

February 2, 2022

Senate Education Committee

Oregon Legislature

RE: SB 1522, technology for education at CCCF/SRCI

Dear Chair Dembrow, Vice Chair Thomsen, and Members of the Committee,

We are the Oregon Coalition for Higher Education in Prison (OCHEP), a consortium of representatives from postsecondary institutions and other interested partners and stakeholders focused on improving postsecondary education and training for incarcerated individuals in Oregon.

As you know, Pell eligibility for incarcerated adults was recently reinstated by Congress. Our desire is for Oregon's prisons to be fully prepared to take advantage of the federal funding that comes with the overturning of the ban on Pell Grants in prisons by July 2023, and we know that DOC shares in this goal. With Pell funding, many more people in custody will have the opportunity to pursue additional training, certifications, or academic pathways. But funding alone will not make this a reality; the infrastructure within Oregon's prisons will need to meet the expected demand for access to and successful participation in higher education. Technology access is key to this goal. The delivery of postsecondary education and training has been changing for years as technology allows for greater remote interaction with students via platforms such as Zoom, Skype, and other online platforms for teaching and learning; the pandemic further accelerated these changes. Our incarcerated students are being left behind.

Many corrections agencies and their college partners across the country have found ways to deliver or supplement education using technology in a safe and secure manner. There are a multitude of examples, partners, and vendors that could be utilized to reinforce the safety and security of the technology devices needed to allow students to continue their education in a way that is consistent with their campus peers. For example, Colorado, Oklahoma, and Iowa all offer distance learning with live instruction via Zoom-like platforms with students from multiple facilities participating in one class in some cases. In Wisconsin, students are given access to allow-listed websites in a DOC computer lab for FAFSA completion, library research, and career services. In Iowa, a separate instance of the college's Learning Management System is allowed-listed, giving students access to relevant course materials on laptops they retain in their housing units. States like Michigan, California, and Colorado are rolling out laptops to every postsecondary student in their custody. In Washington, this is already the case. Most states have access to computer labs or access to laptops in libraries for writing papers and in some cases for performing research. Most states are in some stage of experimenting with these various options. There are many examples to draw from to help guide IT staff to make the right decisions to protect students, faculty, staff, and the public.

We recognize that, as with many things that used to be prohibited but are now allowed inside, technology comes with risk. However, we know that risk can be successfully monitored, mitigated, and managed, as it has been in other states, and within our own Oregon Youth Authority.

While advances in technology are costly, the costs of *not* providing technology access to incarcerated students are much higher, including increased unemployment rates, lower wages, continuation of intergenerational poverty, etc. For many students, particularly incarcerated women who have historically received far fewer postsecondary educational opportunities compared to their male counterparts, continued lack of technology access will make it extremely difficult to achieve equity and progress in Oregon in higher education.

In summary, we know that education transforms the lives of our students and helps prepare them for successful reentry back into our communities, thus saving public safety and public assistance program dollars. We urge you to support the requirement of equipment, connectivity and infrastructure necessary to ensure that people in custody have online access to educational opportunities.

Sincerely,

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