

Co-chairs Sollman and Ruiz, and members of the Committee:

For the record, my name is Dra. Luz Villarroel, and I am a retired educator who worked with students at Oregon's public universities and community colleges for 55 years.

Why am I here advocating for college affordability?

My Heart goes to each and every student who has faced and is facing horrific circumstances, today even more so than in my era, which I have encountered in my past 55 year serving as an educator K-Higher education as an administrator, teacher and counselor. I have witnessed students at PCC going from identity based renter to center to gather snacks for food for the weekend and if Panther Pantry open gather a little more to eat. Our pantries now are open on a limited basis due to lack of funds.

Imagine, I started college in 1969, was able to attend my freshman year with the Tedd F Kennedy Scholarship for four years, and my Fathers Social Security fund. If I had not had access to these funds I would not be sitting here today having earned a BA in Teaching and Linguistics Background, A Masters in Guidance and Counseling and a Ph.D. in Higher Education Administration with Emphasis in Student Development, Sociology and Spanish.

In spite of these funds I found myself experiencing food insecurity, but due to the kind and caring community in Independence, Oregon, I had access to food when I needed or was hungry or the cafeteria was closed. Nowadays we have thousands of students facing not only food and housing insecurities but also can't afford their books, day care and health care nor transportation!

To ensure that the barriers faced by today's students are reduced, I am here to ask you to fund the Student Basic Needs Package (HB 3182 and HB 3183) and increase funding for the Oregon Opportunity Grant.

Passing the Student Basic Needs Package will aid Oregon's students by making it easier for them to access resources, housing, and affordable textbooks. HB 3182 will earmark \$10 million dollars to support Benefit Navigators at Oregon's colleges and universities, which will help connect students to resources and services that will help them thrive academically. It will also dedicate \$6.5 million dollars to nonprofit organizations providing affordable housing support and rental assistance support to low-income college students across this state and create a Student Housing Task Force to investigate barriers students face to accessing housing and to make recommendations that increase student access to affordable housing.

HB 3183 will devote \$5.2 million to Oregon's statewide textbook affordability program, Open Oregon Educational Resources, to continue expansion of no-cost, low-cost textbooks and course materials across Oregon's colleges and universities.

I also ask that you support a \$150 million increase to the Oregon Opportunity Grant, to bring overall funding to \$458 million. An additional investment of \$150M in the Oregon Opportunity Grant would provide meaningful relief to low-income students, making higher education more affordable. Increased investment in the OOG will allow grants to keep pace with rising college and living costs, and OOG eligibility would expand from from 60,000 to an estimated 71,000 students. This ensures that more students can access and complete higher education without crushing debt, leading to a stronger workforce and economy.

You would think by now we would have figured out how to fund free education for all who are struggling to survive who live under the national poverty line.

Let's all who are here who have the power to make a difference think about our own college experience and empathize with our college students of today who are facing the worst historical era in our country in regard to our safety issues, on the brink of an economic disaster and large and unforeseen economic insecurities.

Thank you for taking the time to listen and I hope your heart will empathize with our students and community.

Kindly,
Dra. Luz