

Testimony in support of HB 2262-1, Benefit Navigator Funding  
House Committee on Higher Education  
March 14, 2023

Chair Lively and members of the committee,

My name is Zoe Cooper-Caroselli. I work at Portland Community College as the Statewide Program Coordinator for the HB2835 College Benefits Navigator Consortium. I am here today to speak in support of HB 2262-1 which includes a request for additional funding for this critical work.

Oregon college students face high levels of basic needs insecurity. Many struggle to afford food and housing, and figure out how to pay for utilities and transportation and childcare, all while pursuing their education, learning, growing and working towards careers that will pay them a living wage.

In the past year the college Benefits Navigators have connected with over 8,500 students across the state, referring them to resources and benefits such as SNAP, food pantries, emergency grants, and community-based organizations that assist with housing and utilities. They have helped reduce stigma by tabling at campus events, presenting in classrooms, and including basic needs statements on course syllabi. They have built innovative partnerships to enable the “warm handoff” referral to resources. And they have formed a robust community of practice, sharing resources and best practices with each other across the state.

I'll share a few stories of the impact of this work:

A student at Portland State University was having difficulty attending classes consistently, struggling with a long commute to school and lack of childcare. The Benefits Navigator met with the student to learn more about their needs. Together they applied for SNAP and an on campus child care subsidy. The student is now receiving both benefits, their two children are enrolled in on-campus childcare, and they were also approved for an emergency grant to help with necessary car repairs and gas so they have reliable transportation to get to class. The student is continuing their studies, happy that their children can be here while they learn.

The Benefits Navigator at Portland Community College was passing out a flier they had created that mapped out all available campus resources, thanking them, a student said, “This is exactly what I was looking for.”

The Benefits Navigator met with a Treasure Valley Community College welding student who was struggling to access reliable transportation and learned that they were already receiving SNAP benefits. Knowing that qualified the student for the STEP program on campus, the Benefits Navigator referred them to a STEP coach who was able to immediately begin working with the student. The student qualified for a gas card, as well

as some assistance paying for tuition and supplies for their welding program, and they were able to continue with their studies.

The Benefits Navigators have done a lot to support student basic needs, but we know that one person can only do so much. With additional funding, Oregon community colleges and universities could strengthen and grow their existing programs, enabling them to connect more students to critical resources and benefits.

Thank you for your time and consideration. We really appreciate the prior support from the legislature and look forward to being able to continue to offer and grow this important service to meet student basic needs.