

To: House Committee on Education
From: Justin Barrieault, Financial Coach/Revenue Agent, Portland State University & SNAP Client
Advisory Board, Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon
RE: Support HB 4055
Date: February 3, 2020

Chair Doherty and Members of the Committee,

My name is Justin Barrieault. I have worked as a Financial Coach at PSU for the last 3 years. In this role, I assist students not only with affording their education but also with balancing their budgets, helping to ensure that each student is able to make their basic needs. These meetings find me budgeting with students, implementing debt reduction models, and elaborating on the proper use of credit. These conversations are often arduous, dealing with very sensitive information, and often-times harsh realities. I entered this position expecting this. I knew that, in some cases, educational funding wasn't an option or a resource, and that in my time here I would need to address these unpleasant realities with my students. What I wasn't expecting to witness, however, was the rampant food insecurity on the PSU campus.

Coming from a social work background, I am well versed in navigating DHS barriers, in order to get my participants life-saving benefits. When I took this position at PSU, I believed I had left these duties behind, not seeing their applicability for the college population. I was vehemently wrong in this assumption.

After sitting with countless students, I have developed a more robust understanding of the needs of the college population. In today's world, the necessity of a Bachelor's degree cannot be understated. These degrees open doors, raise families out of poverty and often serve as a measure for an individual's quality of life. I would even argue that today's society has also obligated the need for a graduate degree, as a measure of holistic wellness.

These degrees are time-consuming, demanding, and above all ridiculously expensive, often requiring that students get in thousands of dollars of debt just to better their lives and the lives of their loved ones. Throughout the pursuit of these degrees, students are forced to work less, needing to spend valuable free time on their studies. Opportunities are missed, relationships are strained, and sacrifices are made in the pursuit of these degrees. Unfortunately, the most glaring sacrifice that I witness to be forgone is the promise of food security.

I cannot stress how many times I have met with a student regarding their educational funding, to find out that they haven't eaten a real meal in weeks. The amount of students who have cried in my office, expressing futility and stress related to hunger, has necessitated my call to action. In these moments, I point students to on-campus resources that are available (food vouchers, resources fairs, the food pantry), but often-times these are not enough.

SNAP benefits save lives, particularly the lives of these students. Without these benefits, many of those I have worked with would have left my office hungry, able to afford their unreasonably high tuition, but not able to eat. Recent developments in the SNAP program abolishing the work requirement of students has opened the door for many students who were denied access to this life-saving benefit, and I have witnessed this first hand. Even with the extension of access, however, food insecurity is still a pervasive problem on the PSU campus, with students not receiving the full amount of support they need.

Without SNAP, students wouldn't be successful. Without SNAP, they would not have the strength to engage in rigorous studies that eventually improve their quality of life. Without SNAP, this population would be resigned to poverty, hunger, and an unacceptable standard of living.

Support of HB4055 will put this very real, very chronic issue under the eyes of those who have the power to make systemic change, ensuring that the future generation of changemakers have the support they need to thrive in the present.

Thank you for your time,

Justin Barrieault