

Written Testimony on Senate Bill 263
March 11, 2019

Good afternoon Chair Wagner, Vice Chair 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) of Oregon. I am also the Student Diversity & Inclusion Director at Eastern Oregon University and a community member from Palau living in La Grande, Oregon. I want to thank you for giving me this opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 263, a tuition equity bill that will grant in-state tuition to COFA students in Oregon.

The Compact of Free Association agreement between the United States and the Republic of Palau, Republic of the Marshall Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia is a unique agreement that was established after 1986, when these islands were given an opportunity to establish a political identity outside of being a Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. It also allows the United States to have a strong military presence in the COFA islands in perpetuity. Through this agreement, citizens of these islands have a unique identity classification of “permanent nonimmigrants or eligible noncitizens”. Within the Compact agreements, citizens from each of these nations have special immigration privileges where they can work, study and reside in the United States in a nonimmigrant status, without a US visa and have an indefinite length of stay.

The COFA students that enroll in EOU is about 25 students per year. Due to the income disparities and the challenges of attaining an education, over 90% of the students work 25 to 40 hours per week, maintain a full credit load (full-time status) and are active in campus activities, lead clubs and organizations and are in Student Government.

Due to the unique relationships COFA nations have with the US, the profile of these student ranges. I would like to share 3 different COFA students' profile.

One student is a young woman from Micronesia. She is a Sociology major and is a recent graduate of Eastern Oregon University. She is a US citizen, actively participated in campus and leadership programs; and has been a part of campus initiatives like the annual diversity and equity conference on campus, the Governor's Food Drive, annual Walk for Warmth, which is an annual fundraising effort to help raise funds for people in Union County who may struggle to pay for heating during the winter months.

Another young COFA student is a young man who is an Anthropology major, works full time at the local Boise Cascade Mill, has led campus organizations and is currently working as a Anthropology research assistant, helping his professor with archaeological documentation of historical preservations site around the region.

Last but not least, our COFA veteran, who just recently completed 4 years serving in the US Military and has started his college career majoring in Political Science. He works part-time to support his family and his wife is also a full time student. He is one of 5 current COFA veterans who are full time students and are active in the military.

What do these students have in common? They are all COFA residents and pay non-resident rates. These are some of the 25 students we have that are actively engaged on

campus and in the community. But there are also a handful of these students who barely complete a full year of studies, because of financial challenges.

COFA residents living in Oregon pay all taxes: Local, State and Federal. Even though their taxes help pay for the programs that assist low-income families, COFA residents are not able to access those services themselves. What this bill will provide is an opportunity for COFA students to immediately enroll in any Oregon public college or university and pay in-state rates, making it feasible for more COFA students to attend college in Oregon.

Education is the key to individual social and economic mobility. Educational attainment provides the students the opportunity develop skills and acquire the needed credentials to enter into the workforce in order to provide an adequate livelihood.

With SB 263, they will have an opportunity to reach their educational goals through an easier college path by allowing them to receive in-state tuition at public college and university. Most COFA students in Oregon universities now, have family incomes so low and at poverty level, and a college attainment is an unattainable goal. However, this bill could realistically provide an opportunity for a dozen or more COFA students the ability to enroll in an Oregon college or university and fulfill that goal.

I believe that it is in Oregon's interest to provide access to higher education for all people especially underserved communities that have been left behind in the development of accessible and affordable educational opportunities.

Again, thank you and I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.