

OCCA Testimony on HB 4124 to the House Committee on Education

Chair Hudson, Co-Chair Dobson and McIntire and members of the committee, for the record, my name is John Wykoff, and I serve as Deputy Director of the Oregon Community College Association, representing Oregon's 17 public community colleges.

Thank you to Representative Marsh and the other sponsors for bringing HB 4124 forward and for initiating an important conversation about the future of Oregon's public higher education system. We appreciate the thoughtful intent behind this legislation and the opportunity it creates to step back and examine how well our system is positioned to meet current and emerging student needs.

Nationally, higher education is facing a rapidly changing landscape. Institutions are confronting declining numbers of graduating high school students, shifts in how prospective students and the broader public perceive the value proposition of higher education, and changing expectations about how education is delivered. Today's students are increasingly seeking greater flexibility, multiple learning modalities, and clearer connections between education and career outcomes.

While structural changes at the system level can be part of the solution, we believe it is equally important to directly confront whether institutions are able to meet today's students where they are. This includes recognizing that many students are working adults, caregivers, and place-bound learners who require flexible scheduling, online and hybrid options, and programs aligned with immediate workforce needs.

Over the past several years, the strongest enrollment growth across higher education has been in career-connected degrees and certificates. Any discussion of structural change should support institutions' ability to adapt to these shifting student preferences and labor market demands, rather than constrain them.

We have seen clear evidence of this nationally and in Oregon as out-of-state institutions which have emphasized flexible, career-connected learning models, have experienced strong enrollment growth. One out of state non-profit provider that we have seen educate a growing number of Oregon students recently has averaged approximately nine percent annual enrollment growth over the past three years while charging tuition approaching \$450 per credit. Similarly, community colleges in Oregon and across the country are seeing some of their strongest enrollment growth in Career and Technical Education programs and short-term workforce credentials that provide clear, timely value to students and employers.

OCCA strongly agrees that we should always strive for greater efficiency and smarter integration across the system. Areas such as common general education requirements and more seamless transfer pathways are structural improvements that could make a meaningful difference for students by reducing time to degree and unnecessary costs. While Oregon has focused on improving transfer pathways for more than 15 years starting with the "Student Transfer Bill of Rights" legislation adopted by this body, we have not yet made progress in the way other states ensure that students can smoothly move between institutions.

At the same time, as HB 4124 directs HECC to examine issues such as duplication, we urge a holistic and nuanced approach. While programs may share similar titles or outcomes, they often serve very different student populations. A program designed for working adults attending part-time may look similar on paper to one serving traditional, full-time residential students, yet fulfill a distinct and necessary role. The study should also carefully consider local and regional access, particularly for place-bound students, when evaluating questions of duplication.

Finally, we encourage greater recognition within this work of Oregon's locally controlled community colleges. Community college districts are taxing districts created by voters to meet the education and workforce needs of their communities, and they are governed by locally elected boards. This governance structure is fundamentally different from statewide institutions overseen by boards appointed by the Governor, and it reflects a deep, voter-driven connection between community colleges and the communities they serve. Any system-level analysis should acknowledge and respect this distinction.

In closing, OCCA appreciates the Legislature's interest in ensuring Oregon's higher education system remains responsive, efficient, and student-centered. We look forward to engaging constructively with HECC and policymakers as this work moves forward and to ensuring that the voices of community colleges and the students we serve are fully reflected in the process.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.