



Dear Chair Frederick, Vice Chair Weber, and Members of the Oregon Senate Education Committee,

My name is O'Keef Rengiil Kokichi, and I am a resident and student under the Compact of Free Association (COFA) from the island of Palau, currently living in La Grande, Oregon. I am a senior at Eastern Oregon University (EOU) and now serve as a Lead Mentor for the Summer Bridge Program, which the Strong Start Program funds. Before becoming a mentor, I participated in the program in the school year 2023-2024. I am writing to express my unwavering support for SB 604, the Strong Start Program at Oregon's public universities.

As a first-generation and transfer student from an underrepresented background, I have firsthand experience with the challenges of transitioning into higher education. The Strong Start Program has been instrumental in my success, underscoring this initiative's vital support to ensure student retention, success, and overall well-being, particularly for students from the Pacific Islands and rural communities in Eastern Oregon who enroll at EOU.

The first year of college often presents significant challenges for students who are the first in their families to pursue higher education, those from underrepresented backgrounds, and those facing financial constraints. The Strong Start Program offers essential resources, including academic advising, peer mentorship, financial literacy education, and access to crucial support services. These components are pivotal in helping students acclimate to university life and establish a foundation for academic and career success.

A key aspect of this initiative is the Summer Bridge programs' outreach to the COFA nations to promote the opportunities available in Oregon. This outreach has significantly increased the enrollment, retention, and graduation rate of COFA students, and we aim to continue strengthening our connections with these nations while emphasizing the importance and value of pursuing higher education at a four-year institution, supported robustly by this program. Last summer in 2024, I had the opportunity to work with the Summer Bridge Program in the Republic of Palau, where I helped recruit and assist students enrolling at EOU. I conducted several presentations and meetings to explain the benefits of this program and how it has been a transformative experience for me and many of my peers. Through this outreach, we built meaningful relationships with the students' families, reaffirmed our commitment to supporting their children, and engaged

with partner institutions and school administrations to ensure a smooth transition for students to enroll at EOU.

Today, we are working diligently to enhance our support and guidance for all program participants and the students we encounter daily. We aim to provide equal access and opportunities to all interested students, including those who have not enrolled in the program for various reasons. Some of the many activities implemented by the program include hosting study nights twice a week and offering alternative spring break trips that allow students, particularly those who cannot be with their families during the break, to explore and learn beyond the typical classroom setting. We continue to include and welcome all of the students into the program. Through our experiences, helping them and making a strong first impression about the program have shown that available support boosts their academic success and establishes a valuable support system. Our program participants have become key assets to the school community, taking on leadership roles in the university's board of trustees, student associations, commissions, clubs, and community organizations once they graduate. Through the Summer Bridge Program, I have built connections within the school community, which has opened opportunities for me to serve as the Vice President of the Navigators Club, a member of the EOU President's Commission on Student Success and Belonging, and participate in numerous school clubs and organizations, in addition to my role as a mentor in the Summer Bridge Program.

Research consistently indicates that students engaged in structured support programs during their first year are significantly more likely to persist in their studies and complete their degrees. By investing in SB 604, Oregon reaffirms its commitment to equitable access to education, ensuring that students from diverse backgrounds have the opportunity to thrive.

Furthermore, this program's impacts extend beyond individual student achievement; they benefit the entire state of Oregon. A well-educated workforce strengthens Oregon's economy, fosters innovation, and enhances the overall well-being of our communities. Supporting initiatives like SB 604 is an investment in Oregon's future prosperity.

I respectfully urge you to continue funding and expanding the Strong Start Program to ensure more students benefit from its invaluable services. Your leadership and commitment to education are essential in maintaining Oregon's public universities as bastions of opportunity, inclusion, and achievement.

Although I would love to continue participating in the Summer Bridge program, I will graduate at the commencement ceremony in June 2025. Reflecting on my journey with the program, I am genuinely grateful for the opportunities it has provided me for professional and personal growth. The program has challenged me to take on roles and

responsibilities that require patience, understanding, teamwork, and effective management of a large group of students.

Beyond the work experiences, my involvement has formed lifelong friendships and created lasting memories. I plan to pass on these experiences to future students enrolling at our universities, encouraging them to build community, foster growth, and achieve success in life. This is the story I will carry with me as I graduate from college, and I aspire to inspire others to come and explore what Oregon has to offer. With your support, we could make that dream come true.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I sincerely appreciate your dedication to higher education and look forward to witnessing continued support for initiatives that significantly impact student's lives.

Sincerely,

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