

Written Testimony for House Committee on Education (HB 4124)

Dear Chair Hudson, Vice-Chair McIntire, Vice-Chair Dobson, and members of the Committee,

As the current Interim Director of Faculty Personnel and Policy at the University of Oregon and a two-time alumnus of Oregon State University, I write to express my concern about HB 4124. To begin, the bill proposes the study be performed by the Higher Education Coordinating Commission, an agency who functions to coordinate and convene higher education in the state of Oregon. Instead, this bill positions the HECC to have an oversight role for Oregon's post-secondary education institutions and points only to processes of consultation with colleges and universities during the research project. The purpose of moving away from the OUS system over a decade ago was to provide autonomy and localized decision-making at institutions with internal processes developed to propose and review programs, systems to evaluate and intervene on student matters, and the creation of shared governance to oversee a plethora of other administrative and academic functions. At the University of Oregon, our work comes with engagement from the President through to executive leadership (academic and operational), officers of administration, classified staff, graduate and undergraduate students, governing bodies such as the University Senate and ASUO, numerous campus labor unions, tenure/tenured/career faculty, instructional faculty and research faculty, and alumni and donors. The amount of shared governance and cross-campus collaboration we undertake daily to enact our shared vision at UO is extensive and intentional. Though the HECC can perform some elements of the proposed study, the above intricacies of UO alone present challenges for one agency to grapple with in order to accurately and best represent our institution in one set of findings. Further, placing the HECC in an oversight and management position detours greatly from their agreed upon role in Oregon higher education and creates unnecessary tension with the post-secondary education institutions whose collective aim is to collaborate with the HECC to deliver excellence to its Oregon learners.

Secondly, the timeline proposed in the bill strains HECC resources to the point that work will inevitably be rushed, reliant on readily available data instead of detailed information directly from the programs being studied, and homogenized overarching findings lacking in meaningful value to the legislation for review. Most processes from policy development to program evaluation take a full year, at best, to perform, and they typically have clear methods and metrics defined from the outset. This includes current processes run by the HECC, which UO engages with readily on an annual basis (in addition to the NWCCU, our accrediting body). The short timeline will also shift the HECC's focus away from supporting

our institutions in order to meet the December 1<sup>st</sup> deadline. Not only will our funding suffer even more than it already has (with Oregon ranking 46<sup>th</sup> in the nation for higher education), but our students, faculty, staff, and programs will experience hardships by tasking the HECC with an elaborate and ambiguous project with less than a year to produce a report and recommendations. Feasibility and impact are not recognized in the current bill's language. Additionally, a compressed timeline actively works against the notion of consultation and deliberate, planned collaboration with the institutions being studied. To quote UO's University Senate President, Dr. Dyana Mason, "With Oregon's public higher education system comprised of 17 community colleges and seven four-year universities – it seems difficult to imagine that it is possible to complete a comprehensive and effective review of 24 different agencies, each with thousands of employees and students, hundreds of degree programs, research endeavors and community engagement activities, in six to nine months.". Not only is this a big lift for any competent agency to perform in such a short period of time, but there is a lack of precedence for this work to thoughtfully and fully include the 24 aforementioned institutions. Namely, our institutions were not adequately nor meaningfully engaged with the process and findings of the recently published HECC report titled, "Spending and Efficiency in Oregon Public Universities", which underpins HB 4214.

Thirdly, HB 4124 lacks methodology and leaves the approach solely to the HECC. Or, even worse, as noted in Section 1.6 of the bill, third-party contractors. Though the HECC has talented administrators and higher education knowledge, they are not experts in all of the subjects outlined by HB 4124 (and will not become experts in these subjects given the timeline). The brief mention of third-party contractors is even more troubling if those hired are not from our state system, are taking funds from the HECC/legislation, and are often focused on low-hanging, easily accessible data, which is too often flawed and context-neutral. The HECC report used to substantiate this bill demonstrates these issues well enough to suggest how the agency might approach this study, if approved. Also, though the bill is ambiguous about its study design, it does provide extensive subjects that the HECC must make recommendations on including specific suggestions such as, "(d) Funding strategies, including strategies to foster collaboration, restructuring or integration in the post-secondary education system." If the goal of the study is to learn from the public universities and colleges and put together findings about their students, programs, etc., then why does the bill already assume that restructuring and integration will need to take place and be part of the HECC's recommendation? Good researchers know that confirmation bias is particularly problematic for any study. As it stands, HB 4124 provides an unfortunate framework riddled with the opportunity for the study design, methodology,

and findings to be misused to confirm already-held beliefs about Oregon's higher education institutions.

Finally, I would like to address [Rep. Marsh's recent claim regarding HB 4124 to Oregon Public Broadcasting](#) that, "We do not have time to sit around and twiddle our thumbs. We have to turn this system quickly". I appreciate the concern Rep. Marsh and the co-sponsors of this bill, as well as leadership at the HECC, have for higher education in the state of Oregon. However, I can say with full-throated confidence that my colleagues and I at the University of Oregon have been working tirelessly and endlessly in the face of staff reductions and budget cuts to produce the "big-picture, outside-the-box thinking about what higher ed can look like" which Rep. Marsh suggests this study will provide to Oregon. Our expertise has been garnered in our fields to contribute to the (re)shaping of higher education at our institution and we are not alone in our endeavor. My previous employment and current engagement as an alumnus at OSU suggest they are giving their lifeblood to the same cause. We are all wholly committed to our students, our programs, and our state even in the face of public mistrust and a federal government whose leaders openly denigrate our work. We seek continuous improvement and efficiency as much as we seek to develop life-changing experiences for students and secure futures for our graduates. On a more personal level, I can say that Oregon's higher education called to me from across state borders and brought me here from Idaho in 2010 to pursue an undergraduate degree. OSU's programs kept me here in the state in 2014 to pursue my dream of getting a master's degree as a first-generation student. And Oregon's public university setting—its faculty, staff, students, and electric R1 energy—is what brought me back in 2022 after receiving my doctoral degree to pour back into the system all that I received from it. I believe many of us are in alignment about the work that needs doing in higher education in Oregon, however, I ask that you as a committee consider who does this work and how the work gets done as you review and vote on HB4124.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

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