

Submitter: OraLee Branch  
On Behalf Of:  
Committee: Joint Committee On Ways and Means Subcommittee  
On Education  
Measure, Appointment or Topic: SB5525

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony for SB 5525 (the Higher Education Coordinating Commission budget bill that includes the Community College Support Fund).

My testimony supports the use of money from the General Fund for Higher Education which must include community colleges to reach students with extreme potential but without the resources to go directly into a four-year university. Moreover, community colleges provide education and experiences that make our community stronger in many different ways.

I live in Hood River County, provide my skills as an epidemiologist, and afford my life here specifically because of the community college experience.

Like many individuals, I had to make my own way. I was in foster care. I needed to work when I was in high school and had to quit when I was a junior to work full time. Only through community college was I able to earn my GED, take courses, and have experiences that prepared me to transfer to a four-year school. This was in 1986. Even now, children with obvious intellectual abilities and work-focused skills would find it nearly impossible to go from not having parental resources to study at a traditional four-year university.

My experiences are not as rare as we all wish they were. Many individuals have extreme potential, but need a community college experience to lift them into a position to contribute to their skills and drive to our community and state.

Now, I give back to community colleges. I am an elected member of the Columbia Gorge Community College (CGCC) Board of Education. My story of going from community college to earning a PhD at Emory University is inspirational for many of our current CGCC students. However, I can also see how the community college experience is crucial and better than a 4-year college for so many students. My daughter, for example, took courses at Portland Community College (PCC) when we first moved to Oregon to advance her educational goals. She said the teachers, course sizes, and student diversity at PCC were much better for her than what she experienced at the University of Alabama. I also know that students at CGCC get the educational foundation and wrap-around resources that enable them to contribute to our community. Students at CGCC go on to shine in local careers just out of CGCC courses. Whether as transfer students to other colleges or as new employees in our community, our students say that their experience at CGCC enables them to be better citizens and better employees.

I do not think there should be a distinction between community colleges and other colleges and universities when it comes to state budget funding. Both paths are needed to get the highest number and quality of students. I am certain that, like me, many doctors and scientists would not have become what they are if they did not have a community college experience. Moreover, trade occupations and occupations that do not need four-year degrees are extremely valuable and important in and for our society. Community colleges result in community centered students and graduates.

As a School Board director, I review the programs and outcomes of CGCC and other Oregon community colleges. I am certain that they are essential for Oregon and that they deserve more funding.

Please do all you can to find resources such as those described in SB 5525 to support community colleges.

I know the work you do is difficult and that budget issues are hard to resolve. Thank you for what you do, and I hope this testimony makes it easier to decide on SB 5525.

Thank you,

OraLee Branch

Hood River County resident who actively participates in civic issues