

Co-Chairs Sollman and Ruiz, Members of the Subcommittee,

My name is Belen Santiago Hernandez, and I am a second year student pursuing a degree in Public Health at Western Oregon University. I am a first-generation student, coming from a farm working family. The only jobs available in my hometown for people with no higher education were agricultural. My family always told me that education is the most important asset I will ever have. No one would ever take my knowledge and skills. They always encouraged me to continue my education, as I got older continuing my education became harder. I had no savings or any other source of income to help contribute towards my education. So I, like many others, heavily rely on scholarships, grants and all the financial aid we can get. Without any of it furthering my education would have not been possible.

For thousands of students like me, the Oregon Opportunity Grant is not just financial aid but a crucial resource that enables us to gain the skills and knowledge needed to make meaningful contributions to our communities and strengthen Oregon's workforce.

We know that by 2031, 72% of jobs in the U.S. will likely require some form of postsecondary education. The Oregon Opportunity Grant directly addresses this by providing students from lower-income families with the crucial support needed to obtain degrees aligned with our state's economic needs. Investing in this grant means investing in Oregon's future workforce, ensuring we have qualified professionals ready to meet industry demands and drive economic growth.

As a student leader, I've focused on initiatives to improve student retention and success, recognizing that financial challenges represent one of the greatest barriers facing students today. Without expanded access to financial support through programs like the Oregon Opportunity Grant, many students will face significant obstacles in achieving their educational and career aspirations. Investing \$458 million to expand the Oregon Opportunity Grant in the 2025–2027 biennium will substantially broaden eligibility, increase individual award amounts, and empower countless students across Oregon to reach their educational goals. This investment is critical—not only for my peers and me but for the entire state of Oregon, creating lasting economic benefits and directly addressing the state's pressing workforce challenges.

Thank you for your time and ongoing commitment to supporting Oregon students and our public universities.