

November 15, 2022

TRANSMITTED VIA EMAIL

Chair Alonso Leon and Members of the Joint Task Force on Student Success for Underrepresented Students in Higher Education:

As advocates for students and higher education in Oregon, we are writing to urge you to support investments in student financial aid and wraparound support services that have proven to increase student retention, success, and equitable career outcomes. Specifically, we hope you will consider and invest in the following concepts:

Group 1: Affordability and Financial Aid:

- **Expand the Oregon Opportunity Grant:** Expanding the Oregon Opportunity Grant (OOG) would allow Oregon residents with financial need to access in-state higher education in greater numbers. Increasing the overall funding and maximum awards of the OOG would make sustainable and affordable access a reality for a larger number of low- and middle-income Oregon residents. We recommend moving away from covering a percentage of the cost of attendance, towards the goal of fully covering tuition and fees, a model similar to the Washington College Grant. Further, we recommend two specific changes to broaden the scope of who can benefit from the OOG: remove current restrictions of half-time enrollment, and increase access and flexibility of eligibility to include non-credit certificates and training programs, as well as adult-basic skills, and other on-ramp programs. These programs are often seen as the only option for lower-income adult learners with limited time and financial capacity to engage in post-secondary education, and a growing number of employers facing workforce gaps are partnering with institutions to create more of these programs. In order to maximize the state's investment, it is important to pair investments in student financial aid with investments in institutional support funds.
- **Provide permanent funding for the Tribal Grant:** Continuous funding of the Tribal Grant provides continued access to post-secondary education for Oregon Tribal members. We also recommend consideration for funding to Oregon residents who are members of the other federally recognized tribes.
- **Increase funding for the Child Care Grant and add support for campus childcare facilities to address child care shortages:** Parenting students are an under-resourced population and an increase in the Child Care Grant paired with financial support for on-campus childcare facilities would provide a multi-generation impact in support of economic mobility.

Group 2: Wraparound Services

Increase support for HB2835 Benefits Navigators: Provide a program budget to each benefit navigator across Oregon's twenty-four public post-secondary institutions allowing increased structure build-out and effectiveness of benefits integration models. Funds would be used for peer-advocate programs, direct student emergency aid, or other program needs identified by individual institutions and aligned with intent of HB2835 such as administration of on-campus food pantries or subsidized meal programs.

Block Grants to Support Students: Every college and university student in Oregon has unique needs, and it's important that investments in support services are tailored to meet those needs. Many institutions already have programs that have proven successful. We urge you to provide investments to support existing programs - many of which have operated on limited budgets for decades and have required tuition or student fee dollars to fund - in the form of block grants, to be funded each biennium, to institutions for the following purposes:

- Comprehensive programs for first-generation and underserved students, including outreach to high schools, coaching and stipends.
- Academic coaching and clear educational pathways for students aimed at significantly increasing completion rates and time to certificate or degree.
- Expansion of CTE and Career Pathways programs that include coaching models and holistic supports for learners.
- Increased supports for disability services and accessible education resources.
- Support for Adult Basic Education, General Educational Development, and English for Speakers of Other Languages.
- Delivery of mental health services, which has been declared a crisis for adolescents and an area where campuses are seeing an exponential demand. Not having access to these resources creates downstream determinants for student success.

Group 3: Systemic Accountability & Continuous Improvement

Create a structure to enable success for underrepresented students and increase accountability to meet institutional diversity, equity, and inclusion goals:

- Underrepresented student success block grants will be made available to any Oregon public higher education institution to expand and improve institutional efforts to support underrepresented students. Grants will be provided on the strength of the connection between the institution's diversity, equity and inclusion goals and the proposed efforts, articulation of how grant funds will be utilized to directly impact underrepresented student success, likely positive impact of efforts if funded, and plan to measure and demonstrate success.

- Grant applications will be reviewed and recommendations for funding made by a panel consisting of representatives including underrepresented undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, staff, administrators and HECC staff.
- Grants will be made in biennial cycles, with the opportunity for renewal.
- Grant recipients will report progress and success annually to the HECC and make reports publicly available.

Thank you for serving our state and communities. We appreciate the many opportunities that we have been afforded to participate in this process and hope that you will consider these recommendations as a roadmap of the priorities for our respective organizations. Ultimately, it is all about working together to ensure all Oregon students have access to an affordable, high-quality public higher education that leads to equitable career outcomes to support and contribute to Oregon’s economy.

Sincerely,

