

March 30, 2015

**Testimony in support of HB 3237**  
**House Committee on Higher Education, Innovation, and Workforce Development**

Chair Read and members of the committee,

My name is Kevin Weitemier, I am a Ph.D. candidate in the Botany & Plant Pathology department at Oregon State University. I am also a graduate employee of the university. As a graduate employee I perform research advancing the use of “next-generation” genome sequencing, I help maintain and organize the OSU Herbarium (the largest museum of preserved plant specimens in the state), and I teach the fundamental science of botany to some of the many undergraduates that come through the department.

I write in support of HB 3237, the addition of a graduate employee representative on the university boards of trustees.

Like me, graduate employees are direct stakeholders in nearly every aspect of our public universities: they take classes, they teach classes (about 1/3 of the instructional hours at the University of Oregon are taught by graduate employees), they are involved in student services, and they perform original research that keeps these institutions at the cutting edge of innovation (and that secures additional funding via grants).

Despite their broad relevance across the universities, graduate employees do not have a voice on the boards of trustees. They represent unique interests that differ from those board positions that are already reserved for a student, a faculty member, and a staff member. Graduate employees are not solely students, they are not solely faculty, and they are not solely staff. They are a group that holds a unique relationship to the university that includes some aspects of each, but is represented by none. Though the university boards have only been in existence for a short time, the lack of representation has already been felt by graduate employees, who have struggled to be heard in the most basic ways such as when requesting time on meeting agendas or asking to distribute documents to members of the board.

One small example of this lack of voice was demonstrated just a few days ago during the March meeting of the OSU board of trustees. During this meeting the board was considering tuition increases for the 2015-2016 academic year. Graduate tuition is set separately from undergraduate tuition, but graduate students who are employed by the university receive a full tuition waiver. The members of the board recognized this, and so much of the discussion about changing graduate tuition related to its effect on grants and the internal finances of the university. This is an important and ongoing discussion, but a critical piece was missing: the effect on the graduate employees themselves.

Many graduate students are not employed for every term in an academic year. A person's funding in a future term is uncertain (often not known until shortly before or sometimes even after a term has started) and if funding is lost that person not only loses an income, but they now must pay for tuition on top of it. This is exacerbated for graduate students who pay out-of-state tuition. (Despite living, working, paying taxes, and voting in Oregon for sometimes several years, a graduate cannot obtain in-state tuition status if they were originally classified as out-of-state.) This can be a real and significant financial hardship.

The board voted to raise graduate in-state tuition 2%, and out-of-state tuition 5%. During the entire discussion no one raised the issue of what effect this would have on people in the situation above. I have personally heard the difficulties of a person in just such a situation, but that story was not heard by members of the board. That story was not told by the student representative on the board, an undergraduate, nor was it told by the faculty representative, the Dean of the Graduate School.

I am advocating for HB 3237 not because of the outcome of a particular vote, but because such a vote was taken without even the knowledge of some of the its major effects. Because the story of those who could be affected most acutely was not even heard.

The situation I describe above relating to graduate tuition is an example of a subject that is obviously not directly represented by an undergraduate or a faculty member. However, I wish to emphasize that it is by no means the only subject. As mentioned above, graduate employees are involved in nearly every aspect of the universities' operations: teaching, learning, discovery, and support. In this way a graduate employee representative would bring a unique perspective to the board from behind the desk, in front of the blackboard, and in the lab.

The addition of a board position for a graduate employee would also increase representation for people actually in the university community. Of the 14 voting positions on the university boards, only the three positions outlined above – student, faculty, and staff – must include someone actively involved in the university community. The remaining positions can be held by anyone, and include not only Oregonians but people living across the country.

I would like to thank the committee for discussing this important legislation to strengthen our amazing public universities. I would have liked to testify in person, but the time conflicted with my teaching schedule.

Sincerely,  
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The views expressed here are my own and may not represent those of Oregon State University.