

February 23, 2022

Dear Chair Dembrow, Vice Chair Weber, and Members of the Committee:

My name is Sam Wilson and I am the Project Rebound Coordinator at Portland State University. Project Rebound is a student resource program designed to support formerly-incarcerated students attending our university. We believe that removing barriers to higher education for justice impacted students makes our communities safer and more equitable.

My belief in this work stems from my own personal journey. In 2016, I received my AA degree from Chemeketa Community College. I had the opportunity to attend Chemeketa while in-custody of the Oregon Department of Corrections for over 10 years.

I began taking college classes at Blue Mountain Community College in 2007 at Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution. Without access to Pell or other traditional funding, I matriculated through a series of privately-funded scholarship programs over the next ten years. Like most inmates, my time within DOC consisted of transfers to many different prisons as my classification changed closer to release.

Each institution had differing policies and attitudes regarding education within their facilities. While attending Chemeketa's College Inside at OSCI, there was a notable hostility towards incarcerated students and Chemeketa support staff inside the prison. My peers and I experienced constant harassment by officers and administration: During cell-searches, our homework was destroyed, graphing calculators were confiscated and labeled possible escape devices, faculty from Chemeketa were forced to undergo invasive searches of their person and property while being falsely accused of inappropriate relationships with students by prison staff. The environment eventually got so bad that Chemeketa decided to pull the college program from OSCI altogether and try its luck at Santiam Correctional Institution in hope of better treatment.

As a member of the first cohort of College Inside students to move to Santiam in 2016, I once again noticed a drastic difference in policy and procedure. The program was fully supported by the administration, and because of that support I was able to graduate at Santiam in 2016, 6 months prior to my release.

These programs saved my life. I have been out 5 years and I recently graduated with a degree in English from Portland State, who now employs me to help my peers make the same successful transition.

I work with students returning to campus after enrolling in our Higher Education in Prison (HEP) program at Coffee Creek Correctional Institution. HEP is currently offering a degree pathway to over 80 students, all of whom would benefit from a memorandum of understanding between the Oregon Department of Corrections and HECC. This understanding would directly increase the effectiveness of our program and others like it in the state.

Access to education for incarcerated students has proven to reduce recidivism rates dramatically. I know this formula works. The students in our program are proof. It is imperative

that we invest in higher education programs offering true rehabilitation to make our communities safer. I am before you today because my peers and I were allowed access to college in Oregon's prison system, and I believe Oregon DOC can work with our higher education partners throughout the state to develop a consistent and cohesive approach to education that benefits students, families, and communities across Oregon.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

*Sam Wilson*