

April 12, 2017

Chair Holvey and Members of the House Committee on Business and Labor:

My name is Chris Sinclair. I am an Associate Professor in mathematics at the University of Oregon. I am an officer in my union and the incoming University Senate President. I have been at UO since 2009, and like all my colleagues at UO and around the state, I have a deep commitment to the education of Oregon students.

I have been in academia for much of my adult life. Before graduate school, I was a software developer, and so I have experience not only with the academy but also an area that we expect will propagate growth in our state in upcoming years. In both my academic and previous jobs I have labored with other intelligent individuals working on hard problems. It has always been my observation that the most progress is made when individuals have a comfortable, stable working environment.

One of the benefits of unionism in academia is longer-term contracts for researchers and instructors. Long-term employment leads to investment in the institution which in turn leads to innovation in education and research and ultimately helps to keep Oregon competitive in this increasingly technical world. Non tenure-track instructors, who currently do the bulk of the teaching at universities in Oregon will increasingly be driving innovations in teaching. Oregon State University has been experimenting with online education. The faculty at Western Oregon University are building a robust international students program. The faculty at Portland State are looking for creative ways to engage the Portland community. Instructors with short-term contracts have no impetus to engage seriously in long-term projects which may not be completed by the end of their contract. Our ability in higher education to enacting a long-term vision for Oregon is dependent on long-term engagement.

Researchers too need stability to function at peak efficiency. Experiments are done over the course of years, while contracts can sometimes only last months. Principal Investigators, whether on the tenure track or not, need long-term stability in their labs, in order to carry out and complete their important work.

In my view, it is the ability of workers to collectively negotiate for workplace improvements that will keep top-notch researchers and instructors in Oregon. Our union at the University of Oregon has brought that stability, with longer-term contracts and clearly defined work rules for everyone. My research colleagues want to focus on the science, not management. Having a set of clear rules has helped everyone. Unfortunately, many of our tenured research faculty do not have a full voice in these important decisions because they do not have a union. While they may benefit from many of the things the union bargains, they do not have a collective voice. I know they want one and I believe that everyone contributing to the long-term future of our universities will have ongoing benefits for all the citizens of Oregon.

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Chris Sinclair  
Secretary  
United Academic