

Members of the Joint Task Force on Student Success for Underrepresented Students in Higher Education:

My name is Timothy Withrow and I live in Eugene. I am a University of Oregon honors student, and I am testifying today to share my experience as a first-generation college undergraduate. First-generation students have historically been underserved in higher education in Oregon, and if we truly want our universities to represent the diversity of our state, that must change. I wish I could provide this testimony in person, but with the craziness that comes with the end of the term I hope this written letter will suffice.

This term has been challenging, for all the reasons you can imagine. Returning to in-person learning has been rough for many students, but has been particularly difficult for those already facing financial uncertainty. Personally, I have never been more stressed. Trying to juggle two campus jobs with my classes and extracurriculars, along with just trying to interact with people again, has often left me completely burnt out. That said, this term has also filled me with a greater sense of belonging and purpose than I had ever felt during my past two years here. Whilst my finances are tight they are not dire, and that has allowed me space to form connections and have experiences that I am very grateful for. I know I am lucky. I am incredibly privileged to have parents who are in good health, my tuition covered with the generous support of the Oregon Opportunity Grant, and to have been provided opportunities to excel that are often out of reach for Oregon's marginalized racial and ethnic minorities. There is a critical need to expand these opportunities to those who can use them the most.

The best thing you can do to support first-generation students like me is to increase student financial aid and make the process of applying easier for those who rely on it. I know that politics are messy and there's only so much you can do, but applying for financial aid has always been frustrating for those like myself with non-standard financial situations. This daunting process keeps students like me from being able to attend college because it often brings great confusion and stress. The constant back and forth I've had to have with my parents and the financial aid office over specific forms, deadlines, points of contact and more is something I think could be greatly improved upon to ensure that all students, regardless of their circumstances, are able to attend college and complete a degree.

This uncertainty has more than just a monetary impact. It takes up space in the minds of students when you are forced to wonder where your next meal is going to come from, or how you will pay your rent on the 1st of the month. Imagine how equitable the college experience would be if lower- and middle-income students were able to focus not on how little is in our bank account, but on our classes, our formational experiences, and how we will contribute to Oregon's future after graduation. Not just surviving, but thriving. My college experience has been transformational. I just wish more people could experience what I have been able to.

Thank you for your service to our state, and for your time spent on these topics. I appreciate your commitment to hearing from students like me, and I hope you will take the time to visit campuses across the state to learn more about the experiences of today's students.

Sincerely,

Timothy Withrow
University of Oregon student
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