

Southern OREGON UNIVERSITY

GOVERNMENT RELATIONS

TESTIMONY OFFERED IN RELATIONSHIP TO HB 3029-1

Offered by Marc Overbeck, Director of Government Relations

Chair Hudson, Vice-Chairs Fragala and Harbick, and Members of the Committee:

Southern Oregon University is committed to the expansion and development of Oregon's workforces, particularly in our region, but also for all of Oregon. As one of Oregon's public universities, we take seriously our role as one of the greatest engines for training and educating the future workforce in our state.

The amendment that has been offered to HB 3029—to amend ORS 660.027 to include public universities in the membership of local workforce boards—was crafted as a result of the desire of multiple regional universities to be active partners and contributors in the work in which Oregon's nine local workforce boards are engaged.

Part of what prompted the amendment was that, as of today, none of Oregon's seven public universities have "a seat at the table" directly when it comes to our nine local workforce boards. Some of us have raised this issue with the Higher Education Coordinating Commission, our respective local boards, and/or the Oregon Workforce Partnership. I have confirmed that each of our four regional universities does have an active interest in participating on the workforce boards.

Since introducing this amendment, multiple conversations have taken place around this concept. SOU President Bailey is pleased to have been extended an invitation to have our university once more participate as a member of our local workforce board as we had in the past although not in recent years; and we are grateful to the Rogue Workforce Partnership Board leadership for this opportunity.

And, we understand that other regional universities are excited to participate actively in the conversations that are happening in their regions around how to develop talent

and skills, and to share their resources, expertise and passion to support their regions' economies.

At a time when our state economist has proclaimed that “Oregon has lost momentum” on economic and workforce issues, we believe it’s important that post-secondary institutions with the size and scope of a public university should play a more active role in helping develop regional strategies to address local workforce needs not only for the short-term, but for the long term as well. Our public universities, including SOU, offer a growing number of badges, certificates, microcredentials—that offer demonstrations of learning and skill acquisition that don’t take four or six years to produce.

The amendment to require public universities participate in Oregon’s local workforce boards may not be the perfect solution for how to bring all parties together around the supply and demand for workers, but it is a conversation starter within the legislative process.

Chair Hudson and members, you know me by now in my role with Southern Oregon University which I’ve been in for just over a year. And, last week, while testifying about state mandates in this committee, I shared that I’d previously worked for Oregon state government for 28 years.

What you may not know is that 30 years ago, I was part of a team that helped stand up the first Workforce Boards in Oregon, then called “Workforce Quality Councils”, back before Congress authorized the Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act. I remember traveling to places like LaGrande, where the meetings were held at Eastern Oregon University, and Coos Bay, when the meetings were held at Southwestern Oregon Community College on Newmark Avenue, and the frontier town of Juntura, which is almost exactly halfway between Burns and Ontario on US Hwy 20, where the board met in the 27-student schoolhouse that served all of the K-12 students in the district. At the time, we were envisioning and helping build a table where private sector leaders met with education and labor to look at the short and long-term economic and employment needs of a region.

Fast-forward to 2025. Things look different today. The old Job Training Partnership Act was replaced with the Workforce Investment Act, and then the Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act. The Workforce Councils of the 1990s and 2000s have been replaced with local workforce boards and instead of 15, we have nine, which, with the establishment of the HECC, have grown and matured over time; and in many regions have done a marvelous job bringing business and labor together, and

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have formed strong partnerships with Oregon's community colleges. This proposal is not meant in any way to disparage the workforce boards or their directors, whose talent and dedication is exceptional. Nor it is in any way meant to get in the way of the legislature funding the boards to do the work that needs being done.

At the Oregon Leadership Summit in December, the keynote speaker challenged educational leaders to be "agreement crafters and develop new learning goals". And, he noted some of the work we've done at SOU to meet directly with employers and retool curricula to address employer needs. At Southern Oregon University, we have really been attempting to lean into workforce development as part of an innovative and updated mission, and we know we have more work to do.

We'd like to suggest that this is a time for boldness, creativity, and for demanding that people come together to work in common purpose for the results we all would like to see of a better economy and more opportunity. To imagine Oregon as a "State of Opportunity", And let me also say, just as the public regional universities are requesting a seat at the workforce board table to help, we are happy to recommend that local workforce boards be among the stakeholders who regularly sit on the state Higher Education Coordinating Commission.

You have suggested that it may be appropriate for the HECC, local workforce boards, and public universities meet together around workforce development activities, and we would welcome that opportunity.

Thank you for your consideration, and your support for regional partnerships that maximize the contribution of all who can help.