



OREGON STATE SENATE

**Free Community College
Testimony
SB 81
May 11, 2015**

From the famed bottle bill to the popular beach bill, Oregon is proud of being first to adopt bold ideas.

But being first isn't necessarily better. As journalists say, "Get it first, but first get it right."

The free community college concept is such a case. It is bold, visionary and promises long-term benefits.

And Tennessee did it first.

Last fall, their Community College doors swung open, free to Tennessee high school graduates.

Thousands of young people walked through those doors and are now taking classes to become welders, medical assistants, mechanics, dental hygienists, digital media producers, microelectronics workers, solar cell specialists and police officers.

These students were required to apply for federal funding. And 78 percent qualified for Pell Grants. Grants, not loans. This is how Tennessee can afford to make it work. The state picks up only the gap federal funds don't cover.

This is why Tennessee's increase in Applications for Financial Aid (FAFSA) applications skyrocketed last year – the biggest increase of any state in the country.

Thousands of students are in classrooms and millions of federal dollars are raining down on Tennessee – something that wasn't happening a year ago.

We like to study things in Oregon. And for the last two years, we have been studying how to make community college affordable for Oregonians.

Without some kind of training or education after high school there is likely a well-worn path to poverty. And poverty is expensive. A lifetime of food stamps is much more expensive than the annual community college tuition of \$3,000.

So we've seen Tennessee's law take effect. We've seen the greater than expected flow of federal money into that state. Mostly we've seen that it works. According to Mike Krause, executive director of the "Tennessee Promise" program, "It's completely changed the conversation for students and their families."

"It's changed the culture," he says for families whose culture previously didn't consider college as a viable choice.

People in Tennessee and Oregon are searching for ways to deal with the reality that our technology-based economy needs a workforce better educated than the days when kids walked out of high school and into a lumber mill or an auto factory. Those days are gone.

The other reality -- doing nothing -- is far more expensive.

Like Tennessee, Oregon has a growing population of young people, between 18 and 24 who have no job, no post-secondary education and no opportunity to get ahead. The Oregon Youth commission says each one of these 70,000 young people costs taxpayers about \$14,000 a year in social services and direct costs to society.

The day that one of those kids goes to work as a medical technician is the day they leave public assistance.

Oregon's proposal now before the legislature is similar to the Tennessee law.

In this case it's OK to be number two if we can take advantage of federal education money while putting kids into training programs who might not otherwise have the opportunity.

We may not be first, but advancing opportunities for Oregon's sons and daughters is getting it right.