



Strong Start Program

Oregon Council of Presidents

April 24, 2025

Summary

First-year students and those from historically underrepresented backgrounds face incredible challenges when matriculating to a university. Since 2021, the Strong Start program has provided academic and other support services to these students at Oregon's public universities, resulting in, on average, higher retention rates, GPAs, and credit hour production.¹ The public universities are seeking continued funding for this program to ensure that vulnerable students are able to access these critical support services.

Background

The Legislature initially funded Strong Start in 2021 to help students who had been out of the classroom during the COVID-pandemic successfully transition into postsecondary education. Funding for the program was increased by the 2022 Legislature.

While Strong Start programs are structured differently on each campus, common program goals include supporting students to succeed academically at a university, acclimating students to each institution's culture, creating a sense of belonging, and increasing retention, particularly for historically underserved students. Strong Start participants consistently show better outcomes than non-participants in credits completed, retention into the next term, and GPA.²

Strong Start programs are generally open to first-year students or incoming first-year students. Some universities place a priority on serving BIPOC, Pell-eligible, and/or first-generation students.

Strong Start programs at Oregon's public universities provide residential summer bridge programs, supplemental instruction for first-year students, or both. Participants receive intensive academic support especially in math and writing, academic advising, peer mentoring, tutoring, and study and financial literacy skills. Participating students may earn credit for their participation or access to fee remissions or stipends. Additional information on eligibility requirements and program structure at each public university can be found below.

¹ See program outcomes data on pages 6-8, as reported by institutions offering the program.

² See program outcomes data on pages 6-8, as reported by institutions offering the program.

Eligibility

Western Oregon University – Any new WOU student entering that Fall who needs additional support in the college transition as it relates to social integration and/or academic preparedness in math and writing. WOU can serve up to 200 students and hasn't turned any participants away.

University of Oregon – Targets BIPOC, first-generation and low-income students and those most academically at-risk. To participate, students have to meet the following criteria:

- First-year students beginning in Fall term
- Submit completed application by priority deadline
- Priority given to BIPOC, first-generation and Pell eligible students
- Priority given to students who participated in AVID, ASPIRE, GEAR UP, or similar programs

Portland State University – All incoming first-year students with a high school GPA below 3.0 must participate in the Summer Scholars Program. Other first-year students can sign up for the weighted lottery if there is capacity. The lottery is weighted for first-generation college student status, Oregon residency, Pell eligibility, and those in PSU's Tuition Free Degree program.

Southern Oregon University – Can serve up to 100 graduating Oregon high school students and prioritizes applications from students from the following demographic groups:

- BIPOC students
- First-generation college students
- Rural students
- Pell eligible students
- Mental health challenges, neuro-diversity, and learning disabilities
- Students drastically impacted by the pandemic (personal, job, or learning loss)

Oregon Institute of Technology – Offers the program to students who identify as first-generation college students and are considered low-income as identified through FAFSA metrics.

Eastern Oregon University – All first-year students are invited to apply, with additional targeted recruitment focused on first-generation, low-income and historically underrepresented students.

Oregon State University – OSU's Educational Opportunities Program serves Corvallis campus students from historically underrepresented backgrounds, including first generation, Pell eligible, rurally isolated, and BIPOC students. Within the EOP are the Black Student Access & Success Initiative and the Dreaming Beyond Borders Resource Center.

OSU's Supplemental Instruction (SI) program is offered to all students enrolled in courses with high instances of Ds, Fs, and withdrawals. Since the SI tables have limited space, the Academic Success Center works with programs that serve first generation, Pell eligible, and BIPOC students to offer them early access to registration.

Program Structure

WOU – Two week bridge orientation program and residential program that starts three weeks before Fall term. Students are organized into learning cohorts (i.e. Trio eligible, ASL, resident, non-resident, transfer) with a maximum of 20 students that go through two non-credit courses for math and writing to increase basic knowledge of college expectations in these subjects and increase their confidence in their ability to succeed. Grant funds are used to award \$1000 wage replacement stipend.

UO – Early Move-In Summer Bridge Programs – residential summer bridge programs for incoming first-year students with the following components in common across programs:

- Early move-in to residence halls before majority of students arrive
- Study skill and learning strategy development
- Intensive math and writing instruction
- Peer mentoring and academic advising support
- Social belonging and community development
- Early exposure to academic spaces, advisors and faculty
- Financial literacy and career exploration

First-Year Transitional Support – expand critical support to first-year students and provide support to summer bridge participants success through the year:

- New academic success hub located in the residence halls and focused on providing academic support to first-year students through tutoring, study skill workshops, peer academic coaching, study groups and connections to key campus resources
- Expanded peer tutoring in computer science, math and writing
- Expanded peer-led supplemental instruction in high DFNW (grades of D, F, incomplete or withdrew) first-year courses
- Established support for STEM summer bridge participants through STEM Runway program, including tutorial support, course planning and connections to undergraduate research opportunities
- Expanded professional Learning Specialist support in writing.

OSU – Each fall, the Educational Opportunities Program welcomes a cohort of qualifying first-year students to the Corvallis campus through their Bridge and Academic Counseling programs. Strong Start funding has allowed EOP to offer the program to an increased number of students and to pilot new approaches to integrating career and professional development into the EOP cohort experience.

Additionally, Supplemental Instruction is a free resource that offers peer-led, group study tables for challenging courses. Study tables are led by students who have taken and succeeded in the course in a past term, and they continue to attend lectures. Study tables differ from lectures in that they are highly interactive; students engage in a variety of learning activities to understand and master course concepts. Strong Start funding has allowed OSU to triple the size of the SI program offerings, greatly expanding the number of students impacted.

PSU – PSU launched the Summer Bridge Scholars Program (SBSP). SBSP is a pre-matriculation program free of charge that allows early access to campus resources, housing, and academic coursework to ease the transition from high school to college. Additionally, the SBSP was designed to provide the following:

- Academic skills development and support
- Orientation to academic culture
- Opportunity to earn college credit and a positive GPA
- Connection with support services such as tutoring, academic coaching, and advising
- Improved sense of institutional belonging, resulting from the students' connections with each other, with supportive faculty, and with support services
- Higher persistence and retention rates, and improved academic performance, as a result of the above

SOU – SOU's Bridge Program provides the following benefits, at no cost to participating students:

- Bridge Orientation, a seven-day "Pre-Fall Experience" to support the college transition
- Increased financial support during the first year, including selective fee remissions
- Enhanced academic advising, career counseling, and access to on-campus jobs
- Campus connections to key resources, faculty, and services
- Academic workshops in study skills, time management, and student success
- Supportive year-long peer mentoring
- Leadership development and social networking opportunities
- Access to cultural events, civic engagement projects, and social activities
- Up to seven tuition-free credits through first-year Bridge course.
- Professional development for first-year students via the Bridge Jobs program (resume development, interview practice, professionalism lectures).
- Tracking student progress via regular faculty check-ins and one-on-one support meetings with students.

OIT – OIT's Strong Start program provides students opportunities to develop academic skills, build strong community connections, and successfully transition into university life. Programs were created to address gaps in preparedness and to fill critical needs for students in an unprecedented experience. These include bridge programs (3 to 7 days prior to Fall term), math skill workshops and online learning modules, academic/study skill workshops, increasing the availability of tutoring services, launching supplemental instruction for math classes, professional success coaching, and professional development through student employment team and career readiness programs.

EOU – EOU offers a no-cost, residential, community-engaged Summer Bridge program to all new students. Students earn two college credits participating in classes, workshops and activities during the two weeks they are on campus prior to the start of fall term. The goals of the program are to:

- Build supportive networks among students, tutors, peer mentors, faculty and staff
- Strengthen foundational academic skills
- Introduce students to diverse majors and disciplines
- Introduce students to general education and degree planning
- Provide the opportunity to interact with EOU faculty in their labs and offices across campus
- Continue to engage students through informal activities and check-ins throughout the year.

Other EOU programs supported by Strong Start funding include: Early College Advising, Plateau Scholarships, Early College Initiatives and High School Relationship Building, and a Student Resource Lounge.

Testimonials

More than [100 Oregonians](#) submitted testimony in support of SB 604 to continue the Strong Start Summer Bridge Program. You can see excerpts from submitted testimony below.

Kayla Cho, Student, University of Oregon

“Through Summer Bridge, I witnessed their transformation firsthand. In a short time, these students built friendships, grew in confidence, and found a sense of belonging. I saw their initial worries—about academics, social life, and adjusting to a new environment—gradually ease as they connected with one another and embraced the resources available to them.”

O’Keef Rengiil Kokichi, Student, Eastern Oregon University

“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.”

Hailey Cook, Student, Western Oregon University

“Destination Western made me feel like I had a family and community in my new home. After those two weeks my dad told me that I was a completely different person. I was more sure of myself, I started conversations, and was not afraid to try new things.”

Baron Ucharm, Student, Eastern Oregon University

“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.”

Alissa Leavitt, Instructor, Portland State University

“Strong Start doesn’t just support individual students; it strengthens our communities by ensuring more students persist, graduate, and contribute to Oregon’s workforce. Research consistently shows that early interventions lead to higher retention and completion rates, making programs like Strong Start a wise investment for our state.”

Program Outcomes

2021-22

	Retention (Fall to Winter)		Fall GPA		Fall Credits Completed	
	Strong Start	Not Strong Start	Strong Start	Not Strong Start	Strong Start	Not Strong Start
EOU	88%	91%	3.30	3.00	14.1	12.3
OIT	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
OSU	98.9%	96.7%	3.21	3.08	12.82	12.4
PSU	84%	77%	2.57	2.11	17.0	11.0
SOU	82%	63%	3.01	2.99	14.8	11.1
UO	98%	96%	3.21	3.22	13.6	14.0
WOU	96%	89%	2.76	2.83	14.3	13.0

2022-23

	Retention (Fall to Winter)		Retention (Academic Year)		Fall GPA		2022 Fall Credits Completed	
	Strong Start	Not Strong Start	Strong Start	Not Strong Start	Strong Start	Not Strong Start	Strong Start	Not Strong Start
EOU	95%	81%	79%	74%	3.4	3.2	15.5	11.8
OIT	94%	93%	89.7%	71.1%	3.15	3.19	14.2	12.9
OSU	98.5%	93.0%	93.84%	87.4%	3.08	3.21	13.4	13.2
PSU ³	87.5%	81.5%	63.6%	60.4%	2.37	2.26	10.3	9.9
SOU ⁴	97.0%	56.0%	78%	32%	3.02	1.89	16.1	8.8

³ PSU 2022-23 "Strong Start" and "Not Strong Start" data compares outcomes for students admitted below a 3.0 high school GPA.

⁴ SOU "Not Strong Start" student data represents a control group of 25 randomly selected Bridge-eligible students who enrolled at SOU in Fall 2022 and either declined a spot in the program or did not apply.

UO ⁵	95.5%	95.7%	83%	85.2%	3.11	3.16	13.3	13.7
WOU	97%	92%	84.9%	76.1%	3.06	2.99	13.4	12.5

2023-2024

	Retention (Academic Year)		Fall GPA	
	Strong Start	Not Strong Start	Strong Start	Not Strong Start
EOU	84%	75%	3.14	3.19
OIT	85.1%	66.6%	3.22	3.1
OSU	94.43%	87.8%	3.3	3.25
PSU ⁶	66.5%	57.7%	2.59	2.35
SOU ⁷	69%	33%	2.06	2.31
UO ⁸	86%	86.4%	3.13	3.21
WOU	81.8%	73.9%	2.92	2.89

2024-2025

	Retention (Fall to Winter)		Fall GPA	
	Strong Start	Not Strong Start	Strong Start	Not Strong Start
EOU	94%	90%	3.07	3.2

⁵ UO's Summer Bridge intentionally focus on serving low-income, first-generation, and students of color where historic and persistent opportunity gaps exist for retention, credit completion, and GPA. Comparisons of Summer Bridge and non-Summer Bridge participant outcomes among low-income, first-generation, and students of color show even greater outcomes for traditionally underserved students who participate in the Summer Bridge program.

⁶ PSU 2022-23 "Strong Start" and "Not Strong Start" data compares outcomes for students admitted below a 3.0 high school GPA.

⁷ SOU "Not Strong Start" student data represents a control group of 25 randomly selected Bridge-eligible students who enrolled at SOU in Fall 2022 and either declined a spot in the program or did not apply.

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OIT	85.95%	87.26%	2.8	3.1
OSU	N/A	N/A	3.31	3.27
PSU ⁹	87.1%	71%	2.54	2.76
SOU ¹⁰	90%	70%	3.2	2.5
UO ¹¹	96%	96.8%	3.25	3.24
WOU	97.3%	90.4%	3.23	3.22

⁹ PSU 2022-23 "Strong Start" and "Not Strong Start" data compares outcomes for students admitted below a 3.0 high school GPA.

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