

4/26/2023

Joint Committee on Education
Co-Chairs Frederick and McLain
900 Court Street NE
Salem, OR 97301

Re: Please support full funding for University of Oregon Nontraditional Students

Co-Chairs Frederick, McLain, and Members of the Committee:

My name is Danielle Lichtenstein and I live in Eugene Oregon. I am an undergraduate and a co-director for the Nontraditional Student Union (NSU) at University of Oregon. As you are making important budget decisions this legislative session, I encourage you to support Oregon's students through robust investments in public higher education, including funding the Public University Support Fund (PUSF) at \$1.05 billion and increasing the Oregon Opportunity Grant (OOG) by \$200 million.

I am a 37-year-old independent gap-year transfer student at the University of Oregon. I completed an associates in my early 20s and couldn't figure out what I wanted to do next. I did office work for 15 years following community college and eventually decided I wanted to return to school to pursue a degree in journalism, a field I have grown to appreciate more as I got older. The decision to return to school was not an easy one. I had accrued so much student debt and just about reached the financial aid limit. I also knew going into it there would be a large age gap. I apply for every scholarship I come across that I am eligible for. I am independent and pay all my own bills, rent, utilities, credit cards and for my classes at Lane Community College. I work 40 hours a week on a swing shift as a machine operator to be able to support myself while going to school.

I am very passionate about being co-director for the NSU and strongly support returning students that want to further their education. The NSU is a student run organization that offers help and support to anyone who identifies as a nontraditional student. Before I learned about the NSU student life was a struggle for me. I often felt insecure, like I stood out. My attitude towards college life gradually shifted while being a part of the NSU. Meeting other non traditional students helped me feel more comfortable and accepted.

Nontraditional is a broad term, some of the identifiers are first year generation, low income, over the age of 24, transfer, independent, employed or unemployed, student parents or veterans. Many of these students come to the NSU looking for support for their education such as school supplies, textbooks, food, housing, financial support, and other basic needs.

The school offers a highly regarded Student Support Services program or (TRIOss) that is dedicated to helping undergraduate students with many of the common struggles nontraditional students face while in school. TRIOss helps students with academic advising, it

provides extensive academic support such as one-on-one tutoring sessions and offers mentors which can help guide new or returning students in their education. These services that are tailored to meet individual students' needs are far more accommodating than the standard support services the university provides. However, due to limited funding the program can only accept a certain number of students who meet the eligibility requirements. For those students accepted into the program speak very highly of it. Additional funding for this program would allow more nontraditional students access to all of the great support opportunities this program offers.

Nontraditional students also struggle to find a sense of community in the university, because most classes have a majority of 18–21-year-old students, it's easy to feel out of place. Further funding would allow organizations like the NSU to provide a larger space for students. Having a place to go where students feel accepted and comfortable makes a world of difference academically, mentally and emotionally. It could also provide a place for nontrads to study, have computer and printing access with free printing. It could be a place to relax or meet other nontraditional students.

The organization could hold larger more engaging events geared towards creating a sense of community.

Some nontraditional students struggle to find affordable housing. The university has few available options for nontraditional students with on campus housing having a waitlist that could be months, even a year long.

Many nontraditional students also struggle to make ends meet and have to find part time or fulltime work to be able to support themselves through school. The grants available provide only a fraction of support needed for students to feel financially secure while they pursue a degree.

Oregon ranks 45th in the country for per-student, state funding of public universities and invests less than half the national average in financial aid per public university student. As Oregon's students and workforce continue to face lasting impacts from the pandemic, we must ensure that higher education is more attainable for every student.

In addition to investing in the PUSF and OOG, I encourage you to sustain funding for tribal student grants, which help fund undergraduate tuition, housing, books, and other costs for eligible, enrolled members of Oregon's Tribes.

Thank you for your service to our state and thank you for supporting Oregon's students and public higher education institutions.

Sincerely,
Danielle Lichtenstein
Co-director of the NSU