

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

My name is Ariana Jacob. I am the President of AFT-Oregon, a labor federation of 27 unions across the state including the labor unions that represent full and part-time faculty and graduate employees at almost all of our public universities. I also am part-time faculty at Portland State University, where I have taught in the school of Art and Design since 2014.

This week, on February 4th, 2024, the L.A. Times Editorial board stated, "There is no more important place for colleges to spend their money than hiring the best instructors they can find and providing fair pay, benefits and reasonable working conditions¹." When Oregon's faculty and graduate employees think about fiduciary responsibilities of our public university boards, this quote rings true. We need a study to ascertain to the degree this is or is not being realized after the closure of the Oregon University System ten years ago.

I have personally seen a lot of changes over this last decade. Some of it is hopeful, but much of it is deeply disconcerting, including the fact that the average student debt load has gone up by about \$10 thousand dollars per student, and the percentage of classes taught by part time faculty at Portland State University has gone up by about 10%.

Now, almost half of classes are taught by part time faculty who lack job security and long-term mentorship connections with the student body. This is not good for Oregon. Some of the consequences of that many classes being taught by part time faculty is that a significant portion of our public university faculty make so little money that they qualify for food stamps and the Oregon Health plan. At PSU last year part time faculty who taught 5 classes, which is as many classes as they could, still made less than \$25 thousand dollars a year. It isn't right that the faculty who teach our young people at our public universities and community colleges live in poverty, when we expect those institutions to be the mechanism for social mobility, pathways into the middle class.

A 2022 report by the American Federation of Teachers on the quality of life for contingent faculty asserts: "Educators' teaching conditions are students' learning conditions—but it's difficult to focus on the educational and social needs of your students when you don't even know if you will have a paycheck coming next semester or whether that check will help you make ends meet."²

This is not a PSU problem. It is a public university problem, and a worrisome fiduciary decision. Public universities are also leaning harder into tuition and student debt, and increasing the crisis of adjunctification, but we don't have clear mechanisms to holistically address this situation, because since the breakup of the university system we don't have a central authority to act across our universities. There is information reported and collected relating to these items, but it is not yet tied together in a cohesive and functional package to inform decision makers how to address the multiple overlapping stresses on our university system.

¹ "Editorial: U.S. colleges are overusing — and underpaying — adjunct professors." L.A. Times, February 1, 2024.
<https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2024-02-01/la-ed-editorial-most-college-professors-are-underpaid-adjuncts>

² "An Army of Temps: AFT Contingent Faculty Quality of Work/Life Report." American Federation of Teachers, 2022.
https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/2023/Contingent_Faculty_Survey_2022_interactive.pdf

The January 2022 AGB Report, in our opinion, did not significantly incorporate, involve, or collaborate with faculty, labor unions, employees, and communities impacted by the current Board of Trustees structure. There are tens of thousands of us impacted by this system in addition to the entire state of Oregon. In our experience, the feedback given by our leadership and members had sharp critiques and meaningful recommendations that were not reflected in the final report. Additionally, it was somewhat subjective report in its research method, without any appendices of data or theory-rooted research methodology cited which would be expected in qualitative research publications subjected to peer review. We do see it as important - but emphasize it as limited in its scope and application.

What House Bill 4125 will do is collect the *data* that we need to take a good look at the last 10 years of what has been happening to our public universities since the breakup of the Oregon University System, and in particular what have been the outcomes of breaking up the university board system. It will also collect trends and information on governance systems nationwide, to see how other states are structuring their governance systems to address similar issues in their states. It will sit alongside the 2022 NCHEMS Landscape study and the 2022 AGB report as a critical point of information for our State.

When the universities were broken up, part of the Legislative Assembly's intent was to track and assess the impacts of that decision. Now is the time to collect the information we need to do that assessment - a decade has passed, and it is high time to strategize about how we can create more stable and accountable funding mechanisms for our public universities. We want a clear and informed picture of where we are now with the costs of tuition, books, fees, housing and the rates of pay and benefits across all our universities to be able to make a strong plan for what we want to see happen at our public universities over the next decade.

Our public universities are essential to creating a healthy future economy for Oregon, and we need solid information to know whether the directions our Public Universities have been moving over the last decade are the direction that will best serve our state, our students and our communities. Before we make strategic financial plans in 2025 and beyond, we must be sure that the foundation of our university system is solid. We have a responsibility at the state level to ensure that our public universities are serving the public good.

Thank you - we look forward to working together to build a bright future for Oregon higher education.

Ariana Jacob
President
American Federation of Teachers - Oregon