

Good afternoon Chair Lively and members of the committee. My name is Keith Haxton and I live in Beaverton. I am speaking to you today to urge your support for House Bill 3499.

I am going to first talk about the need for Oregon's universities to be recentralized under the Higher Education Coordinating Commission by way of a personal anecdote, and then I will explain why I believe higher education should be freely available at the point of service.

When Oregon's public university system was broken up and decentralized back in 2013, I was living in Ashland, which is the home of Southern Oregon University. Putting SOU and the other regional universities on the path to privatization had immediate and far-reaching negative consequences for myself and thousands of other people who were (and many still are) relying on the university for their education and/or employment.

The next year (2014), SOU was facing millions of dollars in budget shortfalls primarily as a result of ending the mandatory resource sharing between universities. SOU had to cut some historic programs and scrambled to find funding anywhere. SOU ended up going into a bit of debt in an attempt to try to attract wealthier, and out-of-state students.

I was in this building about 10 years ago, begging my representatives along with the student body president and other student leaders, begging for the state to make up the difference. We only needed about 5 million dollars to cover the shortages. We ended up getting less than 3 million.

Meanwhile, back at SOU, the independent board began "retrenchment", which allowed them to make deep cuts both to student programs and faculty pay. This nearly triggered a strike, but faculty agreed to forgo their pay raises to help soften the blow. However, with their newly imbued autonomy, the board president and top-level administrators decided to raise their own pay at the same time they were cutting the pay of so many others. This blatant display of greed at the expense of students and teachers triggered the faculty to hold a vote of no-confidence on their own administration. The faculty voted more than 70% that they had no confidence in their board appointed administration. It was one of the worst times the university has ever had to endure, and there was an atmosphere of fear throughout the campus. Professors and other university employees were let go for speaking out. This was all directly caused by the decentralization approved in these legislative chambers.

Oregon's public universities are still cutting employee wages, increasing tuition, racking up large debts, and catering to out-of-state students. The negative consequences of decentralization are still playing out across the state, to the detriment of students, professors, and university employees. The first step to privatization has had the predicted consequences. The only people helped in this process were our state's local oligarchs, who needed it the least.

Because of its cost, higher education is not available to everyone who wants to and is otherwise able to attend college. I would love to attend college, earn a degree, and learn more about the world. I'm one of those folks who has never had a hard time in school once I'm allowed to attend. But I have a very hard time being able to afford attendance. Earning a college degree is something that I've been trying to do for my entire adult life, beginning when I first attended college in 2006, when I was just 17 years old. I stopped attending following my first term, after

being denied financial aid because of a clerical error and then learning that my father had been paying for my tuition with credit cards.

I was so young and naive back then. I thought I could work for a summer and save up enough money to pay for my tuition and books for the year. That was a path I had heard about, a story of hard work and perseverance that I believed in. I moved to south Florida to work with my father, uncle, and cousins, in construction. Unfortunately, I was laid off that summer. I didn't know it then, but that was the beginning of the Great Recession. Within two years, everyone who worked at that company with my father would be laid off and that company would go out of business. My father was the very last person to be let go.

I was laid off again about 18 months later, this time working with my brother in north Florida. Feeling that my employment would never be secure, I decided to join the military. It seemed like the best option not just for attending college but improving my life generally. I attended college while I was serving, but a change of my supervisor changed my fate, and prevented me from completing my second term in college. Now I am a disabled veteran, but I don't qualify for the G.I. Bill, nor any other educational benefits. The requirements were changed while I was serving from one to three years of service. I only served for two years. I receive compensation for my disability each month, but it isn't enough to cover even a single class.

In total, I have had to stop attending college because of its being unaffordable at least 6 times in the last 17 years. I have attended college while being homeless for more than one term. I never wanted to go into debt just to receive an education. Having witnessed the horror stories of friends and family who took out private student loans; having seen how many of my peers were saddled with credit card debt from college; having been forced to go without work, without income, despite being willing and able to work, I can't justify betting any more of my future earnings on a college degree now. Mortgaging my future is not a good option, for me or any other student.

So now I'm stuck in this catch 22. I can't afford to attend college even if I'm working full time. Because I don't have a college degree, I can't make enough money per hour to afford college out-of-pocket. If I make enough money to live, I lose my financial aid and therefore my ability to attend college. If I try to work and attend college at the same time, I still don't have enough money to pay bills. This is the punishment I have for trying to attend college while not coming from a middle-class family. I am just one of many millions of US residents who have a similar story. Please make college and university cost-free so that we may all live up to our potential and achieve success.