

Committee Chair Fredrick, Vice-Chair Weber, and members of the Senate Committee on Education,

My name is Andrew Caruana, and I am a graduate student at Oregon State University-Cascades Campus pursuing a Master of Science in Clinical Mental Health Counseling. I am of the first generation of my family to go to college of any level and the only one to seek a postgraduate degree. I am also significantly Physically disabled among other disabilities.

As a grad student, I am not eligible for Federal Financial assistance beyond exorbitantly high graduate student loans, so already, financing is a barrier to access. Within my program, I still also experience blatant ableism as well; I am beholden to the department attendance policy, no more than two missed classes per term without exception under threat of remediation – my attempt to seek assistance from my university Accessible Ed Department was denied without the ability to appeal because my program faculty made a unanimous determination to decline any attendance accommodations despite my presenting ample documentation and justifications which would have been validated, had I been an undergraduate student. However, because of my educational status, my request was denied, citing germane reasoning relating to the ‘Higher Standards and Rigor’ of my program and the ‘Degradation of the learning experience and environment’ for other students who do not share my disability – lest my condition make the environment inaccessible. That is the experience of so many students: professors and Accessible Ed offices being unwilling to accommodate students with very little resistance to hold them accountable.

As a grad student I am less likely to receive the accommodations I need. I am more likely to be discriminated against, as I have been several times already. The collegiate accommodations process is severely under-legislated, leading to a patchwork of procedures across institutions that run the gambit from acceptable to woefully incompetent; the system is broken and needs reform. Alone none of us as students have the resources to fight the departments tasked with helping us. My disability was not cured when I became a graduate student; my financial situation did not miraculously improve; I am still a first-generation college student. I have unmet needs, like countless others, that only SB979 is in a position to solve. I urge strong and unconditional passage of this bill so that it can be signed into law and the work of making education truly accessible can begin.

Thank you for your time and consideration.