

My name is Jenna, a former staff member at the University of Oregon, and a part of the team who planned and executed the 2024 Summer Bridge Program that was funded by Strong Start. I am writing in support of SB 604: The Strong Start Program at Oregon's Public Universities, which will continue funding for programs that help ease the transition to higher education by providing an early start and giving them access to additional resources.

As the Summer Bridge Learning Specialist, I worked closely with students who had been involved in the previous year's program, and I helped plan the following iteration. During the year, I would periodically meet with students who were involved, and many of them had a newfound steadiness to them. Whether or not they had a decided major or were confident in the path they were pursuing, many Summer Bridge students had these things in common: connection, friendship, and academic success knowledge.

During the program, students regularly connect with faculty members and graduate students of their major department (e.g., chemistry). People associated with these roles notoriously intimidate first-year students. However, many Summer Bridge students felt a greater sense of ease and confidence in a course with that faculty member, lowering their 'affective filter'. Shown in the post-program survey, many students felt a secure connection to their major department, and the Summer Bridge Program helped them know their department's resources and staff.

I also served as an instructor and advisor for a subgroup of the Summer Bridge participants (Undergraduate Support Program, USP), and I witnessed the tight bonds of friendship that were sparked during the summer program. From the start of the year, various groups of students in the USP class expressed support for and friendship with one another both in and out of the classroom. It was evident that deep friendships were forming when they arrived at the classroom together, joked with each other, or talked about their friends with me in our one-on-one meetings. These supportive relationships gave them a sense of belonging at the University of Oregon and provided a support system for them during the difficult transition into college life.

Finally, I believe Summer Bridge gave students of diverse backgrounds equal chances to succeed at the University. In particular, I conversed regularly with a group of first-generation students during our events each term. I began to notice the drive they had inside them as each term, I would hear a new role in an organization or job/internship they were applying for (and often, receiving). I believe they were able to pursue their goals because Summer Bridge gave them confidence navigating university-life and knowledge of the value of enriching opportunities.

In all, I am requesting your continued funding and expansion of the Strong Start Program. I believe my experiences with previous Summer Bridge participants is a compelling example of how groups of students are being impacted by this program year after year. Your support of education in Oregon's public universities allows for greater opportunity, inclusion, and achievement.

I greatly appreciate you taking the time to read this. I hope I can count on your support of SB 604, the Strong Start Program!

Sincerely,
Jenna Bertilson
University of Oregon
Springfield, OR