



Testimony on House Bill 4160
House Education Committee
February 3, 2020

Chair Doherty, Vice-Chairs Alonso Leon and Helt, and members of the Committee. My name is Kyle Thomas and I am the Director of Legislative and Policy Affairs for the Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC). Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on HB 4160.

This bill calls out an incontrovertible truth in higher education in Oregon and nationwide: Students of color, low income students, and students from other underrepresented communities engage with higher education in a way that is meaningfully different than students of white, middle-class, or other so-called “traditional” backgrounds. For myriad reasons, the difference in these students experience leads to lower degrees of access, lesser persistence, and disparities in completion rates. On OLIS is an issue brief HECC compiled in December that shows these rates disaggregated for race and ethnicity, and we are planning similar issue briefs for other populations in the near future.

Importantly, this bill does not attempt to craft a solution here in this building, under a typical process involving HECC, the institutions, and members of the legislature. Rather, this bill recognizes the voices of the community are important, and structures a process to ensure they are heard. We look forward to engaging with you in this important work.

Even absent the passage of the Student Success Act, increasing diversity in the population of students participating in higher education demanded that we examine financial aid, state policy, and institutional practice comprehensively, at the risk of failing to meet the needs of current and subsequent generations of students. If the Student Success Act lives up to its promise, the needs only become more imperative. While more students attempting a college degree or certificate program is likely to lead to more completions, we must do better than just increase the headcount. We must also increase completion rates.

Without presupposing any particular solutions the proposed task force may ultimately consider, increasing completion rates means ensuring financial aid programs consider ‘whole student’ needs, not just tuition costs. It also means ensuring institutions look critically at student support structures and whether increasingly diverse populations see themselves in the reflection of their campus. Oregon is overdue to give a comprehensive consideration of these issues, and committing to this work is an important initial step.

Thank you for your time today.