

March 28, 2023

Dear Chair Dembrow, ViceChair Weber and members of the Committee:

My name is Betsy Simpkins and I am submitting this testimony in support of several bills before you today relating to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students, SB 1082, SB 269, and SB 270. From 2007-2015, I worked for the Corrections Education department of Chemeketa Community College. At that time, my Director and I created the College Inside program. It was an associate degree program offered to a few students in two Salem area prisons. This was a privately funded Associate of Arts Oregon Transfer degree program made possible mostly by a local donor. As you all know, at that time there was no federal or state funding available to incarcerated students. For eight years, I coordinated this program and expanded to four of the five Salem area prisons with well over 100 students each term. This program was tremendously successful with graduations every year and in my time, a recidivism rate of less than 3% among our graduates who released.

After leaving this position, I became employed with the Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC). This is the only statewide body whose mission is to coordinate higher education both within each public institution but also among the various sectors providing postsecondary education in Oregon. Since my time began with the HECC, I have sought out ways to create awareness of and advocacy for this population of college students who is as marginalized and “othered” as much as any other underserved group on campus and is perhaps the most invisible and purposely ignored group solely for political reasons, even by the HECC.

Additionally, I am a private citizen volunteer member of the Oregon Coalition for Higher Education in Prison (OCHEP) which is an informal group of stakeholders and practitioners providing prison education in Oregon. There, I share my experience and opinions on the history and current/future state of prison education in Oregon and act as an advocate not only for students but also for the instructors and administrators whose tireless work makes any of this possible.

For these reasons, I am uniquely situated to comment on these bills today due to my first-hand experience relating both to incarcerated students pursuing higher education and also to HECC’s potential to elevate the work for these students that have suffered society’s neglect for long enough.

SB 1082 – Rebound

For incarcerated students, the prospect of navigating the university system upon release is not only daunting but can set the trajectory for student success on campus. It is unrealistic to expect a person who has been isolated from society for years, decades in some cases, to understand and have the skills and knowledge to know how to register, where to get books, how to fill out financial aid applications, and who to ask for help...all while juggling probation/parole requirements, finding and paying for housing, childcare, accessing medical, dental and mental health services and more. Many non-incarcerated first-generation students experience these same frustrations and we as a community seek to help them in many ways and with many subsidized assistance programs. But for incarcerated students transitioning to the outside world, none of this exists. In my personal experience, formerly incarcerated students who knew somebody – a teacher or student or advisor, that could help them navigate all of this was crucial to the student successfully entering and completing their program. I know of several students who attempted to enroll at universities upon release, but with no family help and nobody on campus they could trust with their particular challenges, these students dropped out. As you can imagine, this kind of failure right out of the gates of the prison has so many negative consequences for the students, but also for their families and our communities.

Rebound programs are designed to address all of these issues. By forming a program with knowledgeable and experienced guides, students will feel supported, they will learn to build trust and prove themselves, and ultimately, they will feel safe enough to continue trying to make their lives better. This benefits all of us. I am

aware of some schools who have attempted some versions of this on campus, LBCC and PSU particularly. However, many campus administrators, unfamiliar with the needs and benefits of this student group, find it politically risky to provide overt support financially, ideologically and with sufficient infrastructure. This is a mistake. These students are already on campus, whether administration can acknowledge them or not. The most responsible, safest, and morally upstanding thing to do is to support them as any other student.

By providing state funding, the schools will have the ability and political safety net to create and expand these programs much like what has happened for many other student groups including TRIO and Veterans and the many recognized underserved student centers that have helped thousands of LGBTQIA+, Black/African American, Native American, first-generation and many more students. The HECC is the most appropriate agency to help direct and consolidate this work and provides the necessary support and structure that all postsecondary institutions will need in order to best serve students.

Study after study prove, and I know from personal experience, that education IS rehabilitation. In my opinion, learning - whether it is math, history, or learning how to learn can only be a positive thing. Throughout my eight years working with these students every day, and even in my seven years with the HECC, I asked myself...what will make these students better than when they went into prison...and will that make me safer in my community? The answer for me, every time is, education and opportunities for growth are what create change...and this change for the student, IN the student, is what makes me safe. I know that not every incarcerated/formerly incarcerated student is a success story. But if we as a society know what is the right thing to do to give a person every chance to become a productive neighbor...and we choose NOT to do that, then I fail to see how 100% of the blame falls to that student alone. We know that Rebound programs work. California has been doing it for decades. Do Oregonians deserve any less?

For all these reasons, I strongly urge you to pass SB 1082.

SB 269 – HECC/DOC MOU

I support the need for the HECC and the Department of Corrections (DOC) to enter into a more formal relationship via an MOU for a variety of reasons. At present, there is no way to ensure consistent, equitable, and quality postsecondary educational opportunities inside the correctional facilities in Oregon. Students have very little recourse should they encounter issues with accessing programs, getting to class, or with specific officers or college instructors that interferes with their education. Students may attempt to file complaints with the college/university however, school administration will likely take no position on DOC related security or disciplinary concerns. Additionally, follow-up communication with incarcerated students is nearly impossible with no access to the internet and very restricted telephone privileges. Should a student file a grievance with the appropriate DOC personnel, they will likely say that they cannot interfere with the delivery of higher education and have no authority over college/university personnel. Students are in a catch-22 where they have no advocates, no process, and no interest by either party to resolve issues. The HECC, however, can act as an intermediary for students, and can utilize processes and rules, including Civil Rights and Title IX enforcement that they already utilize in all 24 public institutions. Additionally, with the restoration of Pell grants in addition to the DOC's implementation of an approval process for any postsecondary education program in prison, there will be a need to share data across institutions. Data that neither the DOC nor the institutions have, such as employment and earnings, the HECC does have. Data on disciplinary issues among prison education programs is only maintained by the DOC but will likely be very useful for public institution data collections and may be requested of the HECC as it relates to educational outcomes. All this points to an additional benefit of an MOU that can establish these data sharing agreements without each school having to do a separate one for both DOC and the HECC. It's just common sense.

The need for the MOU has resulted from many conversations among prison education practitioners and the DOC relating to access, equity, and accountability. I am aware that there is a perception that this idea stems from the

restoration of Pell grants for incarcerated students or the access to online education through the passage of SB 1522 (2022). However, the funding source for any education inside the correctional system has no bearing on the needs I have mentioned above. There will always be a need for greater coordination among institutions and between them and the DOC. This is needed to ensure that incarcerated students have access to the highest quality educational opportunities available and that students' rights are respected and enforced. The best way to ensure this is by making and enforcing a formal commitment to do so.

For these reasons, I strongly urge you to pass SB 269.

SB 270 – Allows any student to enroll in any community college

I support the passage of this bill for several reasons. The majority of prisons in Oregon are concentrated in the Willamette Valley as are the majority of public community colleges and universities. For students in Eastern and Southern Oregon who are incarcerated in the few prisons in those areas, access to postsecondary education and training is difficult. These regional schools are also among the smallest with smaller budgets and fewer staff dedicated to higher education in prison. Aside from the mandated GED® and Adult Basic Education programs that are funded through state allocations via the DOC, opportunities for education and training beyond that rely exclusively on the college or university in that area that are able and willing to provide services.

This creates and perpetuates inequity for students to access the tools they need to gain the skills and knowledge necessary to build a productive and meaningful life once released from prison, solely due to where they happen to be incarcerated. By allowing any college or university to operate outside their typical "service district", more students will have access to quality education and Oregon can progress towards greater equity among all incarcerated adults.

My personal experience with this issue centers on the women. Oregon only has one prison in the entire state for incarcerated women, Coffee Creek Correctional Facility. This happens to fall within the Portland Community College service district. During my time with Chemeketa Community College and College Inside, around 2010, we attempted to offer the same Associate of Arts Oregon Transfer degree to the women that we had been offering at the men's facilities for years. At that time PCC did not have the funding nor the infrastructure to offer education beyond their contracted GED® and Adult Basic Education programming. Due to the issues surrounding community college service districts, Chemeketa was not allowed to expand our program to these female students. To this day, the women still do not have access to the benefits of postsecondary education and training offered by a community college. This territorialism has caused hundreds of female students at CCCF to suffer years of educational setbacks. For these women, the time, energy, and financial cost just to catch up with and be competitive in the workplace with the men who have had years of postsecondary education and training opportunities, frankly is disgraceful. If there is a reasonable justification for why a student or group of students should be purposely excluded from higher education simply because it's within the imaginary border of another school that may or may not even be interested in providing that education, I cannot find it. We, as a state, cannot and should not ignore the clear disparities in the treatment of incarcerated women, and we absolutely should not allow such seemingly trivial issues as territorial disputes to interfere with the fair and equitable access to education for women Oregonians.

For all these reasons, I strongly urge you to pass SB 270.

Thank you very much for your consideration of all these matters and for your dedication to improving the pathway to education for incarcerated students, and in so doing, making our communities safer and more productive.

Sincerely,
Betsy Simpkins