair, and members shall be paid expenses by the Board of Regents for their attendance. The Board Office will also provide support and assistance to the Commission. We estimate the cost of Commission meetings at \$76,000 – which will depend on the number of meetings and distance traveled by the members. The expense will require an additional appropriation to the Board of Regents.

The Commission is charged to study, discuss and make recommendations in the following areas:

- Long-term goals and priorities for higher education.
- Governing structure, financing, cost, savings, and consolidation of educational institutions.
- Accessibility and affordability of higher education.
- Strengths and weaknesses of higher education institutions.
- Strategies for enrollment and degree completion.
- Strategies for right-sizing and streamlining higher education with a student focus.

Many of the focus areas of study outlined for the Commission align directly with the Board of Regents' strategic plan, *Building a Future*, which centers the work of Kansas colleges and universities on serving the state and its needs. The Board developed the Plan around three pillars – helping Kansas families, supporting Kansas businesses, and advancing prosperity in the state.

★ LEADING HIGHER EDUCATION ★

Each pillar of *Building a Future* contains areas of focus to help direct the system's efforts. For instance, the Family pillar is focused on student affordability, student access and student success. *Building a Future* is unique in its inclusion of promising practices. These serve to establish a roadmap for achieving the objectives in the strategic plan. Each year, the Board adopts annual goals that help drive implementation of these practices.

The Board has implemented several key initiatives under the Family pillar, which align with the Commission charge.

- Advocate for increased need-based student financial aid;
- Limit tuition and fee increases for state university students;
- Require implementation of student success recommendations at the state universities, including centralized professional advising, strategic use of student financial aid, improved interventions for at-risk students, and better technology supports;
- Simplify students' path to a degree with the adoption of a systemwide general education core; and
- Support the seamless transfer of students among the 32 public institutions by increasing systemwide transfer of courses and associate degrees.

Through implementation of these initiatives and in partnership with the Legislature, the public higher education system is seeing results:

Increased Affordability

- State funded student financial aid has nearly quadrupled
- State university tuition and fee increases are less than half of inflation
- Student loan debt of graduates who are Pell recipients has decreased 16%

Enhanced Access

- The system is providing college courses to 15.5% more high school students than five years ago
- The number of Pell-eligible students in the system grew 4.9% last year

Improved Student Success

- On-time graduation rates have increased 7.3 percentage points systemwide during the last five years
- Retention rates have increased 3.1 percentage points
- Starting wages for graduates are up 16% since 2020

We support efforts to strengthen our higher education system in Kansas. The Blue Ribbon Commission on Higher Education proposed in HB 2402 in combination with the Board of Regents strategic plan could collectively have several positive impacts on students and the system. These may include improved accessibility and affordability; enhanced education opportunities; streamlined processes for students to navigate their educational journey; and increased support for degree completion.

The Commission's charge also includes the study of governance structure, financing, cost, savings, and consolidation of educational institutions. While the Board of Regents is focused on its role advocating for our students and public higher education in Kansas, there are some responsibilities that remain with the Legislature. If you have interest in incentivizing mergers or affiliations of institutions, the Board will need strong legislative collaboration. The Board of Regents pursued mergers of technical schools with community colleges or universities nearly 20 years ago, which the Legislature halted until further study was conducted of technical education. The Board's lesson has been that if we are to reimagine our delivery system, we must have your strong partnership and support on the front end.

We look forward to working with you on driving long-term improvements of our higher education system, benefiting future generations of Kansans.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on this legislation.