

Submitter: Megan Habermann-Guthrie
On Behalf Of: SB 604
Committee: Senate Committee On Education
Measure, Appointment or Topic: SB604

Thank you for considering reinstating the funding for Strong Start. My name is Megan Habermann-Guthrie, and I am the Director of New Student & Family Programs at Western Oregon University. It is my privilege to manage our Strong Start program, which we call Destination Western.

Strong Start has been instrumental to our students' ability to succeed at Western. Students going through the program are retained at 5-10% higher rates than their peers. They also take more credits, and have greater GPA growth, leading to more on time graduations. The original funding allowed us to establish an office dedicated to making all of our orientation programs more accessible. Not only are we able to serve 160-200 students annually directly through the program, but we have been able to incorporate the access and academic focus concepts from the original grant into our Welcome Week.

The funds previously provided by the state allowed us to give direct financial aid to participants, which is not something Western Oregon could absorb when the funding ran out. This has changed which students can participate in the Strong Start two week program, as it can be a challenge for our low income students to stop working two weeks before school starts. Every year we accept students who have to decline their spot, because they simply cannot not afford in the moment to invest in their future. By reinstating the grant you would open the door to so many Oregonians to be able to put their future selves first because they didn't have to worry about what it meant to lose that last paycheck from their summer job before college.

Thank you again for your consideration of this bill. I can assure you, without a doubt in my mind, based on data and student testimony, that this money changes lives. The ability to provide first generation, low income, under represented students the opportunity to have a Strong Start to college has long term impacts, and will help them develop into citizens that will be educated, community focused, and ready to give back to Oregon.