

July 20, 2022

Via Email

Oregon State Legislature
Joint Task Force On Student Success for
Underrepresented Students in Higher Education
JTUSHE.exhibits@oregonlegislature.gov

Re: Written Testimony in Support of Expanding the Oregon Opportunity Grant

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

My name is Garrett West and I am a resident of the City of Medford. I was raised in the Rogue Valley and graduated from North Medford High School in 2010. I was the president of the Robert D. Clark Honors College Student Association at the University of Oregon, where I graduated in 2014. I received my Juris Doctor from the Georgetown University Law Center in 2017 and am currently a practicing land use attorney in Jacksonville, Oregon. Much of my work centers on developing low and middle-income housing for the local area.

As a biracial member of the Southern Oregon Community, I felt that it was important to provide this written testimony to share my experience as a former student from a background that has not been historically well-represented in higher education.

Many of the people I grew up with in Southern Oregon who were considered to be “college-bound” were nonetheless unable to enter college because they were without any financial support to get them started. Many were persons of color and the best/brightest students in Jackson County’s public-school systems. They were in honors and Advance Placement classes, and had dreams of being doctors, lawyers, and teachers. However, their families were consistently in desperate financial need and college quickly became an impossibility.

Even a small investment in those students would have been life-changing, which is why I strongly support fully funding and expanding the Oregon Opportunity Grant. Many of Southern Oregon’s underrepresented young people would be able to enroll at the University of Oregon, Southern Oregon University, or any of the other public colleges if—and only if—they receive funding from the Oregon Opportunity Grant.

The Grant provides students who are in desperate financial need with a jump-start to get them into our institutions of higher education. These are students who almost never receive financial support from their families. Had many of my friends received such a grant, I firmly believe that they would have been able to enroll in one of Oregon's public colleges, that they would have had better lives today, and that the community as a whole would have benefited.

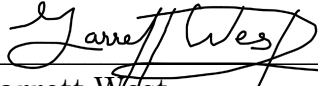
Southern Oregon's poorest students are getting poorer and need more help. The 2020 Almeda Fire annihilated large portions of the local community and rendered thousands homeless. In particular, several local mobile home parks and other lower-income neighborhoods were completely destroyed. The destruction of so much of our local housing stock compounded the already-existing housing emergency. As a result, housing costs have significantly increased and forced thousands of our residents to spend even more of their income on basic survival. Coupled with rising inflation and tuition prices, the local community will be facing significant crises in the coming years: our brightest students cannot afford to go to college and our college graduates cannot afford to live here. Even many of my friends who were able to go to college (teachers, lawyers, etc.) have been priced out of the region. You can imagine what this is doing to our already-disadvantaged students.

Tens of thousands of Oregonians receive Oregon Opportunity Grants each year. However, because of a lack of funding, thousands of students who demonstrate significant financial need are left out and simply unable to go to college. One of the best ways that the Legislature can support students from underrepresented backgrounds is to make investments in student financial aid. Funding for the Oregon Opportunity Grant needs to be a top legislative priority because it is a direct path to providing Oregon's lower- and middle-income students with a realistic opportunity of going to and affording college. This is direct aid that goes to keeping these students in school—it helps to provide them with a roof over their head, and food to eat while they start their studies.

I strongly urge you to fully fund—and expand—the Oregon Opportunity Grant. It is the strongest and most direct path to ensure Oregon's commitment to equity and economic prosperity for underrepresented students in higher education.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this written testimony.

Respectfully,


Garrett West
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