



**Testimony of Ricardo Lujan Valerio, Director of Government Relations<sup>1</sup>  
In Support of HB 2262-1, Benefit Navigator Funding  
House Committee on Higher Education  
March 14th, 2023**

Chair Lively and Members of the Committee,

Western Oregon University is in support of HB 2262, with the -1 amendment, which directs funding for the purpose of hiring benefits navigators. This funding is critical to support students to complete their completion goals while building healthier communities at our universities.

**Western Oregon University students are about five times more food insecure than the average American.<sup>2</sup>** That is why our WOU Food Pantry has been a critical resource for our campus. The pantry received regular product and produce shipments from the Marion Polk Food Share and operates on a client-choice model which allows for low barrier participation for our community to benefit from the pantry. Our pantry team, led by volunteers and staff, also produces data reports that show the impact of food insecurity on campus.

Our Basic Needs Coordinator (Benefits Navigator) has met with over 200 students in the past year since her position was created. She's given out over 100 gift cards, totaling over \$3,000. Almost 90% of the students who came to meet with our benefit navigator were facing food insecurity, and 60% needed assistance with SNAP applications.

**HB 2262-1 will increase the ability for Western Oregon University and student leaders to serve our community.** Our Basic Needs Coordinator also oversees the campus Stitch Closet and Food Pantry, where students and community members can get free food, clothes, and shoes. The Stitch Closet has had over 500 people visit this academic year and we've given out almost 700 clothing items. The Food Pantry has had over 1,000 people visit, and we've given out over 14,000 lbs of food this academic year.

As part of Abby's House, Western Oregon University's student-led gender justice and equity center, the WOU Pantry provides many services that these initiatives address. Our policy to serve all in need allows us to also serve a vast amount of food insecure community members. These additional resources would allow our student leaders and university staff to further our mission to end hunger at Western Oregon University and throughout our community.

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<sup>2</sup> "Can you guess these Food Insecurity Statistics?" By Josh Salsbury, March 1, 2021, <https://wou.edu/foodpantry/statistics/>

**For these reasons, Western Oregon University urges you to support HB 2262-1.**

Students have told Maria, our Basic Needs Coordinator, that if her position wasn't there, they wouldn't have known how they were going to pay for food, transportation, or school, and many have said that they would have dropped out if they didn't have this support. We thank all the community stakeholders for leading this initiative. Please feel free to contact me with any questions, comments, or concern