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March 27, 2023

Senate Education Committee
The Honorable Michael Dembrow, Chair

RE: SB 269, 270, 517 and 1082

Chair Dembrow, Vice Chair Weber, and Members of the Committee:

My name is Deborah Arthur, and I am the Director of Portland State University's Higher Education in Prison Program (HEP), and PSU Project Rebound. Our program offer a bachelor's degree pathway inside Coffee Creek Correctional Facility; we have three in person courses every term, and, as the only four-year program in the state preparing to utilize Pell grants for incarcerated students, we are making plans to expand into other prisons as well. We are actively working on developing a partnership with both Chemeketa Community College and Portland Community College, to develop the 2x2 model suggested by the SB 234 Report to the Legislature. I write in support of SB 269, 270, 517 and 1082.

As Ben Cannon, Executive Director of the Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC), mentioned in his remarks to the Interim Joint Task Force on Student Success for Underrepresented Students in Higher Education on November 17, 2022, *higher education is no longer a luxury but is a necessity*. This includes students who are currently incarcerated; we cannot leave these students behind. A memorandum of understanding between the HECC and the Department of Corrections, **as directed by SB 269**, would go a long way toward promoting equitable access to post-secondary education across DOC facilities. In addition to the points mentioned in 2(a) through (e), the MOU could also include agreements about program evaluation to ensure quality, agreements about facility access for instructors, etc. This MOU will solidify the necessary partnership and coordination necessary to ensure equitable and quality post-secondary educational opportunities for these marginalized students. We are remiss and short-sighted as a state and as people who are tasked with promoting access and equity in higher education if we neglect the needs of incarcerated learners. It is imperative to have the support and coordination of HECC and the Department of Corrections working together to implement standards for higher education in prison. Without such standards and oversight, incarcerated students are at risk of receiving less than equitable access to higher education, particularly as Pell dollars are introduced into the equation. Our incarcerated college students deserve nothing less than the same quality education we would offer to students on main campus. HECC must recognize this group of students and their needs, the DOC must recognize higher education as essential programming, and both HECC and DOC must work together ensure access, equity, and quality education for learners in custody.

For similar reasons, I also support **SB 270**, which will allow incarcerated students to enroll in programs at community colleges beyond district boundaries of the location of their correctional facility, to access programs they might not have locally. This is another important step toward equitable access to higher education. It is also imperative that academic and financial aid counseling be provided for these students; this might be addressed in the 269 MOU.

SB 517 is another essential piece of legislation that will offer formerly incarcerated people a fair chance and bolster community safety. Those who have made significant positive changes in their lives should not be forever held back, post incarceration. Instead, it behooves all of us to make any licensure barriers permeable, and to allow people to contribute in meaningful and important ways to our communities and our economy.

Finally, I urge the passage of **SB 1082**. Supporting students post-release is an essential part of post-secondary education in prison. Transitioning from prison to the community can bring many stressors and barriers. To give students the best chance at success, and to actively promote community safety, it is important to provide a structure of support. At PSU, we have developed a seamless pathway for our students from CCCF into PSU's main campus upon release. We provide social supports, emergency financial needs, academic guidance and tutoring, professional development opportunities, etc. Our Rebound staff and peer support positions are all people with lived experience in the criminal legal system. Project Rebound in California, upon which we modeled our program, is now on 15 Cal State campuses. It is time Oregon also builds out a robust system of support, and we are happy to share our experience at PSU in helping to build this model statewide.

Thank you for your attention to these bills today, and I urge passage of all four of them.

Sincerely,

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