

# Oregon's college students call for more state funding to meet basic needs



By **Tiffany Camhi** (OPB)  
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**The Student Emergency Needs Package looks to help the state's public college and university students with the rising costs of housing, food and transportation.**

Javier Estrada is a full-time student at Mt. Hood Community College in Gresham, Oregon. He also works 15 hours a week as a package handler for FedEx. But last month's ice storm meant Estrada wasn't able to work as usual, and he missed out on vital income to pay for his housing and food.

"I was panicking because I didn't earn enough income in the month of January to cover rent, bills, groceries and food for my pets," said Estrada.

But there was a lifeline for Estrada: MHCC made emergency funds available to students impacted by the storm through the school's Office of Basic Needs. Estrada applied for help on Monday and was approved Thursday.

"I received the necessary funding to help pay for rent and bills in the month of February," said Estrada, who is also the school's student body president. "I'm sitting here in the student government office, feeling incredibly grateful and relieved."

Estrada shared his story in a legislative hearing before Oregon's House Committee on Higher Education this week. He was supporting a bill that would pump state money into college basic needs programs like the one he relied on, funded by his college.



## Students need more than scholarships, says former state representative

The Student Emergency Needs Package, [HB 4162](#), looks to help the state’s public college and university students with the rising costs of housing, food and transportation. The proposal would appropriate a total of \$6 million from the state’s general fund to go toward student basic needs and textbook affordability programs. Oregon’s public colleges and universities would be able to apply for grants through the Higher Education Coordinating Commission to bolster their own basic needs programs.

The one-time funding would be a critical investment in the state’s college students, said Teresa Alonso León, a former state representative and former chair of the House Education Committee



“Students need our help. They need more than scholarships,” said Alonso León on Thursday. “Our students are experiencing the same societal challenges we are having with food and housing insecurity.”

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A legislative task force that Alonso León helped create in 2022 found that underrepresented students faced significant financial barriers while attending college, including the cost of tuition, housing and child care.

The majority of the money from the proposal, \$5 million, would go toward basic needs programming at Oregon’s public postsecondary schools. College students and faculty at the hearing testified that additional funding is sorely needed for things like food pantries, bus passes and to address financial emergencies.

“With the housing crisis in Oregon and food insecurity on the rise, community resources are often tapped to capacity,” said Zoe Cooper-Caroselli, who works at Portland Community College. “Many people with basic needs insecurity don’t qualify for public benefits.”

Cooper-Caroselli is a program coordinator for Basic Needs Oregon, which represents the state’s newly created [college benefit navigators](#). The navigators connect students to emergency resources provided by schools or to public assistance programs, like food stamps. Legislation from 2021 created these roles at Oregon’s public community colleges and universities, but it did not provide any funding beyond salaries and benefits for the navigators themselves.

**Related:** [Oregon colleges work on hiring ‘benefits navigators’](#)

“In our most recent reporting period, the two most common challenges that benefits navigators faced were a lack of available resources in their community — particularly in rural areas — and no funding to directly support students in need,” said Cooper-Caroselli.

The remaining \$1 million requested in the bill would be set aside for Open Oregon Educational Resources, a statewide program that provides textbooks to college students at little or no cost.

HB 4162 is a mashup of two bills that failed in the 2023 legislative session. This year’s proposal is supported by the Oregon Student Association, Oregon Council of Presidents, Oregon Community College Association, Oregon Library Association, and college faculty and staff unions like Service Employees International Union and the American Federation of Teachers.

So far, there is no submitted opposition to the proposal.