

## **Testimony for HB3182 and HB3183, Student Basic Needs and Workforce Stabilization Act for Higher Education**

Honorable Members of the Committee,

For the record, my name is Pamela Fredrick Williams, and I am currently serving as the Benefits Navigator here at Eastern Oregon University. Prior to this role, I attended Eastern Oregon University and graduated with my bachelor's in Communications and Anthropology & Sociology in the year 2020. I would like to share that during my time as a student at EOU, many nights, I would go to sleep without food or feel the shame of not being able to register for classes due to not having enough financial resources. After my first year of college, I owed over \$5K for tuition, housing, and meals. As a first-generation student from a very low-income household, whose home and parents are two thousand miles across the globe, I had no way of paying down this debt. The solution I had was to drop out of school to work and pay off this debt in order to re-enroll into classes. I did not know what to do or who to turn to for help. I was told that if I did not make any payments, my bill would be sent to collections. Not understanding what the word "collections" meant, to me, those words felt like a threat, and that made me even more scared and stressed. That is why funding the Benefits Navigators throughout the state is so important because we help bridge the opportunity gaps for these students, helping them to access resources that can help them succeed and graduate.

I am speaking to you today in support of HB3182 and HB3183, which are critical to supporting students' success and ensuring their well-being throughout their academic journey. The rising cost of living, when coupled with the ever-increasing burden of tuition, has placed a huge strain on students across our state. Many are struggling just to meet their most basic needs—food, housing, healthcare, transportation, and other essentials. When students are forced to choose between paying rent or buying groceries, or when they delay medical care because of cost, their ability to focus, learn, and thrive in college is profoundly compromised. These hardships don't just affect grades—they erode mental health, physical well-being, and a student's ability to persist and succeed in higher education.

For students from rural communities, these challenges are even more pronounced. Limited access to local resources, fewer support networks, limited access to technology access and long travel distances to campuses or services all add extra layers of difficulty. For many rural families, the dream of a college education feels out of reach—not because of a lack of ambition or ability, but because of these barriers.

I speak not only as an advocate but from lived experience. I know what it feels like to face college life with limited means, to feel cornered with nowhere to turn, and to carry the weight of those struggles silently while trying to keep up with academic expectations. During my time as a student, these kinds of support were unavailable. I often wished for someone or something to help lighten the load—not just for myself, but for others like me.

Working as the Benefits Navigator alongside other Benefits Navigators in the state in the past year, we found [recent data](#) showing that a significant 49% of college and university students experience food insecurity, 17% experience housing instability, and 22% experience the need for transportation. These challenges disproportionately affect underrepresented groups, including students of color, low-income students, and first-generation college students. As a result, many students are forced to divide their attention between their studies and the immediate need to secure essential resources, often leading to increased stress, lower grades, and even dropout.

One of my students whom I recently served and provided support for sent me a very impactful email saying, “The Benefits Navigator program has truly been a lifeline for me. As a first-generation college student from a low-income background, I deeply appreciate the support that has been extended to students like myself. The financial burden of college is heavy, and this assistance means so much to us. Thank you for making a difference in our lives.”

Providing adequate funding for these two critical bills is an investment in students' well-being and Oregon's future workforce. When students are supported in meeting their basic needs, they can better focus on their studies, engage in extracurricular opportunities, and graduate on time. This, in turn, contributes to a more skilled, educated, and competitive workforce, which benefits our communities.

Investing in the basic needs of students is a moral and practical imperative. The education system should be a place where students can thrive academically without the constant worry about meeting their basic needs. Ensuring that students are supported in this way will provide them with the stability they need to achieve their academic goals and build better futures for themselves and their communities.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I ask that you prioritize Oregon's future by prioritizing these bills for the basic needs of higher education students and to recognize the profound impact that such investments will have on their success.

Sincerely,  
Pamela Fredrick Williams  
EOU Benefits Navigator  
Eastern Oregon University