

Chair Lively, Vice Chairs Ruiz & McIntire, and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify to you today.

My name is Melanie Landon-Hays and I am a professor of Teacher Education at Western Oregon University, and I also serve as the faculty union president.

I am here to testify in favor of HB 3499. This bill is essential to improving higher education in our state.

Until fairly recently, the US had a virtually free system of public higher education. In 1862, to provide educational opportunity for the "sons of toil," the U.S. Congress passed the Morrill Act, establishing land-grant public colleges and universities on a tuition-free basis. For roughly a century thereafter, many American public colleges and universities either charged no tuition or a nominal fee for attendance. The State University of New York (SUNY) system--the largest in the nation--remained tuition-free until 1963. The University of California system, established in 1868, had free tuition until the 1980s. As recently as the early 1990s, most college students did not take out loans to finance their education. At the national level, free college programs have been in effect for military personnel since the 1944 GI Bill. At least 26 other countries have free or nearly free college tuition.

A lot has changed in the last 30 years however. Between 1978 and 2013, American college tuition reportedly rose by 1,120 percent. Nearly three out of four college graduates have borrowed to cover their college costs, running up a debt averaging \$30,000 each. As a result, American student loan debt now totals \$1.3 trillion.

The tuition squeeze on young Americans results largely from severe reductions in state and local funding for public colleges and universities, usually initiated by conservative, budget-cutting governments. Since 2008 alone, state funding for public universities has dropped 16 percent. The state of Oregon is ranked as 48th in the nation for funding toward higher education. As a result, we also follow all of the negative national trends that institutions of higher education have put in place to ameliorate the lack of funding, including, the increasing adjunctification of the faculty, influence of wealthy donors and market trends on degree programs offered, and declining enrollments for our students, especially those in need of financial aid.

Free tuition would, at the least, restore educational opportunity to millions of Americans and lift the terrible burden of debt from young people. In addition, by bringing large numbers of new students and their funding to public colleges and universities, it would reduce the incentive for administrators to turn the faculty into powerless, impoverished

laborers through adjunctification. And, a surge of fully-funded students might even provide administrators with the backbone to resist the growing corporate takeover of higher education. As a member of the faculty at Western, who has seen hiring freezes, cuts to salaries, and the reduction of programs due to decreasing enrollment and investments in higher education, I can personally testify that our faculty and community is suffering. WOU plays a major role in the economic development and employment of people in our region, and we have been hit hard over the last few years. This year alone we had to cut 5 million from our budget and have lost a quarter of our faculty positions due to nonrenewal, retirement and attrition. The experience and wisdom that is lost with these positions is impossible to count.

On a positive note, research on the cost-benefit analysis from multiple programs across the US show that free tuition passes the cost-benefit test, that is the effects on college outcomes, and the effects of college outcomes on future earnings, is much larger than the cost to the government and society as a whole. Moreover, it appears that benefits-per-dollar-of-cost are at least as high with open access aid, providing greater total benefits to the community as a whole. Free college tuition programs have proved effective in helping mitigate the system's current inequities by increasing college enrollment, lowering dependence on student loan debt and improving completion rates, especially among students of color and lower-income students who are often the first in their family to attend college.

Additionally, wage inequality by education, already dreadful before the pandemic, is getting worse. In May, the unemployment rate among workers without a high school diploma was nearly triple the rate of workers with a bachelor's degree. Today, the fastest growing sectors of the economy are in education, health care, computers and information technology. To have a real shot at a job in those sectors, workers need a college credential of some form such as an industry-recognized skills certificate or an associate's or bachelor's degree. The surest way to make the proven benefits of higher education available to everyone is to make college tuition-free for low and middle-income students at public colleges, and this bill would be pivotal in making this happen.

Dr. Melanie Landon-Hays
Western Oregon University Federation of Teachers

