

Testimony in support of:
House Bill 2485

Submitted by:
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Dear Representatives Nosse, Goodwin, Nelson, and all members of the House Committee on Behavioral Health and Health Care,

My name is Michael Dressman, and I am a recently graduated Master of Social Work, a counselor at Canopy, Inc., and a member of the Portland State chapter of Payment for Placements, which advocates for the ending exploitation of students providing unpaid labor as part of their educational experience.

Prior to entering Portland State, I intentionally saved over \$20,000 in preparation for the fees I knew I would accrue during the course of obtaining my degree – a process that took 4-5 years while managing my own living expenses. I elected to attend Portland State as a nonresident, and moved here from Utah researching and investing in an education I knew would provide a broader, more diverse, and more socially just perspective within my field than anywhere I would be able to attend in Utah.

The increase in academic costs as a nonresident meant despite taking on a part-time job *and* utilizing \$50,000 in federal student loans I spent all of the amount I had saved within the first year of my graduate degree. In order to meet my living expenses, I was required to register for the federal SNAP program and access other local welfare resources. A significant portion of these funds I was paying were specifically coordinated to allow me to provide *additional* unpaid labor as part of my field internship in the curriculum.

I am now fortunate to be working in a position that provides a livable wage and a sustainable workload post-graduation, and nonetheless, the level of stress from my financial expenses frequently has me questioning if I want to continue doing this work yet unable to consider other viable options given the debt I have accrued. I know of many other graduated students working in far more stressful positions with more debt, and an unimaginable number of others who could not complete school or did not apply in first place given the intense financial, physical, and emotional costs of this degree. Most specifically, the current structure of financial entry into higher education bars those within marginalized communities.

The funding this bill provides would grant life changing access to better allow those in marginalized communities to begin *and* complete degrees, and their knowledge and skills are invaluable to both urban and rural Oregon residents on an individual and collective basis. Without this support, the current mental health shortage we experience will only continue to increase, and marginalized communities will continue to be underserved and poorly supported.

Even being a nonrecipient of the direct benefits of this bill, I strongly urge you to support this bill. Our current mental health shortage affects all residents, and without support for existing and future students, this impact will continue to grow.