

Chair Lively, Vice-chairs McIntire and Ruiz, and members of the House Committee on Higher Education,

My name is Chloë Hughes, and I am a professor at Western Oregon University. I wish to testify about the importance of House Bill 4125 and why I support it.

I am a professor of Teacher Education who specializes in language and literacy development. I not only teach on campus and online, I also regularly supervise undergraduate and graduate students in K-12 classrooms. I still feel passionate about teaching, even after 35 years; it's a uniquely challenging and rewarding profession. Who else, but teachers, get to support, inspire, shape, and build positive relationships with the leaders of our future, day in and day out?

Transparent and accountable governance all but disappeared at WOU following the dissolution of the OUS system. Trustees appointed to governing board were, on the whole, already very busy people. Their attendance and familiarity with materials that they had been sent to read prior to meetings was very patchy. WOU's president from 2015-2021 and chief legal counsel also filtered information and prevented two-way communication between the university stakeholders and the trustees. During that time WOU's trustees did not appear to realize their fiduciary responsibilities; they would rubber stamp everything. For example, even though student numbers were dropping each year, trustees approved large capital investments (for new buildings not simply repairs) and additional high level administrative positions. Before the breakup of the Oregon University System, WOU's student body was comprised of about 5,300 undergraduate and 900 graduate students and the university shared one (OUS) legal counsel. By 2021, WOU's total student body had dropped to 4,029 and yet it employed three attorneys.

Decentralization has led to competition within the public sector. We have already felt the effects of private-sector-style market forces at WOU. Several programs (and tenured faculty) were cut about two years ago. Western lost its philosophy minor and major (the only public university we had to offer a bachelor's in philosophy) as well as its chemistry, physics, geography and deaf education programs of study. The breakup of the OUS has led to undue competition among institutions of higher ed, where there used to be collaboration. It has led more and more to generic programs and the curtailment of specialized content.

Though governance has improved a little over the last 12-18 months, there is insufficient oversight to prevent Western, the oldest public university in Oregon, from failing. In its 2019 evaluation of WOU, the HECC observed that WOU was significantly reducing its fund balance to purchase the Vick Building (WOU Salem) and commented that "a fund balance that is projected to be about half in only two years could pose financial risk." The HECC relies on self-reported evidence and has no teeth. While large investments have

been made in buildings and administrators at WOU, faculty salaries have depreciated greatly over time owing to pay freezes and COLAs that represent a fraction of the true CPI. Meanwhile student tuition keeps rising!

I urge your support for this bill to study the trends and impacts on our cherished public universities the past 10 years so that we can find ways to build a bright future together.

Sincerely,

Chloë Hughes