

Dear Oregon Legislator,

My name is Laura Ellingson-Sayen and I am an Associate Professor in Exercise Science at Western Oregon University. I am writing today to request that you support the continuation of STRONG START funding for Oregon Universities with **Senate Bill 604**.

At Western Oregon, we have a large percentage of first generation students who need the extra services provided through their experiences during Destination Western/Strong Start. Nearly 20% of our students have been able to benefit from this program. On average, students who participate in Destination Western/Strong Start are retained at a rate of 5-10% greater than their non-participating peers. Students who participate also tend to carry greater credit loads, while maintaining stronger GPA growth than their peers (leading to more on time graduations).

Students, especially rural, low-income, BIPOC, and otherwise underrepresented students need greater support than ever to start their college education, as the disruption of learning that occurred during the pandemic continues to impact college readiness. Students and their families need help investing in themselves by accessing higher education, and you can make sure that happens by supporting the funding to higher education and supporting their 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.

Furthermore, as we emerge from the pandemic, it is crucial to recognize the unique challenges that students have faced over the past few years. Many students experienced learning disruptions during remote learning, dealt with mental health issues related to isolation, and experienced disruptions in their personal and family lives that often led to financial distress.

Therefore, we urge you to consider increasing funding for programs that provide mental health support and other resources to help students recover from the pandemic's effects.

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 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,

Laura Ellingson-Sayen

