



Testimony on HB 2747

House Higher Education and Workforce Development Committee
February 18, 2025

Chair Hudson, Vice-Chairs Fragala and Harbick, and members of the Committee. My name is Kyle Thomas, and I am the Director of Legislative and Policy Affairs for the Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC). Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on HB 2747.

Postsecondary Education in Prison in Oregon: The Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC) and the Oregon Department of Corrections (DOC) have a long history of collaboration between the agencies and with public and private institutions of higher education in the state to support education for adults in custody. In recent years, this work has been guided by two pieces of legislation. In 2021, the legislature passed SB 234, which required HECC to convene a group of partners to study the best ways to serve adults in custody who were, at that time, recently eligible to receive student grants. That work group, convened in partnership with DOC, developed a report that provided recommendations in three broad buckets. These recommendations focused on 1) expanding education offerings, partnerships, and alignment related to curriculum and course delivery, 2) increasing access and availability of technology in the correctional facilities, and 3) ongoing collaboration between agencies to address revisions that may be needed in statutes and rules.

Following that report, in 2023, the legislature passed SB 269, which required the HECC and DOC to convene an advisory committee to develop a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that addresses data sharing, clarity and transparency on education offerings, develops a distance learning policy, and supports adults in custody in applying for federal financial aid. The robust discussions in the advisory committee also led the group to develop a workplan to encompass the details needed to implement the MOU and expectations for timelines and deliverables. This document is nearly complete, and outlines work for the next several years. The MOU is designed as a living document that can be revised as variables change and progress is made.

Education available to adults in custody (AIC):

- Adult Basic Skills (ABS)/GED programs provide education to build literacy skills and support college and career readiness. These programs are provided by four community colleges (Central Oregon, Chemeketa, Portland, and Treasure Valley) at Oregon's 12 adult correctional institutions. HECC and DOC support this work directly through the allocation of funds, coordination, policy direction, and staff support in the prisons. In the 2023-25 biennium, approximately 2,300 AICs received services through these programs.
- Registered Apprenticeship programs include occupations such as boiler operators, cabinet makers, limited maintenance electricians, and plumbers. These programs are available at correctional institutions across the state, but serve only a small number of AICs, primarily due to the required journeyman/apprenticeship ratios.
- Certificate and associate degree programs are provided by the four community colleges that also offer ABS/GED programs and are available to AICs in nine correctional

institutions. These programs include welding certification, building construction trades, peer recovery coach, and Associate of Arts Oregon Transfer degree. AICs who are students in these programs may participate in multiple programs at any given time, which makes it challenging to provide an exact number of students. However, even with the duplicated number of over 400 students, there are opportunities for growth.

- Bachelor's degrees and other courses are offered by Lewis and Clark College, Corban University, Portland State University, and the University of Oregon in seven correctional institutions. These programs serve approximately 483 students (although this number is duplicated) and additional university partners are working with DOC to expand further.

Higher education in the state's prisons has been bolstered in the past several years by the Second Chance Pell program and the Federal FAFSA Simplification Act of 2020. This federal legislation and programs like Second Chance Pell have enabled higher education institutions to enroll students who are incarcerated in prison education programs and restored their eligibility for federal Pell Grants. Chemeketa Community College and Treasure Valley Community College have been participating in the Second Chance Pell program for several years, enabling them to provide prison education programs in four of the state's prisons. Additionally, Central Oregon Community College and Portland State University have been approved by the US Department of Education (DOE) to operate Prison Education Programs (PEP) in two of the state's prisons supporting Pell eligibility for those students. Other higher education institutions in the state have applied for PEP approval and are working through that process with US DOE and the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities for regional accreditation. The SB 269 Advisory Committee supports DOC by reviewing the PEP applications and providing feedback to the institutions and DOC to ensure a strong application is submitted to US DOE.

WorkSource Oregon Reentry Program: As the work continues to expand access to prison education, a partnership formed by East Cascade Works, DOC, the Oregon Employment Department and HECC has been working to create the infrastructure needed to implement full-service WorkSource Oregon centers in each of the state's prisons. This work has been funded by a US Department of Labor Pathways Home 4 grant and Future Ready Oregon Workforce Ready Grant funds. Through this collaboration, each prison now has a computer lab staffed by WorkSource Oregon to provide reentry services for AICs. The program utilizes a team-based approach, combining prison-based staff for in-custody support and community-based case managers for post-release job placement and training assistance. Inside the prison, WorkSource staff begin working with adults in custody (AICs) beginning 90-180 days from their release date. Since July 1, 2022, 350 adults in custody have been enrolled. **Of those enrolled who have exited WorkSource services, there is only a 1.43% recidivism rate** (convicted of a new crime and measured for 1 year after release from prison). **The official recidivism rate for the state of Oregon is 40.5%** (convicted of a new crime and measured over a 3-year period).

Creating opportunities for AICs to access education and WorkSource services and supports is a multifaceted approach that requires strong partnerships and collaboration. Capacity for this work is limited due to multiple factors. However, HECC, DOC, and other key partners are committed to continuing to address barriers for AICs and work to increase access to these vital services.

Thank you for your consideration of this testimony.