



Oregon

Kate Brown, Governor

Higher Education Coordinating Commission

Ben Cannon, Executive Director
255 Capitol Street NE, Third Floor
Salem, OR 97310
www.oregon.gov/HigherEd

April 29, 2019

Dear Legislator,

I have served on the Higher Education Coordinating Commission (“the Commission”) since 2013, and have been its chair for the last three-and-a-half years.

Throughout this time, the Commission has operated with nine voting members and five non-voting members. Of the latter, statute requires that two are students (one community college, one public university), two are faculty (one community college, one public university), and one is a non-faculty staff member from either sector. The Governor and Legislature made the conscientious decision to include designated interest groups as non-voting members when they established the current HECC in 2013, following advice from consultants from the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) for state coordinating commissions.

From the outset, the Commission’s policies and practices have endeavored to incorporate its non-voting students, faculty, and staff members as fully as possible in the deliberative work of the Commission. Non-voting members sit mixed among voting members at the dais, participate fully in discussions, have played a leading role on workgroups, and vote at the subcommittee level where actions are advisory to the full Commission.

While there is not a consensus amongst current HECC commissioners about HB 3280, all agree that the Commission has invited, heard, and incorporated the voices and perspectives of students, faculty, and staff. Moreover, current and former HECC members generally agree that the Commission has been a highly successful, if imperfect, deliberative body. They value the service they have provided to the Commission. Despite the considerable commitment of volunteer time that HECC service requires (including a minimum of eight full-day meetings per year), as well as the complexity and challenge of many of the issues commissioners face, the Commission has experienced practically no voluntary turnover. It has been a remarkably stable and productive Commission.

During a lengthy discussion of HB 3280 at the Commission’s April 11 meeting, a significant majority of commissioners expressed serious reservations about the bill. Their concerns centered on a desire to ensure that the Commission continues to act as, and be regarded as, a strategic leadership group for improving Oregon postsecondary education through strategic planning, policy recommendations, funding allocations, program approvals, data reporting, and other responsibilities. Several members reflected on the value of appointing voting members to represent the people of Oregon, rather than particular constituencies. Concern was expressed for the Commission’s ability to lead Oregon higher education in the event that voting members felt responsible for advocating for a particular stakeholder group. One commissioner described his concern that an advocacy-based board would lead to the formation of coalitions, result in winners and losers, and ultimately, reduce trust amongst members. Commissioners pointed out that to include voting stakeholders from community colleges and public universities would raise legitimate questions about voting representation from other sectors impacted by HECC decisions, including private career schools, independent colleges, and workforce programs. At 15 voting members, the Commission proposed under HB 3280 is already large. If additional sectors gained voting seats, it could become even more unwieldy.

During our April 11 discussion, several commissioners indicated support for HB 3280. They emphasized that to have a voice at the Commission is not identical to having a vote. One student commissioner shared that while she feels heard by the Commission, the lack of a vote means that students generally do not. One non-voting commissioner expressed concern that while he has experienced the Commission as inclusive, he worries about what may happen in the future with different members and different leadership.

My question is: "What problem is this bill trying to fix? Is not the HECC providing the independent analysis and coordination requested by the Legislature and Governor?"

I believe that for all commissioners, the April 11 discussion underscored the need to ensure that all voices – and especially the learners who are at the center of the HECC's mission – are invited and genuinely engaged by the Commission. Whether or not HB 3280 becomes law, we have an ethical and leadership obligation to do even better at ensuring that all voices are welcomed and heard. I am confident that the Commission is prepared to take up this challenge.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Neil Bryant", written in a cursive style.

Neil Bryant
Chair
State Senator, 1993-2001