

Co-Chairs Frederick and McLain, and members of the committee:

My name is Faren Leader, and I have served as the HB 2835 Benefits Navigator at Linn-Benton Community College since May 2023. I am writing in **support of HB 3089**, the Hunger-Free Campuses bill, which sends funding to colleges and universities to address student food insecurity as well as other closely related basic needs on Oregon's public college campuses. Colleges can use this funding to establish food pantries, create a "Swipe Out Hunger" program, create SNAP or other benefit enrollment opportunities, and more.

The volume of need we are experiencing at our colleges is catastrophic, both in food security and in many other categories that impact student wellbeing and enrollment retention, such as housing, transportation, childcare, and healthcare. I was recently interviewed by a higher education reporter at The Oregonian regarding the continued urgency of college student need across our state. Although I'm pleased with how that article turned out, there were a few reflections I shared that did not make it to print:

1) Many of our students are working full time while attending school full time. If not working full time, most are working at least 20 hours a week as they also carry a full time class load. Despite this, and even if they are lucky enough to be able to combine federal financial aid with work income, they are teetering on a razor thin edge financially, plummeting toward financial ruin anytime any unexpected cost arises, or anytime illness or injury causes a few days of lost work hours. When they do see a small raise at work or a small increase in work hours, this can come back to bite them in the form of losing dollar amounts of SNAP, or losing eligibility entirely.

2) Many of those same students are parenting. At LBCC, about a quarter of our students are parents, and our average student age is 27. They are every bit as deserving of reaching for a better career and better financial future as any other kind of student, but their ability to remain afloat financially is even more precarious.

3) Among our younger student population, a tremendous number of them still have to include their parents' financial information in the FAFSA which can disadvantage them for eligibility for several types of aid, while their parents are unwilling or unable to offer them any financial support. The assumption of "If their parents can't afford to help them, financial aid can" is a deeply outdated perspective. I reject the common American "joke" about broke students living in closets or garages and eating ramen every day. They are engaging in the most challenging learning and skills acquisition of their lives to that point, and they deserve to be eating well and living in a space actually meant for human habitation. You wouldn't want to do your job while living in an unheated garage in January and eating ramen every day. They shouldn't have to endure that, either.

After a year serving in this new role and assessing the conditions "on the ground", for this college basic needs work to make a difference in the long run, there are seven major components that need to be regularly attended to:

1) Immediate resource help: ("Oh gosh, I'm so sorry you haven't eaten this morning and all day yesterday. Let's get you a gift card for our campus food services so you can go get lunch now, here's a guide to local food banks and hot meal sites, and let's set an appointment to talk more ASAP about ongoing food help for you.") I am able to offer those campus food services gift cards because of the budget I have had in this

biennium tied to HB 2835. However, due to flat-funding renewal decisions for the next biennium of the HB 2835 benefits navigators, I will not have an operating budget in 2023-25 as I have in 2021-23 and may no longer be able to offer this immediate on-campus food support.

2) Longer range strategic resources planning with students: ("Hey, let's work on getting you approved for SNAP and stay in touch for several weeks as that progresses. Oh gosh, you also don't have healthcare? Let's work on an OHP application too. Whoa, you just received a notice that you're going to get your power turned off in the next week? Let's get you in contact with this community organization that might be able to help prevent that shutoff. They do have an application process I can help you with if it feels confusing.")

3) Outreach to the campus community to destigmatize asking for help, and generally increase awareness that my office exists and students should reach out to me before skipping classes or dropping out due to their basic needs struggles.

4) High quality data entry, tracking, and analysis both for the benefit of the state as my part of the statewide HB2835 endeavors, as well as for process improvements within the college and within my office.

5) Relationship building and partnering with community organizations like DHS, Community Action Organizations, etc to refer students, understand and facilitate external application processes, etc.

6) Investigating and applying for grant opportunities that can enhance what I am able to offer to students: At LBCC we just received a \$3,000 grant from Swipe Out Hunger which we applied to the grocery gift card program that our student leadership office started during covid closures. With recent cuts to SNAP benefits, and continued rise of grocery costs, as well as continued rise in other cost of living factors like rent, the demand for that help with groceries is so high that \$3,000 is only enough to support about two weeks of that program. I have allocated \$10,000 from my HB 2835 budget to support this program. However, as mentioned above in #1, I will not have this kind of operating budget in the upcoming biennium and may not be able to support that grocery gift card program anymore without my own staffing hours being spent on investigating and applying for grants to cobble together funding so that my students aren't going hungry.

7) Broad scale systems change advocacy such as testimony to legislature that I am writing at this very moment, engagement with media such as my recent interview for The Oregonian, etc.

Due to the volume of contact I receive from students seeking urgent help, in a VERY good week I manage to do maybe three or four of those seven items above with the quality and attention they deserve. I am stretched too thin both in resources and available time as a singular human being— and that is in a current climate in which I DO have funding to help students get immediate food help, take home grocery gift cards, etc. For emergencies like overdue rent, car breakdowns, etc, I can request up to \$1,500 of emergency funding for a student from HEERF, the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund, connected to the covid emergency funds all colleges received. Both HEERF and my current biennium operating budget are about to expire eight weeks from now. I have no idea how I will effectively manage the current volume of pleas for help, let alone a larger volume as more students learn about my work over time, when I no longer have those core resources within the college.

The resources our community organizations can currently offer are simply not enough. They are trying their best, but they are also buried under an unmanageable volume of human desperation. The original intent of HB 2835 was to create a staff position at each college who could help students connect with resources outside the college, such as DHS assistance programs and community nonprofits. I certainly do help students navigate those systems, but in many cases students already receive everything they qualify for from those sources, and they are still drowning. We have to do more. A failure to do more to address the basic needs of our students by expanding the resources available to them is jeopardizing the future of our workforce. The continued drop-outs caused by basic needs struggles, which also disproportionately affect BIPOC, LGTBQIA, and single-parenting students, move us closer to a future in which even at a community college, traditionally thought of as the “smart” way to do college more cheaply, only those with the privilege of family financial support may be able to be confident in their ability to stay housed and fed as they complete their education.

I don't want to watch that version of the future unfold. I hope you don't, either.