Dear Senate Committee on Education,

My name is Benjamín Alemán, a Professor of Physics at the University of Oregon, and a Faculty Leader in the Summer Bridge Program that was funded by Strong Start. I am writing in strong support of Oregon Senate Bill 604, which continues funding for the Strong Start Program at Oregon's public universities. As the founder and director of the North Star Project, the Physical Science specialization of the Summer Bridge Program at the University of Oregon, I have seen firsthand the profound impact that Strong Start funding has had on student retention and success in STEM. The North Star Project began eight years ago, but for the past three years, it has been sustained and expanded through Summer Bridge funding under Strong Start. This initiative plays a critical role in increasing participation in the physical sciences and STEM more broadly by fostering a sense of scientific identity and community among incoming students.

Research consistently shows that early community building and identity formation as a scientist are essential for increasing participation in STEM fields. Without a strong foundation, students often leave STEM within their first year of college. The Summer Bridge Program is crucial to addressing this challenge, providing incoming students with 10 days of immersive, hands-on scientific discovery before the start of the fall term. In North Star, students collaborate with peers, student leaders, and graduate student coaches to design and build robotic rovers from scratch. They program and deploy these robots during an overnight research experience at Pine Mountain Observatory. This experiential learning fosters teamwork, problem-solving, and a deep engagement with real scientific exploration from the very start of their college careers.

Strong Start has directly funded approximately 60 students in North Star over the past three years, dramatically enhancing our ability to build a strong and lasting STEM community. Thanks to this support, we have been able to increase annual participation from 7-8 students per year to 20-25 students. We have also expanded our resources, improving peer leadership and coaching, providing students access to high-performance hardware, and enabling authentic scientific experiences that mirror real-world research. Additionally, Strong Start funding has allowed us to compensate student leaders and coaches, ensuring the sustainability and effectiveness of the program, rather than relying solely on volunteer work. Beyond North Star, Strong Start has funded dedicated learning spaces such as a robotics studio, a light studio (optics), and a sky studio (telescopes), which continue to engage students throughout the academic year, reinforcing their scientific identity and community.

The positive impact of Strong Start on student retention and engagement in STEM at the University of Oregon is undeniable. Without continued funding, we risk losing the momentum we have built in supporting and inspiring the next generation of scientists and engineers. I urge you to support Senate Bill 604 and ensure that Oregon's public universities can continue providing these transformative opportunities to students from all backgrounds. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

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