

TESTIMONY

April 14th, 2025

Good afternoon Co-Chairs Sollman and Ruiz, and members of the Joint Subcommittee on Education: Ways and Means.

My name is Kristen L Pratt, I am a faculty member at Western Oregon University, a member of OCTPET, Oregon's first community advocacy group aimed to transform postsecondary education through policy change, and a member of the People's Council for AFT Oregon. I submit testimony today in support of [SB 5525](#): Public University Support Fund Increase, which would provide critical funding to sustain and strengthen Oregon's public universities.

As an educational researcher I have witnessed firsthand how inadequate funding directly impacts our ability to serve and partner well with students and our community. Western Oregon University plays a vital role in Polk County and the broader Mid-Willamette Valley, serving as both an educational cornerstone and essential workforce development institution. The reality of chronic underfunding has become increasingly dire. In recent years, our university has been forced to make difficult decisions that directly impact educational quality and access. In my department, we have seen reduced course offerings, larger class sizes, and diminishing support services for students who require specialized attention to succeed academically.

Within the College of Education, we have experienced concerning reductions in clinical supervision, professional development opportunities, and technological resources that are essential for preparing the next generation of Oregon's teachers. At a time when Oregon faces a critical teacher shortage, particularly in rural communities like those surrounding Polk County, these cuts directly undermine our state's educational infrastructure and economic future.

The impacts extend beyond my department and college. Across Western Oregon University, departments have been consolidated, staff positions eliminated, and maintenance deferred. Our ability to retain talented faculty and staff has been compromised as salaries remain uncompetitive and work demands and conditions untenable due to short staffing. Student services—from mental health counseling to academic advising—have been stretched thin precisely when our students need these supports most.

For our students, these funding shortfalls translate to real barriers: fewer class sections making timely graduation more difficult, reduced academic support services, and rising costs they cannot afford. Many of our students work multiple jobs while attending school full-time, and additional financial burdens often force them to drop out entirely. Each student who leaves without completing their degree represents not only a personal setback but a loss to Oregon's workforce and economy.

The impact on Polk County and surrounding communities is significant. Our graduates predominantly remain in Oregon, contributing to the local economy and addressing critical workforce needs in education, healthcare, business, and public service. When the university struggles, the entire region feels the effects.

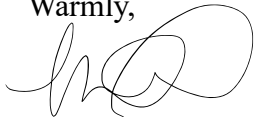
I urge you to increase the Public University Support Fund from the current \$276 million to bring overall funding to \$1.275 billion. This investment is an investment in Oregon's economic resilience and future prosperity. It would allow Western Oregon University to:

1. Restore cut programs and course offerings essential to student success
2. Improve retention and graduation rates through enhanced student support services
3. Maintain affordable tuition rates for Oregon's families
4. Address critical maintenance and infrastructure needs
5. Invest in high-demand programs aligned with Oregon's workforce needs
6. Retain talented faculty and staff who might otherwise leave for better-funded institutions
7. Expand access and support for underrepresented student populations

The evidence is clear that investment in higher education yields substantial returns. We can and must do better for our students and communities. This funding increase represents a crucial step toward reversing years of disinvestment and building a stronger, more equitable Oregon.

Thank you for your time, and I hope to count on your support for this vital funding increase for Oregon's public universities.

Warmly,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kristen L. Pratt', written in a cursive style.

Kristen L. Pratt, Ph.D. [she/her]

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