

Good morning, Chair Fredrick, Vice Chairs Weber & Gelser Blouin, and members of the Committee.

My name is Aubrey Owens, and I am the Director of Disability Resources & UCAM at Southern Oregon University.

- SOU is a regional public university with campuses in Ashland and Medford, with nearly 5,000 students across our undergraduate, graduate, and lifelong learning programs.
- SOU's disabled student population is our second-highest minoritized population at 13%, matching our Hispanic student population.

I am offering this testimony today in support of SB 979: This Bill aims to address the barriers faced by students with disabilities in accessing and succeeding in post-secondary education. It mandates the HECC to convene a workgroup tasked with studying the challenges and opportunities to ensure educational equity for individuals with disabilities in post-secondary education.

For the past 11 years, I have supported students with disabilities in pursuing their ambitions to participate in higher education. Throughout this time, I have witnessed a passionate academic community that, unfortunately, does not always experience equity and inclusion in post-secondary education. Even at institutions with strong adherence to the ADA and Section 504, like SOU, financial constraints prevent the complete removal of barriers for this population. The reality of an unfunded mandate directly impacts how my office operates, limiting our ability to provide mostly compliance-based services, rather than the comprehensive support that truly fosters student success.

In our field, we often say, "The ADA is the floor, not the ceiling." A recent example at my institution illustrates this well: a non-traditional student with significant impairment in his hands and arms cannot write or type and requires a typist to complete his coursework. While digital dictation is an option for some, it poses additional challenges for him. Like any student, he is responsible for completing his homework but none of the traditional accommodations offered as "the floor" address the barrier he experiences at home when completing assignments. If SOU had funding to support the **success** of disabled students, my institution would provide the typist he needs.

A task force will not remove all of the barriers students face, but it can point the way to better policy and budget choices that can.

The true intent of disability law is not just compliance but doing what is right. At Southern Oregon University (SOU), we are committed to supporting **all** students in acquiring knowledge, critical thinking, and opportunity for the future. This includes historically marginalized populations, and I believe that commitment should be matched at the state level through meaningful investment in higher education. State and federal representatives must champion these initiatives with the same enthusiasm and dedication that our disabled student populations bring to their academic journeys.

I am passionate about inclusion and access in higher education—not simply for “special populations”, but for **all**. For individuals with disabilities, our institutions provide a sense of community, affirm their value and abilities, and help them develop the skills needed for meaningful employment. This bill acknowledges that we can do more to support this population by eliminating another systemic barrier that subtly perpetuates marginalization in higher education.

Investing in Oregon’s higher education—particularly in funding institutions to enhance inclusion and access—will create greater opportunity for disabled students who need it. This support will also strengthen efforts to recruit and retain disabled students as an important resource for Oregon’s economic future.

Thank you for your time, and I look forward to your support for SB 979