

Submitter: Jose Abrego Melendez
On Behalf Of:
Committee: House Committee On Higher Education
Measure: HB3089

Dear Chair Lively, Vice Chair Ruiz, Vice Chair McIntire, and members of the House Higher Education Committee,

My name is Jose Abrego Melendez and I am the Benefit Navigator under HouseBill 2835 at Eastern Oregon University (EOU). I am typing this in regards to supporting HouseBill3089.

As the Benefit Navigator at EOU, I have seen the difficulties, challenges and outcomes of students who are constantly having to prove their poverty in order to make ends meet. The State of Oregon Employment Department website, showed that the individuals ages 18-34 have the highest poverty rates in Oregon, sitting at 16.6%, which is the majority of our students' age range. When researching more on food insecurity, The OregonLive site gathered data and stated, "More than one in five Oregonians rely on food stamps." Along with this, a report titled Hunger and Covid-19: Food Insecurity Amongst US College Students in 2020, found that nearly one third of college students missed a meal at least once a week, and 35% of college students said hunger has impacted their ability to study. In addition, "nearly a quarter of students have had to take out loans to cover their food costs." When reviewing statistics, like the ones above, it is evident that students are concerned and will remain in crisis with changes to the pandemic emergency food benefits for SNAP recipients, and how students cannot make ends meet with the reduction. Myself, along with the other Benefit Navigators all over Oregon, have agreed that the pandemic didn't only bring food insecurity to light, but also made us realize how many of our students are battling a silent battle.

Along with this, some of our students do not qualify for SNAP due to their immigration status and must find other ways to get funding for their meals, groceries and coverage for other expenses. I have spoken with students who have had to take out additional loans in order to help pay for bills, tuition, and food. The students I have met with share that they have housing, textbooks, inflation, and tuition increases that are making them choose between their next meal, purchasing a textbook or the next utility payment. Food is a basic need that a student should not have to worry about while trying to pursue an education. EOU does offer the Swipe Out Hunger program where students may donate their meal swipes and students in need can request a meal at the cafeteria, but the hours of operation may not always align with a students schedule of classes, labs, studying, and practice for those who are athletes. In the Fall term of 2022, I received a generous donation of canned soups, vegetables, spam, and snack items for students. Within the following weeks, our Multicultural center was constantly being utilized by students grabbing food. The

donation of about 80 cans of soups along with other donated items went by quickly. Students were asking the Multicultural center about when the food bank would be restocked, and how they could receive more free canned goods. Due to not being able to fully restock the pantry, I was making referrals to our local food banks, but that caused some issues for students who do not drive and if the public transportation doesn't align with the free time some students have.

There are many compelling reasons to pass HouseBill 3089, but the most compelling reason comes down to the amount of barriers our students face in their journey. Food is an essential and basic necessity that our students shouldn't have to be concerned about. In Eastern Oregon, where there aren't many options and places are limited, our students who already face inequalities are being faced with even more challenges and are forgotten when it comes to accommodating or seeing it in an equity lens. The process for HouseBill 3089 is in the right direction and I stand in favor of this HouseBill.

Thank you for your time.
Jose Abrego.