

Testimony on HB 2405

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Good morning, Chair Hudson, Vice-Chair Fragala, Vice-Chair Harbick, and members of the committee. For the record, my name is Scott McConnell, and I am Dean of the College of Business at Eastern Oregon University. Thank you for having us today regarding HB 2405.

I think many of you have met with President Ryan, and she has shared some background on this project and why it is important. In short, HB 2405 provides resources to allow adults in custody to earn a university degree. We are partnering with the Department of Corrections, specific correctional institutions in eastern Oregon, support organizations, and collaborating with other public universities to deliver the coursework and support necessary to make this happen.

This program adds to the good work already being done by Treasure Valley Community College and would seek to leverage the faculty and adjuncts teaching at the correctional facility, as well as shared classrooms, technology, and other aspects of the program. Perhaps equally as important, we have some other people here today who can speak directly to the impact of these programs.

This program is to work in conjunction with both the Oregon Department of Corrections to provide a 4-year bachelor's degree pathway for students already enrolled in associate's degree programs with TVCC. The idea is if the students had their first two years finished with TVCC, then EOU could move them into the final two years of their education and graduate them with a bachelor's degree.

In Spring of 2024, President Ryan, Dean Nathan Lowe and myself toured 4 facilities in Eastern Oregon to determine the needs of the institutions and the technological and academic resources available in order to develop this Bachelor's degree program option. We were met with enthusiastic support from all of the institutions we visited and were told of the countless benefits that higher education in prison offers to not only the adults in custody, but to the institutions themselves. The leadership of the correctional institutions all shared the positive experience with higher education in prison, especially the focus, determination and drive and the resulting behavioral changes in the adults in custody (AICs).

Currently, the DOC and TVCC have 36 AICs at Snake River Correctional Institution working on finishing their 2-year degree program with TVCC.

The degree program that EOU has developed is the Interdisciplinary Studies bachelor's degree program, which combines two minors, one of which is the Business minor. This program is very similar to the program that Portland State is currently offering here on the west side of the State, which is strategic, so that as AICs are released they may finish their degree wherever they are.

When visiting Snake River two weeks ago with faculty, we were able to visit a live classroom and talk to the AICs going through the degree program. When we asked how many would like to continue on to a bachelor's degree, almost every hand was raised. Many of the AICs shared their personal experiences and how focusing on education gives them a chance at life after prison. The faculty were all inspired to do more and are eager to begin this life-changing work. Most faculty get into teaching to change lives and this program would do that.

Studies have shown that participation in educational programs significantly reduces recidivism rates. Incarcerated individuals who engage in educational opportunities are less likely to reoffend after release. Just this past November, research by the Mackinac Center for Public Policy showed that prison education programs “should be viewed as an investment rather than a cost...By providing inmates with education, we are not only helping them break free from their own personal cycles of crime and incarceration, but we are also reducing the burden on our overcrowded prison system” (<https://www.mackinac.org/s2024-02>).

Now, the numbers. It is estimated that the State of Oregon spends up to \$79,000 per AIC per year of incarceration (U.S. Census Bureau). This equates to \$2.8 million per year for the 36 inmates that are currently in the education program at SRCI. The recidivism rates decline for each additional degree obtained. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, the recidivism rates of prisoners released is 83% in 9 years after release. Those who have achieved a GED or high school diploma behind bars have a recidivism rate of 54.6%, and those with a Bachelor’s degree 5.6% and a Masters degree is 0. In dollars, that means if the AICs currently in the program were to finish a Bachelor’s degree, education in prison would be saving Oregon taxpayers an additional \$2.2 million *per year* for these current students alone. When we reduce recidivism, we reduce the overall cost of the criminal justice system.

Funding for this program is necessary on the front-end to get it up and running. Since the AICs are Oregon residents, they would generate completion dollars as they graduate and they are currently PELL eligible. EOU will be seeking extramural funding sources to fill gaps as well, but we hope that the passing of this bill will allow us to get this program off the ground.

Thank you for your time today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

