

Submitter: Melissa Hinzman
On Behalf Of:
Committee: Senate Committee on Education
Measure, Appointment or Topic: SB604

Dear Chairperson and Members of the Senate Committee on Education,

It is with great enthusiasm that I write this letter of support for Senate Bill 604 which would establish funding for the Strong Start Program at universities in Oregon. My name is Melissa Hinzman and I am an academic advisor in the Student Success and Advising office at Western Oregon University (WOU). I have seen firsthand how this program has positively impacted our students and campus community.

Through the Strong Start program (referred to as Destination Western at WOU), I have had the privilege of supporting our most vulnerable and at-risk students as they transition to university studies - a transition often fraught with uncertainty and trepidation. I have served as a mentor, academic advisor, and an instructor with this program and have seen students create connections with their peers, their faculty, and their campus community. I have also witnessed the increased retention, higher credit completion, and successful GPA growth of students who had the opportunity to participate in Strong Start.

As funding for this program decreased in recent years, WOU was required to make significant changes to the original programming. We were unable to offer as many spots to students who would directly benefit from participating in the program and we were forced to decrease financial support for those students who were participating in the program. Many of our students come from historically underserved and underrepresented backgrounds, lower socioeconomic statuses, or are first generation students. Having the ability to provide early academic and social support for these students and potential funds to assist them prior to financial aid disbursement is a huge advantage for those often beginning their studies at a disadvantage.

The Strong Start program is an integral and vital part of our campus community and the students it serves. Any support we are able to provide to assist them in thriving on and off campus is a net positive for everyone involved. Investing in the Strong Start Program is an investment in the youth of this state and in Oregon's future. Thank you so much for your time and consideration of SB 604.