

April 28, 2023

Dear Chair Lively, Vice Chairs McIntire and Ruiz, and members of the Committee:

My name is Betsy Simpkins and I am submitting this testimony in support of SB 269. I have worked both within the Oregon correctional setting as an education provider as well as with the Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC) and I believe this Memorandum of Understanding between the DOC and HECC would benefit students, institutions of higher education, and our communities.

Additionally, I am a private citizen volunteer member of the Oregon Coalition for Higher Education in Prison (OCHEP) which is an informal group of stakeholders and practitioners providing prison education in Oregon. There, I share my experience and opinions on the history and current/future state of prison education in Oregon and act as an advocate not only for students but also for the instructors and administrators whose tireless work makes any of this possible. For these reasons, I am uniquely situated to comment on this bill due to my first-hand experience relating both to incarcerated students pursuing higher education and also to HECC's potential to elevate the work for these students that have suffered society's neglect for long enough.

SB 269 – HECC/DOC MOU

I support the need for the HECC and the Department of Corrections (DOC) to enter into a more formal relationship via an MOU for a variety of reasons. At present, there is no way to ensure consistent, equitable, and quality postsecondary educational opportunities inside the correctional facilities in Oregon. Students have very little recourse should they encounter issues with accessing programs, getting to class, or with specific officers or college instructors that interferes with their education. Students may attempt to file complaints with the college/university however, school administration will likely take no position on DOC related security or disciplinary concerns. Additionally, follow-up communication with incarcerated students is nearly impossible with no access to the internet and very restricted telephone privileges. Should a student file a grievance with the appropriate DOC personnel, they will likely say that they cannot interfere with the delivery of higher education and have no authority over college/university personnel. Students are in a catch-22 where they have no advocates, no process, and no interest by either party to resolve issues. The HECC, however, can act as an intermediary for students, and can utilize processes and rules, including Civil Rights and Title IX enforcement that they already utilize in all 24 public institutions. Additionally, with the restoration of Pell grants in addition to the DOC's implementation of an approval process for any postsecondary education program in prison, there will be a need to share data across institutions. Data that neither the DOC nor the institutions have, such as employment and earnings, the HECC does have. Data on disciplinary issues among prison education programs is only maintained by the DOC but will likely be very useful for public institution data collections and may be requested of the HECC as it relates to educational outcomes. All this points to an additional benefit of an MOU that can establish these data sharing agreements without each school having to do a separate one for both DOC and the HECC. It's just common sense.

This is needed to ensure that incarcerated students have access to the highest quality educational opportunities available and that students' rights are respected and enforced. The best way to ensure this is by making and enforcing a formal commitment to do so.

For these reasons, I strongly urge you to pass SB 269.

Thank you very much for your consideration of all these matters and for your dedication to improving the pathway to education for incarcerated students, and in so doing, making our communities safer and more productive.

Sincerely,
Betsy Simpkins