

We have bargained during many different economic times over the years, but there are things that feel unique about the timing of this bargaining cycle.

There are significant external forces driving dramatic changes in higher education — immigration policy impacting international student enrollment, decreases in federal funding, shifting political narratives about the value of a higher education degree, and an economy where students are questioning future debt in a world where wages often don't allow people to buy a home or rely on one job.

At the same time, there are long-standing enrollment trends that predate COVID and this current administration as you noted Brian. Some campuses have adjusted strategies to respond to those changes, while others have not. These long-term trends, combined with external pressures, have created a real sense of crisis across the system.

We also recognize that not all campuses are in the same financial position. That has always been true, but the differences feel more pronounced in this cycle.

And just as campuses are trying to balance budgets, so are workers. Many of our members continue to face rising costs of food, rent, and daily life. Many are working multiple jobs or cannot imagine affording another rent increase — much less owning a home.

With all of these realities, we come to this bargaining table.

I want to be clear about some key messages we hope you take away today.

There have been times when we entered bargaining with absolute clarity about where we would end up. That is not the case this time — the future feels murkier than usual. But we do come with clarity about our purpose at this table, and we want to share that with you.

First, we are here to represent the classified staff at all seven universities. Every day we talk to members about their challenges — affording rent, buying food for their families, managing increased workloads that impact their quality of life. Their lived experiences will remain at the center of this bargaining process, as they always are. Just as universities must balance budgets, so must our workers.

Second, we are not ignorant to the financial struggles campuses are facing. Those challenges are real, and we will not ignore them. At the same time, our members did not create these problems, and they cannot be expected to bear the brunt of them. It is difficult for someone earning \$45,000 a year to feel they are “sharing the burden” with administrators earning \$250,000 — they live in fundamentally different realities, in different

worlds. We will engage honestly with financial challenges, but we will do our own analysis and our analysis will be grounded in the experiences and realities of our members.

Third, you need us. With the greater scrutiny and broader oversight from HECC, the Legislature, and the Governor, higher education governance and finances will face more public attention than they have in years. Our 70,000 members have built real power in those spaces, and we will bring their voices and lived experiences into those conversations.

Fourth, union jobs are a benefit — to you, to our communities, and to our state. The economic impact of having a campus in a rural area depends on stable, quality jobs, and those jobs exist because they are union jobs. Union workplaces create healthier environments because workers have structured avenues for feedback and engagement. As part of this bargaining cycle, we will prioritize strong union new employee orientation language and meaningful access to workers so we can continue building a strong union. We hope you see that as an opportunity.

Fifth, you cannot build or rebuild these campuses without us. Our members are essential to boosting and sustaining enrollment. They are often the first people new students interact with. They help students navigate challenges and stay in school. They create the campus environment that makes students want to be here. Supporting workers is not separate from enrollment strategy — it is central to it. This cannot be a race to the bottom on worker compensation or campus climate.

Sixth, we will not be scapegoated in this process. Our benefit packages have long been part of institutional budgeting — they are not new. PEBB helps keep healthcare costs predictable and comparatively low to private health care cost increases. Benefits remain our members' top priority, with wages close behind, this funding crisis will not be used to scapegoat our benefits or somehow shift the blame of the budget crisis to the lowest wage workers you have on campus.

Lastly, we are approaching bargaining with an open mind and a willingness to explore creative solutions that ensure campuses remain desirable places to study and work. We are ready to engage with you, as well as with HECC, the Legislature, and the Governor, to build a long-term path forward. But our approach will be shaped by yours.

Do you see us as partners, or as a budget line item?

Are you looking for shared solutions, or to shift the burden onto the lowest-paid workers?

**2026 OPU/SEIU Negotiations
SEIU 503 Opening Statement
February 12, 2026**

We hope you see this bargaining cycle as an opportunity — an opportunity to recognize the power workers have built through their union and to think differently about how we strengthen higher education across our state for staff, communities, and students alike.

We look forward to bargaining with you, even in these difficult times.