

TESTIMONY SB 553 2/8/21

To: Senate Committee on Education

From: Miked Tarkong, Student, Director of Political Affairs at Eastern Oregon University

Re: Testimony in Support of SB 553

Chair Dembrow and Members of the Committee,

For the record my name is Miked Tarkong, senior at Eastern Oregon University majoring in Political Science and Economics with a minor in Pre-law. I am the Director for Political Affairs this school year through the Associated Students of Eastern Oregon University. I am from the Republic of Palau.

I want to thank you for giving me this opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 553, tuition equity that will enable COFA students in Oregon to receive in-state tuition. The Compact of Free Association (COFA) is an agreement establishing and governing the relationships of free association between the United States and the Federated of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Republic of Palau that was established in 1886. The COFA Agreement states that citizens from each of these nations have special immigration privileges where they can be employed, educated, and reside in the United States as a nonimmigrant status, without a US visa.

Coming from a small island to attend college in Oregon, has brought up many challenges, and financial struggles that have contributed to our successes. In 2017, my first year at EOU, there were twenty three COFA students who enrolled in my cohort. Now in my fourth and final year, only four of us get to graduate with our bachelor's degree. The primary cause of this is the financial struggles that have become barriers and continue to contribute to the limitations of our success in accomplishing our educational goals. I could not have continued my education if I did not have a full-time job outside campus as well as an on campus job to help cover my living expenses, tuition and fees.

It is very difficult being a full-time student and having a full-time job. There are numerous times where I had to sacrifice my study time due to having to work in order to ensure that I can keep my apartment, have food to eat and still afford to go to school. What I am experiencing is very common for many of our COFA students. Some of which end up having to quit school because they do not have options. I have seen some of the students that start with me join the military in hopes to be able to finish and come back in order to fulfill their real desire -- a college education. And then some who are trying to manage life but are in a lot of debt, have accrued bad credit history and now are in a downward spiral of not being able to catch up.

My experience at Eastern Oregon University has allowed me to grow as a student but also as a leader. The number of experiences, skills, and knowledge I have received have enabled me to expand my comfort zone, develop my professional skills in order to continue to grow. But as I advance my degree, I cannot help but realize that I make up only 17% of those of my classmates that also dream of this opportunity but cannot gain it. As a senior graduating this year, I realize this same burden is also apparent in the opportunity to go to graduate school. COFA students do not qualify for scholarships, loans and other educational assistance in the US, that can help us further our education. Many students like me often do not go on to further their education in grad school because their first experiences in getting their undergraduate degrees, leave them with a huge financial debt.

TESTIMONY SB 553 2/8/21

By passing this bill, it will also provide a pathway for many COFA students to have an opportunity to attend college which is critical in helping fulfill the promises made in the Compact agreement between our countries and the United States. It will also help reduce the financial burdens faced by many COFA students in Oregon that have limited our ability to succeed in college and fulfill our goals as promised through our mutual agreement to help develop our countries and improve our family's socio economic livelihood.

Again, my name is Miked Tarkong, I hope you found my story inspiring and I humbly ask for your support on Senate Bill 553. By supporting this bill, you are helping change the lives of COFA students, our families, and communities.

Thank you for your time, and I would be glad to answer any questions you may have and as we say thank you in Palauan, Kom kmal Mesulang!