

Chair Alonso Leon and Members of the Committee,

For the record, my name is Quentin Comus. I am a student at Oregon State University Cascades in Bend, Oregon. I am writing to request your support for HB2835.

Having a Benefits Navigator on my campus is important to me because as a student employee within the Office of Student Life, I see first hand the struggles students are facing when it comes to finding food and housing assistance. Especially this year with the coronavirus pandemic and economic recession, students are at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to receiving aid. Aside from being left out of the federal government's economic impact payment plan, students do not have equitable access to affordable resources to deal with the challenges of paying high tuition and fees unproportionate to the cost of other basic living expenses that are rising over the past few decades, which creates a horrific choice for students to make: pay for college and avoid student loan debt or pay for food and housing. The time of "just pull yourself up from your bootstraps" and "get another job" is over. Students are choosing to pay for price gouged higher education instead of consistent housing and food. This is reflected by data collected through our Winter 2021 Student Life Survey, where there were 210 respondents, in which 32 percent of students said that they had "struggled to afford housing at any point during their time at OSU Cascades" and 6 percent of students responded that they, themselves, "have lived in a vehicle or 'couch surfed' as a result of not being able to afford housing". Universities, like ours, are committed to supporting their students, yes, but everything comes at a cost. For this reason, at least on our campus, student support programs like our Food Pantry and Housing Subsidy Program are funded by charitable donations and student fees; not University funding. In a time in which 45 percent of our student body at OSU-Cascades reported that their "overall educational experience" this year, compared to a "non-coronavirus year", was either fair or poor, students are finding it difficult to balance the ability to complete their coursework, earn money through taxing part-time jobs, afford consistent housing, maintain their physical and mental health, and eat nutritious meals. This bill will ensure all students, regardless of their university's physical location or personal demographics, will have the resources, and guidance to access these resources, to maintain an affordable, healthy, and reliable lifestyle that allows them to obtain a meaningful college education. While there may be charitable or local government resources available in college towns, universities across the state do not have equitable resources available to all students, especially those who are remote or living off campus. It's time we all realized that our "next generation of leaders" won't be able to finish their college degrees if they cannot afford college and live a healthy life to get through college in the first place. Thank you for your consideration and, again, I strongly urge you to support HB2835 for all of Oregon's college students struggling to survive during the pandemic, like myself.

Warmly,
Quentin Comus
Newberg, Oregon