



November 1, 2021

The Honorable Ron Wyden
221 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Wyden,

We write to you today with great concern regarding the recent policy removal from the Build Back Better Plan that would provide students with two years of free community college. While we support the higher education investments included in the latest version of the bill, we strongly encourage you and the Biden Administration to revisit this critical investment in the near future. We cannot underscore enough the urgency of this matter.

By not investing in two years of free community college, this threatens Oregon's and the United States' ability to develop and retain a workforce that meets today's evolving industry needs. Providing two years of free community college would uplift and mobilize millions of Americans economically, many of whom come from underserved groups, including rural, low-income, and Black, Indigenous, People of Color communities. [Analyses show](#) this investment would result in a \$160 billion economic boost, giving families disposable income while increasing access to higher education.

Across the country we are struggling to close the skills gap in growing sectors like construction, agriculture, nursing, renewable energy, manufacturing, and IT. Increasingly, we see high school graduates who [opt not to go to college](#) due to skyrocketing tuition costs, a trend that has been [sped up by the pandemic](#). According to the National College Attainment Network, in 2019 alone, just 23% of four-year public colleges were affordable for students who received an average-sized Pell Grant.

Those who do go to college more than not [head to major cities](#) post-graduation in need of higher wages to help pay off mountains of student loans, draining states' talent and threatening our economic vitality. We also know that 30% of college students are working parents, making the path to completion that much more perilous.

This is not sustainable. We can and should build back better. That starts by creating a post-secondary pathway for students by removing financial barriers, like tuition, that will incentivize students to attend community colleges where they can get the training they need to secure a job, receive a good wage, and ensure we are economically relevant and competitive.

As a Legislature, we understand the value community colleges bring, especially for our rural communities. That's why in 2015 we took an important step and passed [Senate Bill 81](#), an



overwhelmingly-supported bipartisan piece of legislation also known as the Oregon Promise Act. In doing so we became the second state to provide free community college after Tennessee. Since its passage we've seen enrollment increase, especially among first-generation college students.

Oregon shows what is possible, but we cannot stop here. We urgently need more funding to maintain the Oregon Promise Act to support students, retain talent, and grow our economy. We know you share a commitment to Oregonians and our fellow Americans, our wellbeing and success. As Congress and the Biden Administration consider future policy, we ask that you use your position to elevate this issue—our talent pipeline, economy, and future depend on it.

Sincerely,

Rep. Teresa Alonso Leon (District 22), Chair of the House Committee on Education

Sen. Michael Dembrow (District 23), Chair of the Senate Committee on Education

Rep. Courtney Neron (District 26), Vice Chair of the House Committee on Education

Senate Majority Leader Rob Wagner (District 19)

Rep. Susan McLain (District 29), Co-Chair of the Joint Ways and Means Subcommittee on Education

Sen. Lew Frederick (District 22), Co-Chair of the Joint Ways and Means Subcommittee on Education



Jeff Reardon

Rep. Jeff Reardon (District 48), Member of the House Committee on Education

Sara A. Gelser Blouin

Sen. Sara Gelser (District 8), Member of the Senate Committee on Education

Janeen Sollman

Rep. Janeen Sollman (District 30), Member of the House Committee on Education

Ricki Ruiz

Rep. Ricki Ruiz (District 50), Member of the House Committee on Education

Zach Hudson

Rep. Zach Hudson (District 49), Member of the House Committee on Education