

Dear Chair Roblan and Members of the Committee:

Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak in support of SB 396 and SB 551. My name is Emily Plec and I am a professor at Western Oregon University. Over the years, I've encountered more foster students in first year public speaking classes, students who are passionate about the system and yearning for success, than I could ever have imagined. In fact, before I came to WOU, I never really thought about foster students, even though I had a summer job as a babysitter for a couple of foster kids when I was a teenager.

This is not an insignificant student population. They have all the barriers of other disadvantaged populations, plus some I'd never really thought much about until I was educated about family privilege, exposure gaps, trauma and transitions. But all of those barriers can be overcome with the right structures and opportunities, and evidence suggests the foster students are capable of doing the hard work if they have support.

Money is not the issue - it can be, just as it can be for many disadvantaged students - but we've tackled that one through the foster tuition promise and Chaffee benefits and I feel like we are getting a handle on it. I applaud this Legislature for those previous efforts to address big barriers, like the financial ones. Now we need to step up our game.

Support *is* the issue. The one thing that will ensure that a large proportion of the students who walk through the doors of our classrooms will walk across the stage with a degree is, to put it bluntly, a Lisa Feinics, a Shannon Simich (the ILP who co-chairs our WOU initiative), or a Lydia Sterba (a recent WOU graduate who has followed in Shannon's footsteps). And not just an office, a position (or two or three) but the kind of resources and authority to really engage the campus community and foster alumni, and do the hard work of reaching back into high schools and junior highs, when kids should be thinking about and can be preparing for college. A lot of this infrastructure already exists, so I am simply lobbying you to incentivize the streamlining and enhancing of it. We're doing a fraction of what we could do at WOU if we had more resources - because we're doing all of it with three individuals' spare time and a 10 hour per week student intern.

If you make the investment now, you will begin to see the outcomes in just a few years. We have too much at stake when we don't make this investment up front - we pay for it in healthcare, the justice system, and welfare services - and lives are no better for those back-end expenditures. Education works on the front end to break these cycles; it changes futures. I get to see the speeches in their dreaded first year public speaking class and also be on the track to hug them when they graduate. I am convinced we can make those foster students - the graduates - the norm rather than the exception if we dedicate ourselves to doing it.

Thank you for your consideration and, I hope, your support of SB 396 and 551.
Sincerely,

Emily Plec
Dallas, OR