

Chairs Frederick, McLain, and Members of the Committee:

My name is Maya Ward and I am the State Secretary of the Associated Students and the University of Oregon. On behalf of the 21,800 students at the University of Oregon, I am writing to urge you to make robust investments in funding for public higher education, including student financial aid, by funding the Oregon Opportunity Grant at a minimum of \$200 million.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, students were struggling to afford rent, food, and textbooks, in addition to the cost of tuition. These issues have been exacerbated by the pandemic. An overwhelming majority of UO's undergraduate student population has reported experiencing significant impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic to their academic experience. In a national survey, 96.5% of UO respondents reported obstacles in the transition to remote instruction, financial hardships, negative impacts on mental health, and/or unstable/unsupportive living conditions due to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup> **These impacts were found to be even more pronounced among the most vulnerable students, namely those from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups and those who are lower-income and eligible for Pell Grants.**

Further, the data demonstrate the impact of the pandemic on student outcomes and ability to return to study at the UO in subsequent terms. Specifically, among UO's vulnerable student groups, 26% of undergraduate resident students reported the possibility of not returning in the fall due to the need to work to support their family or themselves.

We could share numerous statistics with you, but behind those numbers are those most impacted by funding for higher education: students. It is clear that students are struggling as a result of the pandemic, and it is more critical than ever that this committee supports additional investments that will provide resources and support to students, and make college more affordable and accessible.

The Oregon Opportunity Grant 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 in order to provide a realistic possibility of college affordability for Oregon's lower- and middle-income students. Some have said that we don't need to invest more in the OOG because students have also received grants from federal aid provided through the relief packages. However, getting some federal support one year, doesn't do anything to help students this year and the next.

Thank you for serving our community. I know you will be forced to make tough budget decisions this session, and I hope you prioritize restoring opportunity for all Oregon students.

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<sup>1</sup> SERU Special Survey Results: <https://conservancy.umn.edu/handle/11299/218339>

Sincerely,

Isaiah Boyd

ASUO President, 2020—2021, 2021—2022