

Chair Alonso Leon, Vice Chair Neron, Vice Chair Weber, and Members of the committee;

My name is Robert Northman. I am a junior undergrad at Portland State University where I am currently working toward a bachelor's degree with a dual major in social science and political science: public service, with a civic leadership minor. I am a student-body Senator, and recently made the President's List with a 4.0 GPA last term. I am a volunteer for a community-based organization, a speaker, consultant, and an activist.

When I was 18 years old, I was a student at PCC. Toward the end of my first term, I was arrested and charged with selling drugs. I was sent to prison for this first adult offense where I remained until I was 21. While in prison, I could not continue my educational goals since I was ineligible for the Pell grant. I applied for the Pell grant when I got out of prison, but wasn't out for an entire year before I was rearrested on new drug charges and sent back to prison before I could ever reenter a college to complete my educational goals.

I'd spend a few more calendars in a concrete cell before again being released from the Oregon State Penitentiary, this time as a 24 year-old seasoned convict. I applied for another Pell grant, and attended Clark College in Vancouver until my Post Prison Supervision was revoked for associating with a member of a gang—my brother.

After being released for that petty violation, I was off balance and remained off balance. Every job I applied for asked whether I had a felony conviction. I worked pumping gas, and as a flagger until I was arrested again on a federal weapon charge that earned me a 68-month term of imprisonment in federal prison.

While in prison that last time, I made the self-determination that if I wanted to get out of prison and stay out of prison, education would be key. I recognized the importance education has in our society and I believed then as I believe now that education is even more important to someone who is offset by a criminal conviction in an already fiercely competitive job market.

So, the year before I released last from federal prison, I applied for a Pell grant for the upcoming academic year so as to prepare myself to attend school immediately upon my release. I was awarded a Pell Grant, released in November of 2012, and was attending Portland Community College by January 2013 for the Winter term there. I subsequently graduated from PCC in 2015 with an Associate of General Studies degree and a 3.11 GPA.

After school, I was in a perpetual state of seeking employment until deciding to instead become involved in non-profit work. That decision was based partly on the fact that I found it so difficult to secure any employment whatsoever due to my criminal convictions, which no one even cared were nonviolent offenses. After working for several years in the non-profit sector, in 2020, I sought to become involved with effecting more meaningful social change and so I applied to PSU in order to further my education and acquire the knowledge that could help me help others who are where I once was.

Thankfully, PSU uses a common application which did not subject me to arbitrary discrimination by an admissions office that frowns on felonies the same way many employers had in my past. I do not believe it is fair to weigh a past conviction in determining whether a formerly incarcerated person is worthy of receiving an education or employment. If schools are permitted to ask whether a person has a criminal conviction, they are essentially granted the ability to use that information to factor into their decision making whether to allow a student to attend based on something that has no bearing on their willingness or ability to learn. I believe that if I had not sought to further my education I may have very well relapsed into the same self-destructive decision-making that landed me in prison the first three times. Thank you all for allowing me this opportunity to be heard.