



To: Governor Brown

CC: Ben Cannon, Director of the Higher Education Coordinating Commission

Date: May 2020

RE: GEER Funding Request

Serving Vulnerable Students

During this national health emergency, community colleges are prioritizing the needs of our most vulnerable. While we understand that budget cuts may be in our future we need your help to serve Oregonians most at risk: students of color, students from mixed-documentation families, student parents, and those in the lowest socio-economic levels need our help more than ever.

However important community colleges are, we also know the hardships created by COVID-19 are shared by educational, non-profit, business, and governmental sectors across the state. We have to prioritize our requests to our government by triaging our needs, starting with those most at risk.

Community colleges play a unique role delivering education and workforce training to all regardless of their education or skill level. In the process of providing education and financial aid we help keep families out of poverty today and provide the skills necessary to end the cycle of poverty permanently. When a student is enrolled at a community college in Oregon, they also get support for accessing state and federal benefits like childcare, food, and housing. Community colleges are a critical part of the social safety net in Oregon. Teaching Oregonians how to integrate their resources is our way of keeping people on track toward their goals. This is who we are: community is our middle name.

With enrollment declining as much as 25% at some Oregon community colleges, our first-generation students are experiencing even greater challenges staying in college. Colleges are experiencing a disproportionate decline in enrollment from our vulnerable populations. Local high schools are reporting unresponsiveness from seniors as high as 40%. Nationally, Nearly 250,000 fewer returning students from the lowest-income backgrounds have renewed their FAFSA for the 2020-21 cycle, and FAFSA renewals overall are down nearly 5% (more than 350,000 students) compared to last year, according to our analysis of data from Federal Student Aid (FSA).

We call on our Governor to use previously allocated federal dollars for education to support our most vulnerable students. We are requesting \$10 million of the GEER funding, as part of the Education Stabilization Fund, to support 1st generation and low-income students in attending their local community college and prepare for the difficult economic realities of the future.

1st Generation and Low-Income Programs Need Resources

Colleges around the state use coaches to support the most vulnerable; those programs include but are not limited to TriO, Guided Pathways, Future Connect, specialized advising, YESS, and others. This budget would also allow community colleges to get students the resources they need, including but not limited to grocery cards and technology to complete courses. We are formally asking that you help us help our students.

For example, at Portland Community College enrollment is down 20% overall however for targeted programs for underrepresented community's enrollment decline was less. The Future Connect program at PCC is highly effective with students of color graduating at higher rates than their white peers in the general population. In spring term, 150 out of 850 students stopped taking classes, and those students have discussed plans with their coaches to return in the fall. Future Connect also has positive results from advising students online and through texting support to keep students on track. Currently Future Connect is strengthening remote support by adding remote classes summer and fall for students who need additional support specifically built for the online experience.

For fall term PCC has an additional 1000 students who want to be in the Future Connect program, but there are only 320 spots. We will serve the rest but primarily through virtual online support. With GEER resources we could significantly serve more students of color. Future Connect has built a set of specialized supports for students who opt-in and we are working with these students to complete their FAFSAs. This program needs additional support since the ratio of 150 students to 1 advisor is critical. In times of great uncertainty when so many of our students have lost their jobs, keeping students in school with a reliable, knowledgeable coach is the best thing we can do.

At Southwestern Oregon Community College they have TRIO Student Support Services (SSS). The mission of TRIO Student Support Services is to increase persistence and graduation rates of eligible first-generation, low-income college students and students with disabilities; to increase the rate of transfer for these students to four-year institutions; and to foster an institutional climate supportive of the success of these students by providing comprehensive academic support services and advocacy. GEER funding here could be used to expand the reach of this program and address the increased need for programs like this. The year to year retention rate for SSS students at SWOCC is 79%, for that same population not served by SSS the graduation rate is 51%.

Additional funding to these programs can also free up more flexible philanthropic dollars for students who don't currently qualify for CARES Act funding. These impacted students could include but are not limited to undocumented students and students seeking short term certificate programs.

We have thousands of students across the state who want to start these programs at community colleges in the fall. Using GEER funding to support these programs would allow colleges across the state to support these students at greater levels when they need it most.

Ask: Allocate \$10 million to the Community College 1st Generation Grant to provide specialized coaches for students who need it most. Help provide equipment, hire coaches, and expand this program to students who need access to programs like this in order to be successful in their higher education.

We look forward to the continuation of partnerships across these sectors to help get our state through this crisis, protect our most vulnerable students, and rebuild the workforce needed for a strong recovery.