

My name is Angela Mehta, I am a student at the University of Oregon, and a Peer Leader in the Summer Bridge Program that was funded by Strong Start. I am writing in support of SB 604: The Strong Start Program at Oregon's Public Universities, which will continue funding for programs that help ease the transition to higher education by providing an early start and giving them access to additional resources.

As a participant and a Peer Leader for the Summer Bridge Program, I have been able to both experience and contribute to the program. I am currently a second-year student, and while I have participated in many social organizations on campus which have allowed me to make many connections on campus, one of the programs that has had an immensely positive impact on my skills, knowledge, and social circle that the North Star Summer Bridge Program provided me with.

As an incoming first-year student, I was worried that my transition from high school to college would be difficult, and I was scared that I would not make many connections during my first term, or that I wouldn't be able to perform as well as I did in high school with regards to academics. I felt that I did not fit in with other students, and that I would never find a sense of community. I believed that everyone had their own groups coming into college, and that I would miss out on so many experiences that my peers would have, simply because I felt that I was not capable of making connections with people around me or because no one would want to be friends with me. I couldn't have been more wrong.

The Summer Bridge program allowed me to meet students whose interests and career aspirations aligned with mine, and with the help of my Peer Leaders and Faculty, I was directed to various resources like tutoring, transportation, and financial aid, that allowed for an easier transition to university. The friends I have today, were the people I first interacted with during the program, and they are some of my closest friends. We made so many fun memories during Summer Bridge by learning new things, by trying new ideas and even failing occasionally, but these experiences just brought us closer. Even today, when we look back at our time together, we reminisce all the things we did together.

Furthermore, the knowledge, technical skills, and friends I gained during Summer Bridge (North Star track) motivated me to pursue a second major in Computer Science alongside my major in Mathematics and to join Math and Computer Science oriented activities on campus during my first year. Without the guidance I received from the Graduate Mentors, Professors, and Peer Leaders, I would not have had the self-confidence to make new connections and move towards new opportunities.

With all the wonderful memories I had from Summer Bridge, I felt that I should come back as a Peer Leader so that I can provide incoming first year students with the same experiences that I got to have. It was a different perspective, but it was still the best thing that I could have done. Summer Bridge has always been one of my greatest experiences, and some of my happiest moments came from this program, and I wanted the next cohort of students to have those great memories as well. The transition into college can be very intimidating for many students, and I wanted to help incoming first-year students feel comfortable, supported, and be aware of the resources that they had access to on campus, while also helping them get into the routine of college life.

As a part of the North Star track, students worked long days, usually from 8am to 6pm, and were tasked with programming and designing multipurpose rovers, which were tested at Hendricks Park.

This was a difficult endeavor for students, as many of them had little to no prior experience in the construction and programming of rovers, but throughout the program, they learned how to work together and overcome challenges, which allowed for a successful outcome and helped students build connections with each other. Peer leaders worked closely with students, and we would encourage them to break the ice and learn more about their peers and their interests. While students were troubleshooting problems, they would talk about themselves and get to know others in their group. They created a safe and inclusive environment among students, which only strengthened the bond between students. Additionally, seeing as Peer Leaders worked closely with their student groups, we were able to develop a tight bond between our groups. We had many laughs, and we talked about our worries for the future, and how to overcome challenges as a student away from home for the first time. There were many deep conversations, but these moments gave students the feeling of belonging and laid the groundwork for the beginning of many meaningful friendships. When students opened up to one another, it developed feelings of trust and community, and throughout the time they were together, students would uplift each other when things felt difficult or overwhelming. It's a very difficult time for students, and sometimes it can feel like they are carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders, but what I noticed is that students would not hesitate to offer help or support – everyone was experiencing the same emotions and thoughts on different levels, and there was a shared understanding and empathy towards everyone.

As a Peer Leader, I have heard from many students that participated in the program that it was something that impacted them deeply. They made connections and overcame challenges together, and they made many memories that they will cherish and hold onto forever. At the end of the program, when all the tracks came together to celebrate their hard work and the beginning of a new chapter, I felt that as Peer Leaders, we were able to give students the gentle push they needed to move forward. If it's not too much to say, I felt sense of fulfillment and pride, and in that moment, it felt like I had come full circle in my journey with Summer Bridge. Just a year ago, I had been a student who was starting life fresh, and a year later, I was a Peer Leader sitting with people who I am proud to say are still my very good friends.

For those involved in the program, they considered Summer Bridge to be the steppingstone which allowed for a gentle transition into the college lifestyle. The program provided many invaluable resources and offered support to ensure that students felt comfortable and prepared for their journey into the next phase of their life. It fostered many deep connections and allowed for students to make many amazing memories together.

Please continue funding and expanding the Strong Start Program so that more students can benefit from its impactful services. Your leadership and commitment to education will help ensure that Oregon's public universities remain places of opportunity, inclusion, and achievement. Thank you for your time, and I hope I can count on your support of SB 604, the Strong Start Program!

Sincerely,
Angela Mehta
University of Oregon
Eugene, Oregon