

February 20, 2025

Dear Oregon Legislator,

My name is Alexis Morrison and I am the Program Specialist in Disability Access Services at Western Oregon University (WOU). I am writing to request your support for the continuation of STRONG START funding for Oregon Universities with **Senate Bill 604**.

Strong Start (known locally as “Destination Western”) has become a pillar of the WOU community. Nearly 20% of WOU students have benefitted from this program. Students have shared with me that Destination Western/Strong Start provides the tools necessary to navigate higher education and obtain their degrees, and it also builds skills necessary for success in the workforce. Data supports this feedback: Destination Western/Strong Start students are retained at a rate of 5-10% greater than their non-participant peers and carry greater credit loads on average. Furthermore, Destination Western/Strong Start students do all this while maintaining stronger GPA growth than their non-participant peers, leading to more on-time graduations.

Students, especially rural, low-income, BIPOC, disabled, and otherwise underrepresented students need greater support than ever to start their college education. This is largely due to the disruption of learning during the pandemic which continues to impact college readiness. Students and their families need support to invest in themselves by accessing higher education. You have the opportunity now to help make college an accessible option by supporting this funding for higher education which ensures students a successful transition to college by creating a stable funding structure for Strong Start.

Using a gradual release of responsibility framework and scaffolding techniques, Destination Western helps students transition into higher education with additional support and resources. By participating in a summer orientation program that offers students intentional activities and resources, they are able to create meaningful friendships, build a lasting community, and create a foundation for their academic journeys.

I urge you to support the stable funding of Strong Start. It was a great way for students to get acclimated back into in-person learning post-pandemic and continues to be an integral program to serve underrepresented students in their transition to college. These programs show results, and with stable funding, we hope to show you increased graduation rates in addition to the early data.

For all of these reasons, **I SUPPORT STRONG START FUNDING with Senate Bill 604.**

I am happy to discuss this issue further and answer any questions you might have. Thank you again for your support of Oregon students and institutions.

Sincerely,

***Alexis Morrison, MS | she/her***