

Greetings Chair Dembrow and members of the committee,

For the record, my name is Emily Wanous and I am the Legislative Director for the Oregon Student Association. Thank you for asking us to come speak with you today. We've been asked to come share the student perspective on re-opening during COVID.

While it is hard to sum up all of the perspectives we hear from students, the overarching theme we hear is that students both wish for a return to normalcy but also have serious concerns about the health and safety of themselves and their loved ones.

Learning in an online environment has been tough for students. Isolation and stress is a common theme, as is the difficulty and inaccessibility of online learning, despite the valiant efforts of our amazing and underappreciated faculty. Disability accommodations for online learning also remains a problem students struggle with, as do basic needs such as internet access.

It is also hard to say how much of the poor online learning experience can be attributed to the modality of online learning itself and how much must be attributed to the economic pressures students in Oregon face. Therefore, the most important thing we have been urging decision makers to do in assessing how best to help students right now is to zoom out a bit and realize that students are people who are hurting economically right now.

It is hard to meaningfully talk about students' learning outcomes or desire for in person classes without talking about how, even before COVID-19, 41% of college students in the United States had experienced food insecurity in the past 30 days, and 52% had experienced housing insecurity, with 1 in every 5 having experienced homelessness.¹ This basic needs desperation overshadows any talk of classes for many of our students.

It is hard to meaningfully talk about how comfortable students are returning to in person learning without talking about how right now, due to how Oregon Health Plan eligibility is calculated, many students are unable to access OHP because they are claimed as dependents on their parents taxes, and thus income they often have no access to is counted against them. Or about how hard it is for student parents to find affordable childcare. Or about how isolation is impacting our students' mental health and yet mental health access is out of reach for many.

It is hard to meaningfully talk about how reopening guidelines are working out for students when we know students are stuck in a lease in their college town from beginning of the pandemic. In these scenarios, students are often left paying rent in a place they are no longer living due to the switch to online learning and helping with rent at their family home. This is why students across the State have been circulating a petition to call on lawmakers to see the extent of this issue, so we call on you to imagine how impactful a temporary lease break would be for hurting college students in Oregon.

And it is hard to meaningfully talk about how to make decisions over campus reopening in a manner that centers the needs of students without talking about the dynamic of institutional boards as they relate to our community and the affect which the dismantling of the Oregon University System and the creation of institutional boards of trustees has been on our college campus when it comes to principles of shared governance and affordability.

¹ https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/HOPE_realcollege_National_report_digital.pdf

By no means do we expect this to all be solved in a session, or in multiple sessions, and we do not believe in making the perfect the enemy of the good. But we urge legislators on this committee who are serious about protecting students during this pandemic to work with us this upcoming session to seriously address these many issues.

One of the biggest things we can do to start to address many of these problems right now is address our woefully underfunded financial aid system in this state. Barely 1 in 4 students who need the Oregon Opportunity Grant can access it purely due to lack of funding.

Yes, our students would love to be in person. They also need access to healthcare and the ability to keep safe if they end up in person. At the end of the day, until we address the myriad ways our college students are experiencing an economic crisis, regardless of covid-19, we remain worried about the future of this state and our students.