

Testimony: Simone Cordery-Cotter  
March 30, 2022  
On behalf of the Oregon Student Association

Hello Chair Alonso Leon and Task Force Members,

My name is Simone Cordery-Cotter, I'm a second year graduate student finishing up my Masters of Public Policy at the Mark Hatfield School of government. I'm here today, virtually, to share my graduate experience as a returning professional student. I worked for 5 years in marketing and communications before pivoting my career into public policy by serving for a year in AmeriCorps. After my AmeriCorps term, I worked for a nonprofit for a year before coming to Portland State in the middle of the COVID 19 pandemic.

It has not been an easy 2 years, financially speaking. I'm fortunate that my partner and family are willing to support me financially, but I have still taken out \$20,500 in federal loans, which I will need to begin paying back in May. I've also been the recipient of a \$5000 State Treasurer Urban Pioneer scholarship, and a \$7,000 AmeriCorps education award. Personally, I've invested upwards of \$5000 of my own money into my graduate education, which has not been easy because it is very challenging to find full time or part time work that accommodates a graduate school schedule while paying sufficient wages to support my cost of living. I have had weeks where I would not be able to eat if it hadn't been for my partner and his financial support, or substantial familial support, because I have had to make a tuition payment.

I say all of this not to garner pity, but to illustrate that paying for graduate school has been a substantial drain on my finances, even with my excellent credit score, stellar academic background, and drive to work and make a difference in the world. The cost of a college education has risen 324% in the past four decades, and there has been little support from minimum wage growth or protections for graduate students. I frequently see opportunities come through my inbox that would be ideal to serve my educational and professional goals, but I simply cannot take advantage of them because even at \$15 or \$20 per hour, I cannot afford to take the work. Several times over the past year I have considered dropping out of graduate school in order to make more money in order to pay off the loans I have already accumulated and try to save money to buy a home. It's only the support of my academic advisor, Dr Hal Nelson, and several other faculty members that convinces me that my graduate studies are worth completing.

I have recently been offered a job as a policy analyst with Oregon's Office of the State Fire Marshal, and I'm fortunate that my new supervisor is willing to be flexible while I finish my graduate degree. I acknowledge that this is a rare privilege. If I could ask you for one thing today, I would ask that you respect the talent and skill of the students that will come after me, and pay them what they are worth. Ideally, student pay rates would not only include tuition remission but would also constitute a living wage so that students can concentrate on their studies and enjoy everything that their institutions have to offer. Portland State is a wealth of knowledge and expertise, but even a year and a half into my education, I feel as if I'm just scratching the surface because in addition to going to school, I have had to work a hodge podge of part time and full time jobs to support myself and pay for my education. We need meaningful and enforceable rules around student wages to ensure that these professional opportunities are available for not just the privileged few, but everyone who has been deemed worthy of university or college admission. Thank you for your time today.