

Dear Chair Dembrow and Members of the Committee,

My name is Dr. Ross E. O'Hara, Director of Behavioral Science and Education at Persistence Plus, and I write today in support of Senate Bill 564. As a scientist and researcher, I understand the pivotal role of student data in increasing equity in higher education. Currently, Oregon lacks comprehensive data to indicate the number of college students who are also parents. This lack of data creates a significant barrier to making appropriate determinations about the specific educational needs and outcomes of student parents.

This lack of data also prevents colleges, universities, and communities from fully leveraging student-centered technology to support students and boost graduation rates. Many states and institutions partner with technology providers to implement scalable solutions for student challenges, such as maximizing financial aid, accessing remote tutoring, or securing jobs and internships. These technologies function best when comprehensive and robust student-level data allow for personalization of messages, resources, and “nudges.”

Consider my organization, Persistence Plus, as one example. Our platform provides proactive, personalized, and automated student support via interactive text messaging. Think of it as an advisor “bot” that checks in on students to keep them on the path to graduation. In multiple randomized controlled trials, students using Persistence Plus have been significantly more likely to remain in college—by up to 10 percentage points—compared to students not on the platform.

A key component of Persistence Plus is its use of individual-level data to nudge the right student with the right information at the right time. In the case of student parents, for example, our platform sends personalized nudges about the availability of on-campus childcare, tips for balancing their remote learning with their children’s own remote learning, and motivational reminders about how earning a college degree will benefit their family’s future. But none of this is possible without data on who is or is not a student parent.

All students deserve to have the programs, resources, and technology they need in order to succeed academically, and SB 564 is the first step toward making this possible. I believe that requiring public post-secondary institutions to identify whether a student is a parent, acting as a parent, or a guardian is an essential tool in the fight to lower educational barriers and close the achievement gap for parenting students. This is why I urge you to support SB 564.

Thank you to Senator Gelser for championing this bill and to Chair Dembrow for sponsoring it. Thank you to the committee for this opportunity to submit my testimony in support of SB 564.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Ross O'Hara".

Ross E. O'Hara, Ph.D.
Director of Behavioral Science and Education
Persistence Plus, LLC