

Co Chairs Sollman and Ruiz and members of the subcommittee

For the record, my name is Maria Barrera and I serve as the Basic Needs Coordinator at Western Oregon University. I am one of the many Benefits Navigators that work with students across the state of Oregon. I am here today to ask for your support to continue funding for the Benefits Navigator Program. This program, which was first adopted by the legislature during the 2021 legislative session, was established to assist students at public community colleges and universities in accessing essential resources such as food, housing, and financial aid.

I want to thank Co-Chair Sanchez and Co-Chair Liber for including the funding for benefits navigators into their budget framework. However, the work is not finished. We need to make sure the funding is secured in order to not pull the carpet from under our students. If this funding doesn't continue it puts at risk thousands of students' lives who continue to struggle with having their basic needs met and need support. Since 2021 with the funding from the legislature, benefit navigators have become critical guides connecting students to services that keep them in school and on track. As you have heard today and over the past few years, university students are facing greater challenges than ever before. Inflation is driving up the cost of food, housing, and tuition on our campuses, students are facing increased mental health challenges, and many are still dealing with the academic impacts of the pandemic.

Many students face basic needs insecurity like not knowing where their next meal may come from or how they'll pay for rent which among other things remains a major barrier to college completion, especially for BIPOC students and those from low-income backgrounds. Across Oregon's universities and community colleges, we have been able to expand our services to help with food, housing, and other basic needs but before this program, many students didn't know how to access any of these existing resources. At Western Oregon University since I started my role as the first ever benefits navigator in January 2022, I've met with 639 students in need, many of whom are facing food or housing insecurity, or need assistance obtaining health insurance. I help students apply for SNAP, find housing, or access other resources to help them stay on their educational path. For example, last term I worked with a student who was facing food insecurity and needed help applying for SNAP and who also had no health insurance. Together we walked through the application and even wrote a letter to DHS in support of her case so she could get both benefits that would help her buy groceries and get her medical expenses covered. She stopped by Abby's House a couple weeks ago to let me know she got SNAP and OHP benefits and has been doing great in her classes.

Programs like this – alongside increased levels of financial aid – are crucial to the academic success and well-being of university students. This investment by the legislature has proven to support tens of thousands of students in accessing basic needs services, and, ultimately, to continue their education. Students cannot achieve academic success if they don't have access to food or a roof over their head. The role of the benefits navigator is a key element to ensuring students have their needs met so they can focus on school and earning their degrees. I hope you will join me in supporting students, who might need a little extra support and fund our benefits navigator positions moving forward.