

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 I applied for another Pell grant, and attended Clark College in Vancouver until my Post Prison Supervision was revoked for associating with a member of a gang—my brother.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.

What a waste of time: for each year spent in prison, I could have and would have spent that time acquiring an education that could have empowered me with the knowledge that I believe undoubtedly would have changed the course of my life much earlier on.

When I reflect on the time I spent in prison, I feel as though the time was wasted since I did not learn anything meaningful until I was released and allowed to pursue an education in higher learning. I believe prisoners should be allowed access to higher education while in prison and that if they were, many would embrace the opportunity, attain an education and help to reduce the overall recidivism rate upon their release from custody.

Thank you all for allowing me this opportunity to be heard.