

April 16, 2025
Ways and Means Committee

Dear Co-Chair Kate Lieber, Co-Chair Tawna Sanchez, and members of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means,

My name is Shoshana Zeisman-Pereyo, and I am the Executive Director of Student Academic Support Services at Portland State University (PSU). Thank you for the opportunity to speak in support of Senate Bill 604 and the continued funding of the Strong Start Grant program. This program is critical to addressing college readiness, supporting students' transitions into higher education, and ensuring equitable access for all learners.

Each campus implements our programs based on the unique local conditions of each of our universities paying close attention to serving veterans, rural students, Pell-eligible students, and students from otherwise marginalized communities, ensuring we bring in all types of students into these programs.

I want to share how PSU has leveraged the Strong Start Grant to improve retention rates, close equity gaps, and help students achieve their educational goals.

The Challenges We Face

Many first-year students arrive at PSU underprepared for the demands of college. Recent K-12 test outcomes in Oregon highlight the need for additional support. Students face:

- Financial barriers that force them to prioritize work over academics.

- Gaps in study skills, discipline, and maturity—particularly for online courses.
- A lack of community, which is vital for persistence and engagement.

These challenges are especially pronounced among first-generation, low-income, and BIPOC students. PSU's ethos is to be *student-ready*, meeting students where they are and providing the resources they need to succeed.

How the Strong Start Grant Helps

The Strong Start Grant has been transformative for PSU. Over the past four years, it has directly supported 1,370 first-year students through programs like Summer Scholars and Math Start, with hundreds more benefitting from expanded resources. Here's what we've achieved:

1. Summer Scholars Program:

- In Summer 2024, over 250 students participated in the Summer Scholars Program. As of now, over 90% of those students have continued their academy journey. These students are among our most vulnerable—those admitted with less than a 3.0 high school GPA—and are more diverse than our overall cohort.

2. Targeted Academic Support:

- Piloted two new positions: a Scholars Academic Support and Retention Specialist and a Scholars Academic Coach. These roles provide tailored outreach, study skills coaching, and motivation support to ensure student success.

3. Curriculum Innovation:

- Enabled PSU to redesign its first-year general education curriculum, embedding resources like academic advising and student affairs support directly into coursework.

4. Math Start Initiative:

- Offered free sections of a new course, *Qualities in Math Confidence*, to over 70 students in Summer 2024. Early assessments show promising results in improving math readiness.

Equity Impact

The Strong Start Grant has been instrumental in addressing educational inequities:

- Since policy changes allowing admission of students with less than a 3.0 GPA, representation among BIPOC students has increased significantly:
 - Black student representation grew by 9%, with these students now comprising a quarter of this cohort.
 - Hispanic/Latino representation rose from 20% to 36%.
- These students now represent 21% of PSU's first-year population—a testament to the program's ability to attract and retain and serve underrepresented groups.

The Path Forward

Despite these successes, our work is far from done. The incoming cohorts require more support than ever before due to disruptions in their formative educational years during the pandemic. The Strong Start Grant enables PSU to:

- Strengthen existing programs like Summer Scholars and Math Start.
- Develop new protocols for real-time student support—whether through math tutoring, writing assistance, or FAFSA guidance.
- Ensure that no student falls through the cracks.

Call to Action

In closing, I urge you to continue funding Senate Bill 604. The Strong Start Grant is not just an investment in individual student success—it is an investment in Oregon's future workforce and economic vitality. By supporting this program, you ensure that every student has the opportunity to thrive academically and contribute meaningfully to our communities.

Thank you for your time today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.