



Disability
Rights
Oregon

TO: Senate Education Committee
FROM: Travis Leatham
DATE: March 5, 2025
RE: SB 979 DRO Support

Dear Chair Frederick, Vice Chair Weber, and members of the Senate Committee

My name is Travis Leatham, I am an attorney with Disability Rights Oregon. I have advocated on behalf of many students who have requested reasonable accommodation for their disabilities. In that capacity, I have seen concerning patterns of discrimination.

One pattern I have noticed is that colleges and universities will sometimes nominally approve a student's request for reasonable accommodation, but will fail to enforce the accommodation when they receive pushback from instructors. I recently worked with a PhD candidate with a physical disability who requested reasonable accommodations from their PhD supervisor. The professor refused to accommodate, and when the student took their request to the university administration, the professor was overruled and the accommodation request was approved. The professor was displeased, and the student noticed a precipitous drop in their grades after the accommodation was approved. When the student later attempted to request additional reasonable accommodations, the professor indicated that the student was not a good fit for their program, and that they should find a different professor to supervise their PhD. This student agreed to find a different PhD supervisor, but was unsuccessful as their grant funding was tied to the specific professor who was unwilling to work with them.

I intervened on this student's behalf, urging the university to intervene so the student could continue in the PhD program. The university declined, saying it was up to the student to repair the relationship with their former PhD supervisor. In the end, the professor was not willing to reengage with the student, and the student had to drop out of their PhD program.

While I find that student's experience particularly troubling, discrimination against students in higher education occurs in a myriad of ways, including, but not limited, to:

- Opaque and confusing processes that discourage students from requesting accommodations;
- Instructors openly discriminating against students without intervention from the administration;

- Instructors improperly trained on using learning management systems, such as CANVAS, leading to accessibility issues; and
- Accessibility offices being understaffed, under resourced and undereducated regarding the rights of people with disabilities.

Ensuring that students with disabilities receive reasonable accommodations can vastly improve the quality of their lives. I, myself, am a person with a disability. When I attended law school, I believed that I had the capacity to be an attorney. However, my disability made it truly difficult for me to maintain the workload of a first-year law student. Eventually, I went to the accessibility office at my school. Working with an excellent staff member, we were able to identify and implement reasonable accommodations for my disability. If I hadn't received those accommodations, I would not be here today advocating for my community. Disability Rights Oregon supports SB 979 and encourages you to do the same.

Disability Rights Oregon (DRO). For more than 40 years, we have served as Oregon's federally authorized and funded Protection & Advocacy System. DRO is committed to ensuring the civil rights of all people are protected and enforced.

If you have any questions regarding DRO's position on this legislation, please call Ben Gurewitz at 971-806-7908 or email him at bgureiwitz@droregon.org.