

Testimony in Support of 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 Mark Wilson. I am writing to offer my strong support of House Bill 2747, to expand online educational opportunities to prisoners at each of the 12 prisons maintained by the Oregon Department of Corrections (ODOC).

On January 9, 2025, I was released from 37.5 years of incarceration within ODOC custody. Six days later, I began work as a paralegal and Policy Associate at the Oregon Justice Resource Center (OJRC).

The OJRC works to promote civil rights and improve legal representation for communities that have often been underserved in the past including people living in poverty and people of color. We work to create a more fair, just and humane criminal legal system and to educate the public on issues related to civil rights and liberties.

I write today in my personal capacity, but I mention my work at OJRC because it would not be possible if not for the rare educational opportunities that I was fortunate to benefit from during my confinement.

When I entered the prison system in 1987, PELL grants were available to prisoners, so the prison system offered robust two- and four-year college degree programs. Sadly, however, Congress eliminated prisoner PELL grants in 1994, and the college programs left the prison system soon thereafter.

I was fortunate to earn an Associate of Arts degree from Chemeketa Community College in 1995 as a member of the last class to graduate before the program ended. Between 1995 and 2009, no college programs were available within the prison system.

In 2009, the University of Oregon (UO) began offering Inside-Out classes, in which 12 university students came into the prison to take classes with 12 prisoners at the Oregon State Penitentiary (OSP), and the Oregon State Correctional Institution (OSCI) in Salem, Oregon. These were intended as “one-off” classes, rather than a pathway to a degree. But I eagerly enrolled in every class I could. Typically, only one or two classes were offered during a given term, so at OSCI, which held approximately 900 prisoners, just 12-24 prisoners (1.3% - 2.6%) were able to benefit from classes during any given term, and classes were offered just two or three times each year. In short, demand greatly outstrips supply.

Despite this, I was very fortunate to receive the opportunity to graduate from the University of Oregon with a Bachelor of Arts degree, majoring in general social sciences in 2019. Again, this is a rare occurrence within the prison system. Despite PELL grants being reinstated, college classes are returning to the prison system *much* slower than when they were eliminated.

Earning a two- and four-year degree in prison was significant to my rehabilitation and growth as a human being. Participating in prison college classes changed my life. It gave me knowledge, skills and tools that helped ensure that my transition back into the community was smooth and that I would be able to earn a living wage within the legal profession. *Every* prisoner should be so fortunate. Sadly, most are not.

Passage of HB 2747 will help change that because offering online educational opportunities to prisoners in every ODOC prison will significantly increase the number of prisoners who have access to college classes while incarcerated. This will enhance prisoner rehabilitation, reduce recidivism risk and help create a safer and more rehabilitative culture within our prison system.

Research has long shown that the recidivism risk of prisoners drops 28 percent when they receive access to any prison education, and 48 percent for those who complete a post-secondary education program. Every dollar spent on prison education saves about \$5 in incarceration costs associated with recidivism, for a 400 percent return on investment.

For these reasons, I strongly encourage you to pass House Bill 2747.

Sincerely,

Mark Wilson