

Co-Chairs Sollmon and Ruiz, and members of the Subcommittee,
For the record, my name is Imogene Schwarz and I am a first-year student majoring in pre-nursing at Western Oregon University. I am here to ask you to fully fund the strong start programs at the seven public universities.

As President Peters said earlier today, the transition to college is one of the most challenging times for a student. Strong Start programs are incredibly important on our campuses, reducing the college preparation gap and helping first- year students transition successfully into college and stay on track to graduate.

At Western Oregon University, the Strong Start program is called Destination Western. Destination Western is a residential bridge orientation program designed to help students develop the skills needed for success at WOU and in college-level academics. The program lasts ten days and includes academic sessions, small-group activities, workshops, and social events. WOU serves between 150 and 200 students annually in this program. Students who participate at Destination Western have a 5-10% increase in their retention rate, take more credits per term on average, and have a higher GPA. Furthermore, they tend to access services on campus at a higher level than their peers.

I went through the Destination Western program myself last September, but I started at WOU with minimal knowledge. After Destination Western, I knew so much more about campus resources, classes, campus life, and most of all, how to succeed in a college environment. Also, Destination Western gave me the opportunity to move in early and get acclimated to an entirely new living situation, helping me work through feelings of homesickness and anxiety. This program gave me a strong foundation and bridged the gap between high school and college, allowing me to get to the successes that I have today.

As you have heard, Strong Start programs like Destination Western give students the tools and skills to be successful, persist, and eventually graduate. I know you have tough decisions to make in the budget, but please prioritize students like me by funding the Strong Start program for the seven public universities for the 2025-2027 biennium. Thank you for your time and thank you for your service to our state.