

Chair Smith, members of the committee, good afternoon. My name is Tel Wittmer and I have the incredible privilege of serving as Student Body President at Kansas State University. I really appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today on this important and very optimistic legislation.

Just for a moment, I'd like to take you back to 1863. Admittedly, I'm kind of a history nerd and I am very blessed to get to love and serve my neighbor in this temporary role at a particularly storied institution.

So just for a brief moment, I'd like to take you right back to the very middle of the Civil War in 1863. Just two years prior to that in 1861, after three disastrous constitutional conventions, Kansas finally becomes the 34<sup>th</sup> state admitted to the union with free soil. It's a really turbulent time right – before 1861, after the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, settlers from the north and south are flooding into Kansas to determine the trajectory of the state. People are dueling and dying left and right, Lawrence is burned to the ground – and as much as I like the metaphorical interpretation of that statement it would be hard to imagine something like that happening today.

In the midst of all of this violence and chaos culminating with the start of the Civil War, in 1862, the Morrill Act is passed and signed into law by President Lincoln, establishing land-grant colleges in the north. A year later in 1863, K-State is established as the very first operational land-grant institution in the country.

So why does 1863 matter? It matters because right in our very own backyard, Kansas State University becomes Abraham Lincoln's vision for an institution that provides access, education, and above all, opportunity – to the common man and woman. K-State is really unique in that way. We're very literally this national ideal of equal access to higher learning and social mobility and there is no doubt that we continue to accomplish that goal. But the reality is, it has become increasingly hard to do that and it looks like it is only going to continue to get harder and harder to live up to our land-grant mission.

We know that college costs are rising and have been climbing for some time. We know that the cost of living has increased for some time as well. And there are lots of complex reasons for those rising costs that we could debate for hours. But one thing is for sure – in today's competitive economy, in terms of wage earnings and social mobility, nothing is more important than access to post-secondary education. College is becoming increasingly unaffordable and out of reach for the very people my institution, K-State, was intended to serve.

We also know that textbook prices have become outrageous. Recent data from the College Board indicates that the average undergraduate student at a four-year college spent \$1,240 on books and supplies during the 2019-2020 school year. Further data suggests that the prices of textbooks have increased even more thanks to the pandemic and increased demand for educational resources absent the classroom. Passing HB 2265 would undoubtedly go a long way in making college more affordable and accessible to those who need it the most.

I can certainly tell you from my own experience, being the son of two educators from rural Kansas – as someone who grew up on the ragged edge of the middle class – had I not received the generous amount of private scholarship dollars that I had, I'm fairly certain that I wouldn't have experienced anything near the number of opportunities I've been fortunate to have at K-State, let alone the opportunity to be here standing in front of you today.

I know my colleagues from the University of Kansas plan on speaking/have spoken on the research gathered directly from our own Kansas Board of Regents Institutions in 2019, so I won't spend a lot of time on that data – which definitely deserves to be wrestled with. Instead, before I end, I want to share some of the little things that we have to do at K-State to counter these very real financial challenges facing students today.

At K-State we have a very strong student philanthropy through the KSU Foundation devoted to keeping students on campus who otherwise would have to end their studies due to financial stress through our student opportunity awards. With our philanthropic t-shirt campaign, K-State Proud, more than \$1.3 million has been raised since its inception 13 years ago. In the 2019-2020 school year, 212 students applied for student opportunity awards and we awarded \$260,160. So far this fiscal year, we've seen 130 students apply and around 65 awarded thus far being awarded around \$70,000 to continue their studies.

Furthermore, thanks to the data on textbook affordability that KBOR's Student Advisory Committee was able to obtain in 2019, K-State has been able to devote its philanthropic attention to Textbooks 2.0, our Open/Alternative Textbook Initiative. Textbooks 2.0 is K-State's grant program providing funding to faculty to develop or adopt digital alternatives to print textbooks, which has saved students an estimated \$5 million since 2013. Students still have to pay a \$10 fee to support the program, but it is much more affordable compared to paying an average cost of \$100 and up on traditional textbooks. On March 24<sup>th</sup> we will be holding All In For K-State, a single day-fundraising campaign devoted to a single cause – our Textbooks 2.0 initiative. All of this, in the hope of alleviating the climbing costs of textbooks and furthering our land-grant mission.

To be sure, the measures in HB 2265 won't solve every financial challenge regarding textbooks and educational access, and I highly encourage universities in our state to adopt open/alternative textbook initiatives like we have at K-State. But this bill's passage would certainly assist us in our current efforts to provide accessible resources and keep struggling students on their path toward attaining a quality education.

Our mission at K-State today is the same it was in 1863 – to provide access, education, and opportunity to the common person. Together, through the small impact of removing the sales tax on textbooks in HB 2265, we can make an enormous difference in relieving the unbelievably large burdens and barriers facing Kansas students and their families and provide more opportunity to Kansans for years to come. Thank you.