

Senate Committee on Education
900 Court St. NE, Salem, OR 97301
RE: SB 269 and SB 270

Committee Chair Dembrow, Vice Chair Weber, and members of the Senate Education committee:

My name is Jill Forgash, and I am a Higher Education professional currently working in community college student success and retention. I am writing to you today to urge your support for Senate Bill 269 (SB 269) which would promote collaboration between the Department of Corrections (DOC) and the Higher Education Coordinating Commission, and Senate Bill 270 (SB 270) which would expand access to higher education for incarcerated adults.

There is a direct correlation between educational attainment and reduction in recidivism rates – according to a 2018 RAND corporation report, individuals who participate in correctional education are 43% less likely to return to prison within three years than those who do not participate in education. Additionally, every dollar invested in correctional education programs saves four to five dollars on re-incarceration costs. Therefore, it is advantageous from both a crime reduction and economical standpoint to intentionally invest in increasing educational opportunities for adults in custody (AICs).

The final report of Senate Bill 234's working group revealed a multitude of challenges that AICs face when it comes to student success. These include inadequate access to technology, availability of remote courses, limited curriculum, and a lack of staff for implementing and supporting higher education programs in prisons. In addition to those barriers, many AICs experience several transfers between facilities while incarcerated, and the lack of coordination between educational programs can halt a student's progress towards a degree and discourage them from pursuing further education.

SB 269 would address these challenges by encouraging data sharing between agencies, developing policies on distance learning programs, helping students apply for financial aid, and creating clarity around qualifying educational programs. SB 270 would further remove barriers by allowing AICs to apply for and enroll in programs at community colleges outside the district boundaries of the correctional facility, as well as post-secondary distance education programs, ameliorating issues that arise from transferring facilities.

Access to higher education is life-changing, especially for incarcerated individuals. In my current role, I have worked with students from Larch Correctional Facility at Clark College in Vancouver, Washington. I have heard their stories of how education motivated them, built up their self-confidence, gave them a reason for living when they left the prison system, and helped them stay safe and healthy. SB 269 and SB 270 will be a huge step forward for the Department of Corrections and the Higher Education Coordinating Commission to expand access to higher education for AICs, increase economic opportunity, reduce recidivism, and preserve public peace, health and safety. As a higher education professional, a student advocate, and an Oregonian, I urge you to support both SB 269 and SB 270.

Thank you,



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