

House Committee on Taxation – HB 2038– February 4, 2025

Introduction

Chair Smith and members of the Committee, -

Good afternoon- I am Justin Rorabaugh, Director of Wichita State University's School of Digital Arts (SODA) and Shocker Studios. Thank you for allowing me the time to speak with you about what Wichita State University is doing regarding workforce development. Particularly, in direct support of film and digital media production as presented in HB 2038.

School of Digital Arts and Shocker Studios

Bachelor of Applied Arts in Media Arts – Approved as a new degree program by the Kansas Board of Regents in the summer of 2017 and launched 60 days later. The program is housed in Shocker Studios, our 35,000 sq ft production facility consisting of classrooms, and multiple cutting-edge production spaces including, film, animation, motion capture, clay modeling, multiple recording/podcast studios, and our industry leading editing suite. We have grown so rapidly we are currently in the renovation stages of additional space bringing our total footprint to over 50,000 square feet. We have also now entered into a new private-public partnership with Justin McClure Creative and together we have formed Synthetic Scenes – our virtual production studio.

While much of the conversation in higher education lately has been centered on the demographic enrollment cliff, these industry-driven concentrations are experiencing a significant surge in growth. In fact, data points to SODA growing from our current 550 students to over 1,000 in the next four years.

One of the major components of our degree program is the applied learning aspect. All students in the school are required to complete three different semesters and levels of Practicum work. This is all hands-on, production-based work performed outside of the classroom. Just this semester alone, we have over 155 students in our practicum courses, completing working on projects ranging from short films, animations, video games, and audio recordings.

There is a significant aspect of this work that is missing...Kansas does not have regular, film and television production opportunities for our students to work on. While our students do get opportunities to work on smaller, local productions, the magnitude and comprehensive nature of a "regular" set is missing. The potential impact of students having the opportunity to work on the scale of production proposed through this legislation would be unrivaled.

One of our recent collaborations is with Khiow Hui Lim, an executive producer located in Pasadena, CA who, as a former graduate of Wichita State, reached out to us about our capabilities in virtual production. While she would love to film entire projects in Kansas, given the lack of film incentive, she has begun looking to piecemeal if possible, which is how we were able to come on board alongside her to act as her virtual production studio. My biggest concern is as these students become trained in these areas, there is nothing to keep them in Kansas. We are losing the best and the brightest in this rapidly emerging area of commerce.

One of the questions I am often asked by parents of prospective students is, "But, can they stay in Kansas working in this industry?" Passing this legislation makes that answer a resounding YES.

We have students credited on Netflix and on tv shows like *The Bachelorette*. When we see the day our students are credited on productions that also boast being filmed and/or produced in the State of Kansas, I will know that the infrastructure we have been working so hard to train our students in, has come to fruition.

Call to Action

With the passage of SB 52, you can help us keep the creative workforce we are developing and training through the applied learning at Wichita State University right here in Kansas. Let's make Kansas a state people want to come to, rather than a training ground that fosters high-end talent and then sends them away.

Justin Rorabaugh
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