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Comments on HB 2766

Before the House Education Committee

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Faculty members of Oregon State University in the sciences and the humanities oppose HB 2766, which would add computer-based language coding as a world language. We believe there is a misconception about the purpose and goals of computer-based language coding. Learning a computer language provides us with wonderful skills of mastering a system of pure logic to command a machine, but it does not develop the skills that learning a natural language does - to enable communication between people.

What is the meaning of language and how do we as humans use language in our daily lives? We use language to communicate information, but also to negotiate meaning, to gather knowledge, and to transmit emotions. A language relies on the use signs, symbols, and gestures together to create meaning reciprocally between a sender and a recipient. A computer language teaches us the use of logical commands to program a machine.

Why do we require students to learn a language other than English? What do we teach students in World Language classes? Most of us would agree that knowing a language other than English allows us to communicate with people from other cultures. Language teachers at all levels, K-16, teach much more than how to assemble morphemes and phonemes into syntax that will be decoded by the receiver.

In a world language class, we teach students about the people speaking the language, the history of countries, tribes, ethnicities using the language, and the mechanics of producing the language in phonetics and phonology. We explain that mastering grammar perfectly is not a requirement for successful communication, but that knowing the customs and etiquette are indeed. The term World Language is therefore misleading; it is a generalization and simplification to describe the study of a complex subject that goes beyond the mastery of a command structure a computer language uses. Learning a world language also requires the negotiation of four skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking in a language other than English. The scope of a computer language is only limited to a unidirectional method of communication, and the majority of computer languages use English for coding.

What are potential implications if this bill is passed? Faculty in the humanities and the sciences at Oregon State University agree that adding computer languages as a world

language would deprive students of a global and international experience much needed in our contemporary world to engage with other cultures within and beyond the borders of Oregon and the USA. Such a bill would reinforce the notion of Oregon as a monolingual and monocultural state.

Finally we believe this bill potentially violates the recently confirmed right to governance of university curricula, which is vested in the boards of trustees and delegated to faculty governance bodies. Because passage would place the legislature in the classroom, we also believe this bill may be seen as jeopardizing the accreditation of universities in Oregon.