

Written Testimony on Senate Bill 553
February 8, 2021

Alii, kmal ungil sueleb. Hello and good afternoon Committee Chair Senator Dembrow, Vice Chair Senator Thomsen and Members of the Senate Education Committee:

My name is Bennie Moses-Mesubed, and I am the Vice President for COFA Alliance National Network (CANN). I am also the Student Diversity & Inclusion Director at Eastern Oregon University and a COFA community member living in La Grande, Oregon.

I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 553; a bill that will provide students who legally entered the United States under the Compact of Free Association treaty, the ability to qualify for in-state tuition and be eligible to receive state and university scholarships or other financial aid while attending public universities in Oregon.

“The Republic of Palau, Federated States of Micronesia and the Republic of the Marshall Islands have a unique immigration relationship with the United States called the Compact of Free Association/COFA. Through this agreement the COFA nations have allowed the U.S. Military to occupy their land and sea territory which have involved atomic nuclear testing and ballistic missile exercises, that have displaced families and damaged the environment and our island economies. Also within the agreement, is a commitment that includes health, housing and security of COFA citizens who remain in their home countries as well as the ability to migrate, without work permits or visas, to study, live and work in the United States. However, when COFA people arrive in the United States, and despite the assurances of the compact, we are faced with many challenges, including being immediately excluded from many essential state and federal social services as well as higher-education financial assistance programs”. (*Asian Pacific American Network. (2015). COFA Fact Sheet. https://www.apano.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/apano-COFA_final4.pdf*)

Starting in 1977, Eastern Oregon University had a Micronesian Program that served thousands of students from the COFA islands with an average annual enrollment of 60 new students each year. Since the program’s end, COFA student enrollment decreased until 2014 when EOU started intentional recruitment in the COFA islands. Since then, we have had an average of 20-25 new students each year, with our highest total annual enrollment numbers at 117 students in 2019 and only 38 students enrolled this school year.

Our COFA students come to college with a variety of backgrounds. Some moved to Oregon at a young age and attended Oregon high schools, but because of their COFA status, are not eligible for most federal aid programs as well as grants like the Oregon Opportunity grant. COFA citizens enlist in the U.S. armed forces at a greater percentage than any other population and many of our students end up joining the US military as an option when they no longer can carry the tuition debt and cannot find jobs that supplement their living expenses and help them pay their bills, in hopes to return to college, after having served in the military. While others are US citizens who graduated in island high schools and moved back for college, but because they did not graduate in US high schools have a situation that makes them fall in between the cracks in terms of eligibility for aid.

Due to the income disparities and financial challenges they face, over 90% of the students work 25 to 40 hours per week and still maintain a minimum of 12-15 credit hour course load. However, most of the students do not complete a full year because they accrue a large debt within the first few months that limit their ability to register to continue in the next quarter if that debt is not paid.

If a student is fortunate enough to get some scholarships while going to college and working a minimum of 20-25 hours per week, they often get penalized at the end of the year when filing taxes as their income is then over the minimum eligibility for Pell Grant which then forfeits their ability to have that type of aid the next year in addition to not qualifying for work study or loans. This also robs these students from a full college experience, including the ability to join an interest group/club, volunteer to gain an experience in a field they want to pursue, attending a conference and growing their leadership skills just to name a few.

Most COFA students and their families in Oregon have incomes at poverty level, and college attainment is an unattainable goal. With the pandemic, our COFA students are not only experiencing the impact of COVID19 at higher rates, but are also experiencing the large gap as resources are not available to them as they try to navigate a pandemic and continue their education. Many of the students have dropped out because they lost their jobs during the pandemic, and are struggling to make ends meet.

Even with all those barriers, some of our COFA students are making time to volunteer through Eastern Oregon CANN, and assist with testing events, distribute foods and PPE to people in quarantine, and help with food drives where they were able to serve over 350+ impacted households in Union County.

As residents living in Oregon they also pay local, state and federal taxes and yet they are not able to access those services themselves. This bill will provide opportunities for new COFA students to immediately enroll in any Oregon public college and pay in-state rates, reducing their financial burdens. It will also give hope and make it feasible for those that have dropped out to have a chance to re-enroll and complete their college education.

By supporting SB553, you are providing an opportunity for COFA students to achieve their highest potential which in turn is an investment towards Oregon's future and the future of our COFA people.

Thank you again for this time and I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.