

SB 979 Testimony: D. Schafer

Hello Chair Frederick, Vice Chair Weber, and members of the committee,

My name is Deirdre, and I am a student at Eastern Oregon University. I am here today to speak in support of SB 979, which would require the Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC) to convene a Students with Disabilities Success Workgroup.

As the mother of two disabled Oregon college students, and as a disabled student myself, I have experienced first hand many of the pitfalls faced by disabled college students in Oregon. I began my own college journey in 1998 and will graduate in June, 2025. Had I received the support I needed, I might be speaking to you today with a few more letters after my name. At the state university I attend, there is no funding for the TRIO program, and the disability services office—which tries its best—has not had a director since 2020 and consistently struggles to meet student needs.

But I'm here to talk about a specific barrier to education faced by Oregon's disabled student population: Poverty. Did you know that in the UK, disabled students are eligible for an allowance of over twenty-seven thousand pounds, or thirty-five thousand US dollars, per year from kindergarten all the way through graduate school? That is because for many, it is impossible to hold down a job while attending university; and, the credit load required to receive full financial aid is extremely difficult to bear. Oregon's disabled students are not fundamentally different from those in the UK.

Additionally, many of Oregon's disabled college students are "non traditional;" meaning they are grown adults; often with families of their own. Traditional financial aid, designed for able bodied eighteen year olds with their hands on mommy's purse strings, is not sufficient. Yet, these students are willing to accept living in poverty in hopes of achieving a better life through education. This forces disabled students into situations that are psychologically, physically, and financially harmful; contributing to high levels of burnout and low levels of degree completion.

Oregon's disabled college students, and their families, deserve better. They deserve, not just equal, but equitable access to higher education and economic opportunity. They deserve the chance to contribute. By convening a Students with Disabilities Success Workgroup, the HECC can demonstrate its commitment to supporting an inclusive learning environment, closing achievement gaps, and to breaking down barriers for students with disabilities.

Thank you for your time, and I hope that I can count on your support of SB 979!