

My name is Kathleen Brown. I am the associate director of Early College Initiatives at EOU.

Two days ago, I had the privilege of welcoming 73 students from 12 different schools to EOU for a Dual Credit BBQ. While this may seem like a small number to those on the west side of the state, we were thrilled to have students from so many different school districts come together to celebrate their accomplishments in dual credit and explore the possibility of higher education in their future.

I share this story because two students were unable to attend. They were home working their family's cattle and hadn't been in school all week—they simply couldn't step away to attend an event that celebrated their hard work and achievements. While their peers explored our campus, met faculty, learned about opportunities at nearby community colleges, and connected with partners like OHSU, those two students missed out.

But will they be left behind or forgotten by EOU? Absolutely not. One of our Early College Initiatives (ECI) specialists is already working with them and will continue to support them through graduation—answering questions, guiding them, and helping their community support their next steps.

ECI Specialists are supported by federal and state funding. Without that funding, ECI @ EOU would struggle to reach students in rural areas—whether they come from ranching families, American Indian nations, Hispanic communities, or simply small towns across eastern Oregon.

I'm here to support **HB 2997** because it's designed to help rural areas like ours. I respectfully ask for the committee's support of a policy that would create a grant fund under the Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC) to support local, community-based partnerships serving rural learners statewide—in collaboration with universities like EOU.

Organizations like College Possible and EOU are already working together to expand impact in our region, and I'm excited by the potential for new partnerships.

ECI is unique. We are not in schools to recruit students to EOU—we're there to help students discover and pursue their next steps. Through stackable experience such as dual credit, CTE, military experience, community college, university, or immediate entry into the workforce with training in the trades—our goal is to equip students with options. Whether they choose to pursue a degree that enhances their prior experiences or another path, ECI @ EOU is committed to the long game: helping students return home and strengthen the communities that raised them.

Without funding, ECI Specialists wouldn't be able to drive the 750 miles they average each month, help over 1,500 students register, speak with parents about their children's futures, support teachers with multiple duties on their plate, or celebrate student success alongside the communities that support them.

Every high school student should have the option to earn college credit at a discounted rate and transfer those credits wherever their future leads. The passage of **HB 2997** would allow ECI @ EOU to continue building the kind of support and funding that directly aligns with the bill's goals.

If ECI @ EOU can continue investing in our communities with the support of state and federal funding, we'll see more students believing that EOU can be part of their future—and even more importantly, remind every student no matter their path, that their dreams are valid, no matter where they came from and how big they are.