

ASSEMBLY SELECT COMMITTEE ON CALIFORNIA MASTER PLAN FOR HIGHER EDUCATION -- SPENCER BRANDT, UC STUDENT

Good Afternoon. My name is Spencer Brandt, and I am a third year student at UC Santa Barbara. I have the privilege of being here today representing the UC Student Association, a systemwide advocacy group with a strong history of campus activism and education policy advocacy for the 270,000+ undergraduate, graduate, and professional UC Students. It's good to be here in Fresno, because it feels like home to me here. I grew up here in the central valley, as did my parents, and their parents before them. I'm cognizant that in the Valley, we lag significantly behind the rest of the state in terms of higher educational attainment. Only 13% of adults in my home county have acquired a bachelor's degree. My family is reflective of that number. Throughout my childhood and teenage years, I can remember my mother always telling me that she couldn't wait until I went away to college. Whether this was because she saw potential in me, or because she saw an angsty teenager who was frequently on her nerves, I can't be certain. But more particularly, my mother always stressed to me that the cost of college should not prevent me from pursuing a higher degree. "The degree, the skills you learn, are worth it," she would say. Occasionally, this message came across as typical motherly encouragement; other times, I could hear in her voice that she was trying to tell me something else. Something about her own journey through life that she regretted, something about the inaccessibility of college when she was growing up, and the financial struggles that had limited her options. Despite those odds, she had acquired a degree, so I took her advice, and applied to the schools of my dreams, all of which were in the University of California and CSU system. I was admitted to UCSB, and quickly decided to attend what was, and is, the most beautiful campus in the world.

Upon enrolling at UCSB, I quickly learned the cost of college for students are not confined to the classroom. The cost of college includes books, course readers, and lab coats; housing, often in saturated markets with perpetually rising rents; and food, and other basics things needed to survive. Another thing I learned from my mom, a K-12 teacher for more than a decade, is that academic success does not begin and end in the classroom, it extends to every student's environment at home. I've had to make tough decisions about whether to buy every book I need for my courses, or go to the market and buy ingredients for dinner. I've sat in lecture, wondering what I can do to afford next month's rent payment. I've maxed out on the amount of student loans I can take out per quarter. I can tell you the names of every financial assistance program that we have on campus, which ones are grants, which ones are loans; and which ones require proof of an eviction notice before they step in with meager assistance because I have been searching for every possible avenue to be able to pay for college .

I can also tell you that I know the financial support students receive is going to get smaller, before it gets bigger. This is because our segments of higher ed and the State are only two pieces of the web of assistance that is provided. At the Federal level, student aid grant programs have been decimated. In 1980, the Pell Grant covered 77% of the cost of a college attendance. Today, it covers less than one-third of that cost. Pell is no longer tied to inflation, and uncertainty and neglect at the federal level threatens to impose further financial hardship on students.

In addition, increased enrollments have impacted the housing markets for campuses across the state. My first year, I lived in a triple room on campus, in a dorm that was constructed around the time my grandfather was born. Older friends of mine

who had lived in the same dorm were shocked; “that room was a closet with two people living in it. How do you manage?” they would say. Needless to say, we were eager to move out after a year of close company. This year, the last freshman doubles were converted to triples, to accommodate rising enrollment.

My roommates and I decided to move out of the residence halls, and into Isla Vista, where the costs were ostensibly lower. We began searching for housing for the coming academic year during December of our first year. We quickly realized that the only way to find something halfway affordable was to find some friends who were willing to pack into an apartment in like sardines. We settled on a group of six, then, six turned into eight. Our leasing company paid us no deference, and leased out the unit we had been eyeing to another group of UCSB students. We added a final two people to our group, and signed a lease on the bottom story of a duplex, for a grand total of 6,850 dollars a month, well above the cost estimates posted on the UCSB website. My parents agreed to split the security deposit; my share was 14 hundred dollars in total. “We’ll get all of back,” I assured them. But my friends and I knew that Isla Vista landlords are notorious for getting away with highway robbery, pocketing thousands in falsely claimed damages through deposit theft each year. Today, as far as our landlord knows, we have 8 people living in our little blue apartment. But in reality, anywhere from 10 to 13 people are crammed into two bedrooms, and one garage on any given night, some who are additional subleasers, some who are friends, some who are experiencing homelessness.

The student aid I receive this year, through Cal Grant A and Federal Direct Loans still comes \$150 short of covering the cost of my rent each quarter. Needless to say,

when I'm not studying, I work to make up the difference. While the home environment can feel cramped, loud, and overwhelming sometimes, at least I can say I live with good friends. Not all students can. This kind of an environment can take its toll on our academic performance and mental health.

Cal Grant and loans don't cover the cost of basic needs either. As a freshman with a meal plan, I paid almost 2 thousand a quarter for nutritious and consistent meals, paid for a special grant given to first-year students. Now that I live off campus, I can't afford to be paying 10 dollars per meal. I cook for myself as often as I can, and buy food and other basic necessities at the market down the street. The prices there, unfortunately, are well above the state average.

Cal Grant does not cover my cost of living OR my cost of education during the summer months as well, even though my lease lasts year round. Because of the difficulty I have had getting into courses I need to begin and continue my major, I have pursued taking classes over the summer. I cannot do this at UCSB, because Cal Grant does not extend into the summer. This leaves me in a time crunch to take as many courses as I can to finish my degree in four years, before my financial aid runs out. I had no idea about any of this before I stepped foot on campus and experienced the trial by fire that students know all too well. We need a more accurate and transparent assessment of these costs, so that they can make the right financial decisions.

Lastly, this leaves books, course readers, and other educational supplies, as a third, consistently under-prioritized cost that I bear, the price of which are rising faster than housing or tuition and fees. These are the true costs of attendance. They go far

beyond tuition and fees. Students are engaged in a constant balancing act, weighing their academic attainment against their basic needs.

In past hearings held by this committee, we have heard about the importance of making the university accessible, to *all* California students, especially those that are underrepresented, including people of color, undocumented students, students from rural communities, and students with disabilities. If our state wants to claim the mantle of standing for these communities, and for a vision of opportunity and social justice, this is imperative. And if our state is to meet the needs of California's vibrant economy, we must increase the number of students with degrees, and close the degree gap.

We do this by investment, first and foremost. The California public higher education system clearly lacks the resources to accomplish this major task without a major shift in tone on the part of lawmakers and the executive branch in regards to funding. If you're hesitant to believe me, take a look at the state of our campuses right now. Come visit our classrooms, and sit with students in the aisles of our lecture halls, who are struggling to get into the classes they need to graduate on time. Visit our research labs, and talk to our researchers who work with aging and dilapidated equipment. Call our Counseling and Psychological Services center, and try to schedule an appointment. I can promise you'll wait a while before you can see a therapist, and once you do, follow up visits are scheduled weeks away, if at all. Now imagine that these institutions have enrolled thousands more students, without adequate reinvestment, and tell try to tell me they're still the number one public higher education system in the nation.

We must collectively reimagine the role of higher education in our state. I believe every resident must have the right to attend college without debt, without tuition, and without an unbearable cost of living. Students on our campus have high hopes in our collective ability to produce a long term vision for public higher education in our state. Through it all, we must look to the student experience as our guiding light. We must raise per-student spending in all segments, lower the cost of attendance for students, and we must work together, as students, as workers, as faculty, as colleges, and as policymakers, to make this vision a reality. I can promise you that students are ready to do their part. Thank you.