

February 19, 2025

Chair Frederick, Vice Chair Weber, and Members of the Committee,

Please accept this collaborative letter of support for SB 604: The Strong Start Program at Oregon's Public Universities from current and former participants, peer leaders, staff, and faculty in the Summer Bridge and Alternative Spring Break programs funded through Strong Start from 2021 - 2024 at Eastern Oregon University.

In submitting our testimony together, we hope to highlight not only the profound impacts this funding has had on individual students but also the interconnected, intercommitted community of students, mentors, staff, faculty, and administrators that Strong Start has helped to grow and sustain on our campus.

From the start, EOU's Summer Bridge and Alternative Spring Break programs have worked intentionally from a relational, culturally sustaining model of college success and retention to support historically underrepresented and underserved students. Both programs are designed to increase student success through multiple overlapping measures, including:

- Scaffolding varied, culturally-relevant opportunities to apply and strengthen foundational academic skills (primarily reading, writing, critical thinking, presenting, and working effectively in small groups)
- Building a thick network of students, peer mentors, staff, and faculty, fostering students' sense of belonging, agency, and resilience in the face of academic and other challenges
- Familiarizing students with diverse disciplines, career possibilities, and people who apply and create different kinds of knowledge in different fields
- Drawing intentional connections between home, community, and higher ed, encouraging students to see themselves and their communities in the university
- Introducing students to real-world contexts in which they can develop soft skills associated with teamwork, leadership, problem-solving, adaptability, and flexibility and examine the root causes of complex social issues through experiential education and civic engagement
- Increasing faculty and staff knowledge of students' diverse experiences, strengths, goals, and needs, building institutional capacity and commitment to student success
- Allowing students to "bank" two credits prior to the start of fall or spring term, providing more flexibility to take a lower course load if needed to be academically successful that

term, or to take a higher overall number of course credits in order to maintain eligibility for financial aid and athletics and remain on track toward timely graduation

Critically, these programs also provide opportunities for students to advance into leadership roles as mentors, tutors, classroom assistants, research team members, and co-designers of the program in following years.

It is working.

92% of Fall 2023 Summer Bridge students were retained through their first year on campus, compared to 71% of EOU's first-year class. The Fall 2025 Summer Bridge cohort is on track to reach that same bar. 70% of students who participate in Summer Bridge or Alternative Spring Break go on to assume leadership roles on campus both in and beyond these programs, which is strongly associated with persistence and timely graduation from college.

In the words of a few members of this growing community at EOU:

"Summer Bridge has impacted me by allowing me to have the chance to open up and meet new people before the school year, as well as create new friendships which are still going strong months after! This program helped me feel more comfortable when reaching out and utilizing the many resources on campus. I found Summer Bridge not only extremely helpful but also very educational and effective!"

–Caitlyn Carlsen, First-Year Psychology Major, 2024 Summer Bridge Student

"Summer Bridge has created a community of different people from around the world who keep me focused on school, especially during study nights. Now, as a mentor, I use what I've learned from this program to do the same for incoming students. The Summer Bridge program and Alternative Spring break sticks to the main theme of "Stories of Place". It played a significant role in teaching me the historical and contemporary context. Because we come from different places, getting ready for the challenges that we might face while here is a big part of Summer Bridge's objective. From learning about the history of Oregon from the Nez Perce to the first European settlers to now, I have personally gained context to the land and be able to understand La Grande's unique cultures of art, college life, and especially Winter/Summer in the Pacific Northwest. These would have been obstacles that I'd have to spend months to learn myself and missed so much more that Summer Bridge gave us to be able to integrate into EOU."

–Baron Ucharm, Senior Art Major, Lead Mentor, 2023-2024 Summer Bridge and Alternative Spring Break Student

“Summer Bridge is a phenomenal means of helping students new to Eastern Oregon University connect their home cultures with rural and frontier rural communities. They acquire the cultural capital necessary for success in college, but more importantly, they see themselves as capable of valuable contributions to campus and community life. Many Summer Bridge students go on to be campus and community leaders who serve with vision and voice.”

–Dr. Nancy Knowles, Professor of English/Writing and Lead Summer Bridge Faculty, 2021 - 2024

“I really appreciate the opportunity to engage with students in the formal and less formal academic environments during the Summer Bridge program. This rapport that I'm able to establish with many of these students before the start of the school year goes a long way in helping them feel comfortable seeking me out for support later on. Simultaneously, these experiences provide me with access to a deeper pool of students to draw upon for activities, events, and student employment opportunities. The Summer Bridge program energizes and accelerates the process of student acclimation to new surroundings; relationship building with peers, faculty, and staff; and just generally enables our students to be better equipped for the transition into a new and highly formative stage of their lives.”

–Ryan Scariano, EOU Learning Center and Summer Bridge Faculty, 2021 - 2024

Together, we urge you to support Senate Bill 604 and find ways to sustain the level of funding and programming we know works to make college possible for historically underserved students and their families.

Thank you so much for your time.

Dr. Cori Brewster
Director of Summer Bridge and Alternative Spring Break
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