

Dear Co-Chairs and members of the committee,

For the record, my name is David Raco. I work for Southern Oregon University in Ashland and I live in Talent. I have worked for SOU for over eight years. I am writing you today to ask you to prioritize funding higher education and taking care of essential workers across the state. I appreciate that the current budget proposal does not include steep cuts, but we need to invest now to boost our economy and keep families safe.

This past year was particularly hard on SOU and its employees. The pandemic destroyed our budgets, and the wildfires in our region cost us dearly. Several employees at SOU lost their homes, and our enrollment will suffer for years to come due to displaced families from our region, families whose children could have attended SOU but won't now because they were forced to flee our valley. SOU managed to stabilize its finances by asking its faculty and staff to accept furloughs in 2020 and 2021. I have personally been furloughed one day a week since May of last year. The generous unemployment aid from the federal government and the state of Oregon has helped, but like many workers at SOU, I feel like I still need to accomplish 40 hours of work with only 32 hours in my work week. Thankfully we avoided layoffs in the aftermath of the pandemic and the wildfires, but I worry that if Oregon does not make an investment in higher education now, we will be right back in dire straights in a few years.

This is also the time to support our most vulnerable communities by investing in housing, paying essential frontline workers what they deserve, and investing in broadband expansion for rural communities. The Rogue Valley in-particular needs more affordable housing, especially in the wake of the wildfires that devastated our region and primarily affected lower-income communities. Our frontline workers have risked their health and the health of their families during the pandemic to continue to provide essential services to us all. I have been fortunate enough to work from home halftime since the pandemic began, but many workers could not perform their essential jobs remotely. They deserve our support. Finally, all the remote work during the pandemic has clearly revealed the need for better Internet services in our rural communities. I work with several people who live in rural areas, and their lack of stable and fast Internet service has impacted more Zoom meetings than I care to recall. The Internet has essentially become a utility and needs to be extended to all communities to ensure that they can fully participate in modern work and life.

Thank you for having this hearing and for taking my written testimony.

Sincerely,  
David Raco  
Ashland, OR