

Dear members of the education committee,

My name is Nick Keough (they/he) and I am a student at the University of Oregon as well as a member of ASUO Student Government!

Today, I am here to ask you to vote YES on HB 2542, the Basic Needs Navigators Bill, which will place trained basic needs coordinators on college campuses across the state to help students navigate and apply for services like SNAP, OHP, and other basic needs services.

As a low-income student, navigating higher education and making ends meet while doing so has been one of the biggest challenges of my life thus far...so this bill is a deeply personal matter to me. As I am sure you are aware, the cost of higher education has skyrocketed in the last 20 years when it comes to tuition, textbooks, mandatory fees, and other costs associated with earning a degree. My family and I have made countless financial sacrifices to get to this point and for my continued attendance at the University of Oregon. I have served tables full-time throughout most of my time at college to make loose ends meet and afford things like my rent, food, textbooks, tuition, gas, and all my other expenses. As hard I work, often things still come up short and I'll tell you that the things that fall off first are usually my basic needs expenses.

For instance, when I was a student at Lane Community College there was a year-long period when I was not making a lot of money which led me to being food-insecure. I essentially had no income, so the times that I ate were either at the student food pantry, or when a friend or teacher would buy me a meal because they were aware of my situation. I remember the times that I was in class when I was so hungry that I couldn't focus or retain the material because I was so dazed from hunger. I remember sometimes just eating one can of beans a day. I lost a significant amount of weight very rapidly, and I remember people asking why they could suddenly see my collar bones more. It was humiliating, and I remember being so embarrassed that I couldn't meet my basic needs at the time. I didn't feel like I had support from the school itself and didn't feel like there was anyone there to help me navigate the complex and confusing legalities and paperwork of applying for public assistance. Had there been a basic needs coordinator on campus, I imagine my situation could have been very different.

Today, I am lucky to be in a better spot but I know that my story is not singular, and that many students across the state of Oregon have had similar challenges with not being able to meet their basic needs. As someone who has been involved with student government and student advocacy for quite a while, I have met many other students who have had to choose between food and textbooks. I have met many other students who had no idea where to go when they needed assistance. I have met many other students who have failed classes or dropped out entirely because they had to prioritize their basic needs. With the COVID-19 pandemic, the stories have only gotten more frequent. When students are not able to meet their basic needs and aren't able to make it to graduation, it doesn't just drastically impact that student's life and trajectory...it impacts the entire state of Oregon and our future economy. A basic needs coordinator is the bare minimum that this legislator could do to address this issue, and I hope you will. Can Oregon students count on your support for HB 2542?

Thank you for your time,

Nick Keough
Community Organizer
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