

Dear Senate Education Committee,

Bureaucracies have a certain inertia about them. They are averse to change. We see that with the Oregon Department of Corrections, which has lagged badly behind other states when it comes to technology access inside.

Understand: technology access is higher education access.

As if the past year of online courses has taught us nothing, they are still recalcitrant to offer technology in their prisons. They cite “safety and security” of the institution. What about the safety and security of our communities? We know education is the most protective factor against recidivism. We know it creates better opportunities for people. With better options people make better choices.

My re-entry was successful not because of the system but despite it. I am not a first-generation college student. My mom got her master’s degree from the very school I now attend. She taught me not only the value of higher education, but how to make it become a reality. Many of the women I was in prison with had no such influences in their lives.

They could become first-generation college students but instead the DOC sends the message that only work is of value and higher education is meaningless. They have to fit their classes in between their full-time job. We have an opportunity imbue the value of higher ed and instead we squander it so that AICs can go work in the prison-industrial complex for pennies.

As citizens, we internalize the values reflected to us by our government. As long as DOC devalues education and favors low-wage work instead, our AICs will subtly internalize that message. We are failing our them and we are failing our communities.

Higher education makes us safer. We must increase our access to it via technology—its 2021 and literally everything, including this hearing, is done via technology—and we must signal the value of education by allowing AICs to satisfy their full-time work requirement with full-time school. We’ll all be safer because of it.

I unequivocally support senate bills 234 and 235 and all bills that increase access to higher education and improve re-entry pathways.