



**Testimony of Ricardo Lujan Valerio, Director of Government Relations  
In Support of HB 4082 - Summer Learning Grants and Strong Start  
House Committee on Education  
February 5th, 2024**

Chair Neron and Members of the Committee,

Western Oregon University supports HB 4082 which mandates the Department of Education to establish and administer the Summer Learning Grant Program. Our university, along with others in the state, has seen firsthand the transformative power of these summer programming initiatives - for public universities it is our Strong Start initiative. This program has been instrumental in bridging the preparation gap for incoming university students, a gap significantly widened by the COVID-19 pandemic's disruptions to education.

The Strong Start initiative, generously funded by the Oregon Legislature in 2021 and continued in 2022, has been a beacon of hope and progress amidst these challenges. This initiative supports residential summer bridge programs and supplemental instruction, focusing on critical areas such as math and writing, while also providing academic advising, peer mentoring, tutoring, and crucial study and financial literacy skills. It is tailored to meet the unique needs of each university's student body, with a particular emphasis on serving BIPOC and students from underserved communities. This comprehensive support has not only helped to create a community of support for these students but has also significantly boosted their academic and personal success.

The results speak for themselves: over 2,500 incoming and first-year students have participated in and completed Strong Start programs, demonstrating consistently higher retention, stronger GPAs, and more completed credit hours. These are not just numbers; they represent lives changed, futures brightened, and a community strengthened.

However, the journey doesn't end here. The ongoing impacts of the pandemic on pre-university learning necessitate not just the continuation but the expansion of such crucial programs. To this end, Oregon's public universities are requesting \$6 million in funding for Strong Start through the 2024-25 academic year. This investment is not just in the program but in the future of our state's educational and economic health.

This funding is critical to maintain the program's current offerings and to allow time for universities to provide comprehensive data on retention and completion rates. Our preliminary data is promising, showing high retention among Strong Start recipients. We are eager to demonstrate that completion rates will follow suit, affirming the long-term benefits of these investments.

We urge the committee to support HB 4082 and to consider the inclusion of funding Strong Start.. An investment in summer programming Strong Start is an investment in the future of Oregon's youth and the overall prosperity of our state. We look forward to continuing this vital work with your support, ensuring that the academic and developmental growth of incoming university students remains a priority in our collective efforts to educate and empower the next generation.