

Testimony of Dean Laura Nissen to the Education Ways and Means Committee Wednesday, April 22, 2015

Co-Chairs Monroe, and Komp and Committee Members. For the record my name is Dr. Laura Nissen and I'm the Dean and Professor of the School of Social Work at Portland State University.

I'm here to ask your support for our request for \$755 million for public universities in the 2015-2017 biennium.

The money is not for the universities, it is for the students who are facing heavy debt loads and inadequate services – especially in social work where I work and live, but also true for students across the PSU family where we have the most low-income, first generation students, underrepresented communities of color and veterans of any of the universities. These are all students who deserve and need more support but we have less and less available to give to them.

In my school – in social work – our students are a special group – often first generation students, often with complicated backgrounds of their own – they make a lifetime commitment to serve the most vulnerable and the most in need – focusing in such areas as:

- homelessness
- child abuse, neglect and juvenile justice
- drug and alcohol addiction
- trauma and mental health
- human trafficking
- health, aging and disability
- school social work
- domestic and interpersonal violence
- and various forms of community organizing to advocate for civil rights and equity of various identity groups

To highlight the compelling need and financial vulnerability of our students in our program (often choosing between paying for books and paying for food), almost half reported food insecurity in a recent first of its kind internal study*. Imagine a student working with those who do not have a home, who is him/herself, hungry. And imagine that times many hundreds. That is our reality every day.

And amazingly, in the face of these challenges, our students and our faculty BELIEVE that the world can and will be a better place if they invest everything they are in building solutions. Some of those future social workers are considering a college pathway at this very moment – and we need your help to make sure that this is possible for as many of them that are needed.

Our students, like so many at PSU, are among the most earnest, hard working and committed Oregonians - they are often working multiple jobs, attending to family needs, and not only participating in classes, but completing field work that puts them on the literal front line of some of the most tragic, dramatic and powerful human experiences that one can imagine – they are witnesses to both human suffering, and thankfully, healing. But they need support from our schools to succeed – and too often – we are faced with continuing cutbacks resulting in loss of services (additional advising, adequate class sizes, range of course availability to meet needs) that is required. Rising tuition causes student debt load to creep upwards too often – especially burdensome for the humble salaries expected in the professional practice of social work and related fields.

Social work as well as allied professions, are among the fastest growing employment sectors in Oregon and nationally. But we have limited ability to meet these growing workforce needs in our state due to financial constraints preventing vital faculty hires and expanding our student body.

This is especially relevant as we were created by the Oregon state legislature 50 years ago to meet these needs, and stand today as the only public social work education option in our state – yet funding cuts have impaired our ability to fulfill this important and vital promise.

In the last 15 years, our programs have been tightened, trimmed, and squeezed beyond measure. This incalculably important resource – our public higher education system in Oregon – and my program as a poignant example – needs your fierce commitment. We aim to, and have the capacity to, continue to be a vitally important part of our state’s future success– but only with your help and investment. Because we are so cognizant of the many challenges and funding requests, we are aiming only to restore what has been lost – please on behalf of our students and the many vulnerable populations that count on them to assist in building a strong, healthy and vibrant Oregon, lend your support to this request.

*School of Social Work Anti-Hunger Coalition, 2013