

**Date:** March 5th, 2025

**To:** Senate Committee on Education

**From:** Nick Keough, Political and Legislative Organizer, AFT-Oregon

**Re:** Support for SB 979: HECC Students with Disabilities Success Workgroup

Chair Frederick, Vice-Chair Weber, and Members of the Committee,

AFT-Oregon is a federation of 27 local unions representing 18,000 education workers across early learning, K-12 classified, community colleges, and public universities. Today, our labor federation is writing to express our **enthusiastic support of SB 979, which aims to establish a statewide workgroup within the Higher Education Coordinating Commission that will bring together students, staff, and other key stakeholders to study and improve access for students with disabilities in higher education.**

As an organization representing faculty, staff, and academic professionals across Oregon's public colleges and universities, AFT-Oregon believes that **equal access to higher education** is not just a policy goal – **it is a fundamental civil right.**

Today in Oregon, students with disabilities in higher education encounter **significant challenges** that impact their academic success, retention, and overall college experience. These include **inconsistent access to accommodations, financial burdens, physical accessibility issues, and a lack of institutional policies that adequately support their needs.** Many students must navigate these challenges alone, repeatedly advocating for basic accommodations and services. These systemic barriers lead to lower retention and graduation rates, further limiting economic and professional opportunities for students with disabilities.

SB 979 takes an essential step in addressing these disparities by **bringing together students, staff, higher education institutions and disability advocates** to assess what statutory changes, policy reforms, and financial investments are needed to ensure an equitable educational experience. **This workgroup will provide vital recommendations** to the Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC) and the Oregon State Legislature to strengthen institutional support, improve accessibility, and promote student success.

The workgroup will include **a diverse group of stakeholders with direct experience and expertise** in supporting students with disabilities. Membership will consist of students with disabilities, representatives from the HECC, faculty from Oregon's public universities and community colleges, staff from disability resource centers, and advocates from disability rights organizations. This inclusive and comprehensive approach ensures that those most affected by accessibility challenges will have a voice in shaping solutions.

**We urge you to support SB 979 and take this critical step toward improving accessibility and equity in Oregon's higher education system. Thank you for your time.**

**Signed,**

AFT-Oregon

<https://www.aft-oregon.org/about-aft-oregon>