

To: Oregon Legislature
From: Susan Whitelock, Assistant Professor, Eastern Oregon University
RE: EOU Faculty Support of Tuition House Bill 4099
Date: February 5, 2020

I have been teaching at Eastern Oregon University for twenty-nine years in the English/Writing Department, and have witnessed the arc of changes in Oregon education policies since 1991 that have negatively impacted the success and retention of students from Compact of Free Association (COFA) nations. I urge you to support the COFA Tuition House Bill 4099.

EOU has a long history of students coming to us from the Compact of Free Association Pacific Island nations: Federated States of Micronesia, Republic of Palau, and Republic of Marshall Islands. It is a history that began after the first post WWII COFA agreements. When I first began teaching at EOU, there was a large and thriving population of COFA students on campus. At that time EOU supported a policy of granting in-state tuition to these students. COFA students were very successful and graduation rates were high, some going on to graduate school, or returning to their home islands to work as professionals in their fields and leaders in their island nations. Even the current President of the Federated States of Micronesia is an EOU graduate.

However, over time, this policy of in-state tuition for COFA students changed because other Oregon universities did not offer this benefit and required consistency across all campuses, and also EOU then suffered several financial support changes in Oregon, and EOU was left with the task of trying to survive cutbacks.

The impact of this change in tuition rates was immediate: I began to observe that students, now having to pay non-resident tuition, were dropping out of college because of financial strain, or students were enrolling intermittently to work to pay off balances so they could again register, or students joined the military, dropping out for long trainings. Many COFA students now work 30-40 hours a week to try to cover costs. In addition, many students have ended up in Collections due to high balances they could not cover in time. I also have witnessed the emotional stress that COFA students now experience because financial support no longer matches the cost of attending college. These students do not qualify for loans, and if they temporarily drop out to work or to participate in the military, they lose their island scholarships because they must gain a certain number of credits a year to keep those scholarships. In addition, many of these students come from poverty and cannot rely on family support, but rather their families rely on them.

Yet the United States made a commitment to COFA nations to support education. One could not have foreseen the skyrocketing costs of a college education. By charging non-resident tuition to these students, we are not fulfilling that promise. These students hold jobs and join the military,

but cannot reap any of the benefits of American citizens, such as Social Security benefits, and there are no military support services if they are Vets returning home to their island homes. They do not qualify for student loans, only Pell grants. Many of their families cannot offer financial support. I had the privilege of living in Chuuk in the Federated States of Micronesia, where I went to teach while on sabbatical, and I was able to witness first hand both their commitment to education, but also their great poverty.

I can say that any campuses with students from these COFA nations are only enriched by their presence. Even though they carry the burdens of their nations on their backs when they arrive on our campuses, they do so with commitment to hard work, and they continue their dreams of helping their families survive economic stress, the legacies of US nuclear testing, and climate change.

COFA students have long come to Oregon to enroll in all of our Oregon universities, and COFA students at all of our Oregon campuses are struggling to find access to affordable education. Our current university policies and practices stigmatize and oppress the very students we say we value, without any sensitivity to cultural differences, particularly financial differences. We are noting diminishing retention and graduation rates of Pacific Islander students without unmasking the very choices Oregon universities are making in policies and funding that have made these lower rates of college success inevitable. The students themselves are made to feel responsible for their poverty, as if they are dropping out for lack of love of learning, or are failing courses due to lack of commitment instead of lack of sleep and lack of money.

It is a shame that Oregon can boast that former graduates are now the leaders in Micronesia nations, but now we are letting down their descendants by not recognizing the impossibility of a financial situation created by non-resident tuition. Oregon can be one of the nation's leaders in recognizing the richness these students offer our state, and by acknowledging the commitment to access to education made by long standing COFA agreements.

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