

Chair Alonso León and Members of the Joint Task Force on Student Success for Underrepresented Students in Higher Education:

**Personal Testimony:**

My name is Moses Montenegro, and I live in Eugene, OR. I am a proud employee at my alma mater, the University of Oregon (UO). The greatest achievement of my young life was earning my BA in International Studies as a first-generation college student. I am testifying today to share my experience as a student from a background that has not historically been well-represented in higher education in Oregon.

Pursuing a degree in higher education was always a dream of mine since a very young age. When I was a teenager, my family moved from the Bay Area to Grants Pass, OR. I attended Grants Pass High School. For the most part, I had a good high school experience. I was involved in many clubs and had great friends. However, I had teachers who did not believe in me. For example, when I told my math teacher about my plans to attend college, he expressed that I did not have what it took to go to college. Although, I had an A in his class. In Grants Pass and in Oregon some people are unable to see past the predominantly white borders we live in. Let me be clear I did have teachers and community members who believed in me. However, the voices of those who told me I could not achieve anything were the loudest in my head.

After spending my senior of high school as a Rotary Youth Exchange student, thanks to the support of the Grants Pass Rotary Club, I returned to Grants Pass wanting to continue learning. I attended Rogue Community College (RCC). During my time at RCC, I was part of TRIO/SSS, a program that empowered me to identify and accomplish my education and lifelong goals. This program was what I needed to guide me through my journey in higher education. When you are a first-generation college student, navigating the unknown world of higher education is challenging. I was working and going to school full time. I spent three years at RCC before reaching the point when it was time for me to move on to a university. TRIO/SSS helped me with college applications and took me on college tours. Towards the end of my time at RCC, I decided UO was the best next fit for me.

There were many things I was not prepared for when I started at UO. I was especially not prepared for the high cost of a quality education. After receiving financial aid and being awarded the Diversity Excellence Scholarship, I still did not have enough to cover the cost of my first year at UO. I had no choice but to take out federal student loans to help cover my tuition and room and board. Even having taken out student loans, I still did not have enough money to pay my bills, so I did what I had to do and got a student job on campus. UO was a lot different from RCC. The courses were difficult, and I had to work harder. Balancing classes, homework, and a job during my first term at UO was challenging.

During my two years at UO, I struggled to find a balance. It was hard to imagine myself making it to graduation day and crossing that stage to receive my diploma. I was in a world with people who did not look like me or come from the same background as me. I felt like an outsider trying my very best to fit in. I found community at the Center for Multicultural Academic Excellence (CMAE). This corner of campus was my haven. I had a counselor and support system at CMAE of people who believed in me. With their support, I made it to graduation day, and my parents and family got to witness me walk across that stage. Although I graduated with student loan debt, I know people who graduated with way more than I did.

Being an employee at UO is an honor. I love the work I do, as I know it has an impact on students. My goal in life and the work I do, is to provide opportunities for students from underrepresented backgrounds the same opportunities I had. I know what it is like being the only student of color in a classroom. I know

what it feels like to feel like you do not belong. These institutions were not originally created for persons of underrepresented backgrounds. I encourage the Joint Task Force on Student Success for Underrepresented Students in Higher Education to be the best advocates for college students in Oregon. These students deserve better. They deserve the opportunity to succeed. Their success will not be easy, if there are people who believe they cannot achieve greatness. Students need supporters in their corner, and I am proud to be that for the next generation of Ducks.

**Student Financial Aid:**

Attending college is significantly more expensive than it was just a few decades ago or even just a few years ago. One of the most important things you can do to support students from underrepresented backgrounds is to make investments in student financial aid.

The OOG is Oregon's largest state-funded, need-based grant program for college students. It is the state's only need-based aid program. Approximately 40,000 students receive Opportunity Grants each year, yet funding limitations have meant that the grant is not available to thousands of students who demonstrate significant financial need. Funding for the OOG should be increased to provide a realistic possibility of college affordability for Oregon's lower- and middle-income students.

You may be thinking that incoming freshmen and transfer students can apply for scholarships to help offset the high cost of receiving a quality education- as a volunteer scholarship application reviewer for the Diversity Excellence Scholarship at UO. I can tell you that 10 out of every 60 applicants will receive this scholarship of about \$6,500.00. This is the same amount I received when I came to UO in Fall 2017. Although the cost of education has increased, scholarship amounts have not. Each applicant has good grades and has demonstrated that they will excel at UO, but there is not enough funding to give every student a scholarship. I will add that if I did not receive a scholarship from UO, I would not have been able to attend university dependent only on financial aid and federal student loans.

I hope you will provide investments with accountability measures to campuses that will allow them to support their student populations. Thank you for serving our community. The experience of today's students is very different than it was 10, 20, and 30 years ago, and our college and university communities look very different. I appreciate your time and support for student success.

Respectfully,

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