

Date February 11, 2021

To: House Education Committee  
From: Mark Mitsui  
Re: Support for HB 2835 College Benefits Navigator Bill

Chair Alanso Leon, Vice Chair Weber, Vice Chair Neron and members of the Oregon House Education Committee,

There continues to be growing support for [HB 2835](#), from community partners, students, and colleges/universities.

I'd like to thank the co-sponsors: Representative Reardon, Senator Gorsek, Gelsner, Representative Alonso Leon, McLain, Senator Dembrow. As well as Representatives Evans, Neron, Schouten, and Senator Frederick.

Emerging from Pathways to Opportunity (PTO), this bill funds a benefits navigator at each community college and public university and supports the PTO coalition (summits, technical assistance, connections to STEP, revenue development). Today, I am once again writing in support of HB 2835.

I have met with many of you about the skills gap we have in Oregon and the opportunities we have statewide to train students for the jobs of tomorrow. The skills gap is quickly growing due to the pandemic and we are seeing a rapid move towards automation. We know that many workers are at risk of permanent displacement, or permanent unemployment in their respective industries unless they receive upskilling education and training. Furthermore these workers disproportionately represent BIPOC and other under-represented communities. A key barrier to upskilling for our students is basic needs insecurity. The risk of taking time off to back for retraining is too great when costs for food and housing can no longer be met with financial aid alone. We don't need to duplicate or reinvent the delivery systems but we do need to integrate those systems at our colleges. We need to wrap existing benefit programs around post-secondary education in order to have an equitable recovery.

At PCC, more than 40% of our students are the first in their families to go to college. More than one third of PCC students are BIPOC, making PCC among the state's most diverse institutions. The need for this work is big, we know that 63% of our students face some type of basic needs insecurity which is why our students go part-time and don't finish because it takes too long to graduate. COVID-19 has exposed the vulnerability of our students which is why our enrollment decline is 24% statewide while university enrollment has declined by only 4%. Many of our students are one flat tire, or one sick child, away from dropping out.

While I was at the Department of Education I worked on a joint letter between 6 federal agencies who disburse federal benefits. This letter, which we submitted for the record today, lays out the benefits and best practices of braiding federal benefits. These best practices are still being referred

to today because this advice is truly a series of bipartisan solutions to moving students through to graduation.

With COVID-19 plaguing our every educational decision our students have been forced to make hard choices between taking extra inflexible hours or school. Between choosing to care for their families or their education. For 1 in 4 students statewide their path to college education stopped when the pandemic hit, for the vast majority of our students that was due to job loss and basic needs insecurity.

In 2018, the Oregon Legislature unanimously passed HB 4043 that studied whether or not colleges could successfully play a role in helping students sign up for federal benefit programs like SNAP. If you ask DHS, the Oregon Food Bank, Partners for a Hunger Free Oregon, when low income students receive the benefits they qualify for their pathway to completing their education becomes much more clear.

We tested benefit navigator positions at LCC, MHCC, ChemCC, and SWOCC. Those positions were able to sign students up for thousands of dollars in benefits. Our data shows those students have been more likely to persist and succeed. Those pilot programs are slated to end this biennium and we need your help to expand this crucial work across Oregon.

HB 2835 could provide a portion of sustainable funding for benefit navigation, and incorporates the feedback from community colleges, students, Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon (PHFO), ODHS, Oregon Student Association, universities, and many other stakeholders at the state and local level. Having a benefits navigator at each college is a proven strategy to address the growing basic needs insecurity that is disproportionately impacting students of color, parenting students, and many rural communities. It's a key strategy for an inclusive recovery and economy. As part of the bill, ODHS would provide training and tools to ensure the navigators are able to connect students to as many resources as possible (SNAP, ERDC, OHP, etc.)

This bill concept has been tested, we've done pilot programs, we know the positive impact, this work has an incredible ROI, and with your help we can develop a statewide plan for support that doesn't leave out small, rural, and regional colleges. This is a statewide approach, we can't have the success we need for our most vulnerable students without these positions statewide.

Please move HB 2835 to a work session, we appreciate your support. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Mark Mitsui  
President  
Portland Community College