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Public comment in response to the July 14, 2022 Field Trip Virtual Listening Session with Incarcerated Students at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility and Snake River Correctional Institution

July 24, 2022

Esteemed Joint Task Force on Student Success for Underrepresented Students in Higher Education representatives,

My name is Wynn Strange, PhD candidate at Portland State University and adjunct instructor for Portland State University, Linfield University, and Pacific University. I am writing you as an instructor for the PSU Higher Education in Prison program where I recently finished teaching students Sociology of Alcohol and Other Drugs. I am writing in support of changing the implementation of the 1994 Measure 17, further reducing the work requirements for Oregon's incarcerated students.

Our course explored social factors related to alcohol and drug use and abuse. I curated course readings related to theory and evidence around the significant impact of social factors, and thus the need for social solutions, on addressing substance abuse. We started class looking at the law and policy history related to substances. We explored media representations and common ideas related to substance use versus reality. We then ended the class by reading Gabor Mate's book, In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts, which explores the link between trauma and substance use and advocates for compassion at the center of trauma-informed health care for people who use substances. Students requested this class because many of the students have personal experience with past substance use or with family and close friends who have a history of use. At times the course materials were triggering for students, which we prepared for and discussed. I built the course focused on semi-structured in-class discussions, directed notetaking, and applying what they learned through an analysis paper. Students worked through challenging concepts, and often challenging emotions, to engage in the class and learn, and were able to reframe and understand their own and others experiences through multiple lenses.

As underrepresented students, incarcerated students deserve additional support. One of the ways that the students would feel supported is by reclassifying full-time education as full-time work, removing the current state requirement for at least half-time work for students enrolled in educational programs.

Section 41 of the Oregon constitution, related to work and training for corrections institution inmates declares the intention for inmates to "be fully engaged in productive activity... to successfully reenter society with practical skills and a viable work ethic..." Education in prison fulfills this imperative, it is about investing in our people while they are incarcerated so that they are prepared to return on that investment upon their release. Reducing work requirements would improve the current and future lives of students. And this decision would make education more accessible for students with disabilities.

There is a disproportionate number of people in prison who have low educational attainment. There is a well-documented relationship of higher education both improving employment opportunities and in reducing antisocial behaviors. Education is most effective at reducing recidivism for students who complete a course or program. Students develop of a sense of self-efficacy and the necessary skills for

future employment. Prisoners are vulnerable to burn-out just as anyone is, and yet they have limited access to rejuvenating activities. Reducing their burden prevents burn-out before it happens.

A disproportionate number of prisoners have disabilities, and prison is a disabling place. Several students disclosed they have dyslexia or ADHD. They struggled to complete readings in the best of times, and when they were on lockdown, many were stuck in their cells with cellmates who were not considerate of their needs. Noise and an uncomfortable environment is distracting and stressful. Social isolation increases stress for people without family and friends close enough to visit them. And many mundane parts of life are controlled including when and what to eat, whether they can have a fan on, and when the lights are on, which also increases stress. The high levels of stress all contribute to increased symptoms for those with learning disabilities, and is often challenging even for those without a diagnosed disability. Reducing the requirement for work outside of higher learning would provide students the opportunity to spend more time on learning, reducing their overall stress. Ongoing stress also impacts physical health, so reducing stress should have secondary positive impacts on public health.

I worked with the PSU Disability Resource Center and ADA Coordinator at CCCF to explore options to make education more equitable for students with disabilities. PSU's solution is technology based, a software license for a screen reader that is shown to aid in reading comprehension. However, this software requires an internet connection, which computers within prison walls lack. Getting readings onto devices and getting the appropriate software for students is a challenge. Also, computer labs where students have access to basic word processing software are only open for limited hours. Even if software were available, access to the systems with the software would likely remain a challenge. If students were not required to work, it would give them more time to read, write, study, and process the materials from class. In turn, this would make their education more accessible in the face of the challenges and barriers of other forms of accessibility.

The students in my class are extremely bright, they have a wealth of life experiences and knowledge from a variety of both traditional and non-traditional educational sources. The students grew their knowledge and developed more sophisticated and nuanced understandings as they engaged in our class. My students were thirsty for knowledge and genuinely excited to learn and discuss complex concepts. Students always wanted to know more. When I teach non-incarcerated students, I often have to cut readings because the students are overwhelmed, whereas in the face of all the stressors they face, the students at CCCF were ready to have a new unplanned reading introduced that addressed a question someone asked the previous week.

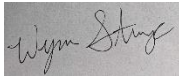
During the term all of my students worked their normal jobs. While they worked and did excellent in the class, I know that they were often stressed out and felt stretched thin. Learning involves a great deal of mental and emotional labor. The students handled this with grace and positive attitudes, and yet they should not have to face unusual amounts of challenges to work on their education.

The fact that the majority of the state voted for Measure 110 in 2020 shows a strong public support for new approaches to address social challenges like drug and alcohol use, incarceration, and reducing recidivism. Reconsidering the implementation of 1994's Measure 17, regarding education as fulfillment for work, aligns with the direction Oregon is heading by investing in its people and working on recovery and rehabilitation rather than further criminalization and punishment.

Given this reclassification would be aligned with the intention of the original law, reduce future recidivism rates, increase the accessibility of education, and be in alignment with the strong public support for new approaches to ongoing social challenges, I strongly support this decision and urge the task force to address the needs of incarcerated students.

Thank you for your time and consideration of policies supporting students pursuing higher education while incarcerated.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink on a light gray rectangular background. The signature reads "Wynn Strange" in a cursive, slightly slanted script.

Wynn Strange

Pronouns: they/them/theirs

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