

February 4, 2026

House Committee on Education
Oregon State Capitol
Salem, OR 97301

Re: HB 4124

Chair Hudson, Vice-Chairs Dobson and McIntire, and members of the House Committee on Education:

For the record, my name is David Johnston. I am a Senior Instructor of Physics at Oregon Tech, our state's polytechnic university, at the Portland-Metro campus in Wilsonville. I also serve as Vice President of OT-AAUP, Oregon Tech's faculty union. I am testifying today as a faculty member at one of Oregon's public universities and as a representative of OT-AAUP's 80 members.

First, I would like to thank you for your service to Oregon and for your commitment to the education of our students. Although I am not a native Oregonian, my family and I have been proud to call Oregon home for nearly eleven years. I also want to acknowledge the work of the Higher Education Coordinating Commission and its staff, who are equally dedicated to Oregon students.

While many of my colleagues and I support the idea of evaluating Oregon's post-secondary education system and planning for the future, HB 4124 is currently framed in a way that risks treating higher education primarily as an economic instrument—a return-on-investment calculation and workforce pipeline—rather than a public good that also prepares Oregonians for thoughtful, informed participation in civic life. This bill directs HECC to develop recommendations for a “viable and superior institutional framework” that emphasizes access, economic development and employment, and financial viability. Those are important and essential goals. However, my concern is that without explicit direction to evaluate the broader educational and civic purposes of higher education, those purposes will be overshadowed.

Higher education is undeniably a pathway to financial stability for many people, and costs have become a real barrier for too many students. HB 4124's

attention to access—including students across geography, rural communities, and underserved populations—is essential. Furthermore, it is prudent to plan for demographic changes, enrollment pressures, and rising costs. But we also must remember what higher education uniquely contributes: the capacity for critical and skeptical reasoning, intellectual humility, open-mindedness, and the skills to engage respectfully with those we disagree with. When I look at our country today, these are precisely the skills that often seem in short supply.

I know this not as an abstract ideal, but from personal experience. As an undergraduate, I wanted to study as much physics and mathematics as possible and viewed general education as an obstacle. In one early course on Western Civilization, I wrote a paper on the relationship between science and the early Roman Catholic Church, relying almost entirely on sources from within the Church. I earned a lower grade than expected, and the feedback was simple and lasting: *you only examined sources from one viewpoint—what about the others?* That moment taught me something I still practice: don’t stop searching when you find material that confirms what you already believe—keep going until you understand the strongest competing arguments.

Later, I took an upper-division philosophy course—Buddhist Metaphysics—that I entered with more confidence than I deserved. It became one of the most transformative classes of my education. It exposed me to ideas I would never have encountered otherwise and made me a better thinker, a better listener, and ultimately a better teacher. Those are the kinds of intellectual experiences that help students grow into adults who can navigate complexity, tolerate uncertainty, and treat one another with respect.

In closing, it is essential to address affordability, sustainability, and Oregon’s workforce needs. HB 4124 appropriately calls for a study that addresses access, economic development, and financial viability. But it is equally essential that the study—and any resulting recommendations—treat the broader educational mission as co-equal, not secondary. In related testimony, faculty governance leaders have raised concerns about the quality of consultation and the feasibility of the December 1, 2026 deadline for a study of this magnitude, and they have emphasized the importance of protecting shared governance and academic mission in any restructuring conversation. We share those concerns, and would add this: the study should

not only ask how institutions produce workers, but also how they produce citizens and community members capable of critical thought, open inquiry, and constructive democratic engagement.

Therefore, we respectfully ask you to amend HB 4124 so that the study's framework and metrics explicitly include these educational and civic outcomes on equal footing with economic and financial considerations.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully submitted,

David G. Johnston, Ph.D.
Senior Instructor, Oregon Institute of Technology
Vice President, OT-AAUP