

Office of Academic Affairs | University Studies

Post Office Box 751  
Portland, Oregon 97207-0751

503-725-5890 tel  
503-725-5977 fax  
askunst@pdx.edu  
www.pdx.edu/unst

February 8, 2021

Oregon Legislature  
Senate Committee on Education  
RE: SB 713

Dear Chair Dembrow, Vice Chair Thomsen, members of the Committee:

I write to you as an individual who has been directly involved, in various ways, in the criminal and juvenile justice systems in Oregon for over 25 years. For ten years I practiced criminal and juvenile law, representing youth and adults in juvenile and in criminal court. I then pivoted to teaching at Portland State; my courses are primarily community-engaged seminars partnering with multiple juvenile and adult carceral institutions. I also direct Portland State University's Higher Education in Prison Program, a degree pathway in Liberal Studies at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility, and I am the Faculty Advisor to the Justice Impacted Student Group on the PSU campus. I come to you from the perspective of working extensively with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students for many years, some of the best and brightest students I have had the pleasure of teaching and learning with.

According to the Brennan Center for Justice, nearly 1 in 3 adults have a criminal history in this country.<sup>i</sup> There are as many people with criminal convictions as there are with college degrees. Less than 4% of formerly incarcerated individuals earn college degrees.<sup>ii</sup> This is deeply problematic in multiple ways, with a real social and economic cost. Two out of three people who start a college application and select "yes" to the criminal history question do not finish the application.<sup>iii</sup> Just the question itself can become an insurmountable barrier.

We know from abundant research and data that higher education reduces recidivism, and provides employment and positive support that decreases the likelihood of future crimes. The RAND report from 2013, "Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education," affirms that completion of education - obtaining a Bachelor's degree - has been correlated with a less than 10% recidivism rate - a significant reduction in recidivism.<sup>iv</sup> Successful reentry is a matter of public safety and economic necessity. We do a disservice to the public when we limit productive options for those returning home. We need to offer returning citizens the opportunity to serve meaningful roles in the community - and access to higher education encourages and develops just that.

Even beyond public safety and economic opportunity, as an educator I assert that higher learning has the ability to transform one's own life experience, and thereby

transform our communities and strengthen our nation as well. In his essay "Only Connect: The Goals of a Liberal Education," William Cronon asserts that "[a] liberal education is about gaining the power and the wisdom, the generosity and the freedom to connect."<sup>v</sup> Like Cronon, I hold on to the dream "that everyone might someday be liberated by an education that stands in the service of human freedom," including those who have made mistakes and paid their debt.

It is past time to dismantle barriers to success. Louisiana was the first state to ban the box in higher education. Since 2017, Maryland, Washington, Colorado, and California have followed suit and passed similar legislation. I urge you to reduce this barrier to higher education for people in Oregon, and support SB 713.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

*Deborah Smith Arthur*

Deborah Smith Arthur, M.A., J.D.  
Associate Professor  
University Studies Program  
Portland State University  
[debs@pdx.edu](mailto:debs@pdx.edu)  
503-725-5831

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/just-facts-many-americans-have-criminal-records-college-diplomas>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/education.html>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://or-nola.org/ban-the-box-in-higher-ed>

<sup>iv</sup> [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR200/RR266/RAND\\_RR266.sum.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR200/RR266/RAND_RR266.sum.pdf)

<sup>v</sup> Cronon, William. "Only Connect...: The Goals of a Liberal Education." *The American Scholar*. Vol. 67 no. 4, Autumn 1998, pp. 73-80.