



Testimony on Senate Bills 443 and 576

Senate Education Committee

April 6, 2017

Chair Roblan, Vice-Chair Linthicum, and members of the Committee. My name is Kyle Thomas and I am the Director of Legislative and Policy Affairs for the Higher Education Coordinating Commission. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on Senate Bills 443 and 576, which would require the Commission to draft rules to the extent that at least 25 percent of Oregon Opportunity Grant (OOG) moneys be awarded to students committed to majoring in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics fields.

Students apply for the OOG by completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) prior to enrolling at a specific institution. The FAFSA collects demographic and financial data about the student and the student's family, but does not collect any information about the student's program of study. Therefore, in order to ensure that the Commission awards a specified percentage of OOG moneys to students in any major, the Commission would have to collect and verify additional student information.

Second, the bills do leave open the question about how awards would be adjusted if students change majors and the student-award mix drops below 25 percent. While the legislation appears to allow HECC to develop a rule around this question, the grant is awarded each year to students, and so HECC could potentially inherit a condition that would require it to adjust awards for individual students based on no other eligibility issue than a change in major. Alternatively, the HECC may have to adjust awards to first year students to award greater than 25 percent of dollars to STEM students to account for changes to the student major mix in other cohorts, meaning an otherwise qualified incoming student could be denied an award based on choices made by other students.

Third, according to current enrollment data, the overall total of university students – i.e., first-time freshmen, new transfers, and continuing/returning students – at public universities who are enrolled in STEM programs is at 25.4 percent. The rate for new first-time freshmen is 29.1% in fall 2016. This data accounts for all students, and not just OOG recipients, but it suggests the goal of the legislation is being met, or is close to being met at the university level. We currently do not have the same data available for community colleges.

Finally, SB 443 (but not SB 576) deletes the authority of the HECC to establish procedures that prioritize awarding Opportunity Grants to students with the greatest level of financial need. This would have the effect of returning the operation of the program to a first-come, first-serve model, or a model where more students may receive awards, but those awards would cover less student need. In either case, students with the greatest unmet need after application of Pell funding would likely receive fewer dollars under the program.

Thank you for your time. Please contact me if you have any questions.