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Legislature passes SB 523, expanding opportunities for nursing education at Oregon community colleges

SALEM, Ore. – The Oregon legislature has taken a significant step towards improving access to quality nursing education by unanimously passing Senate Bill 523 in both chambers, which will allow community colleges across the state to offer a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) degree. This landmark legislation aims to create better, more equitable opportunities for students, address local healthcare workforce needs, and leverage the capacity of community colleges to offer the RN to BSN pathway.

SB 523 was approved by the Senate during a floor session on Thursday (June 15), following unanimous passage in the House last week. The Senate had already approved the bill in May, but an amendment made in the House needed a concurrence vote by the Senate. Senators were able to do so on Thursday, the same day floor sessions in the chamber resumed after a six-week walkout by Republican senators.

One of the primary benefits of this legislation is the increased accessibility of 4-year nursing degrees, particularly in rural areas. By providing a community college option for earning a BSN, the bill expands access to higher education and empowers students in underserved regions. Currently, many community college Registered Nurse (RN) graduates are forced to pursue costlier out-of-state or online providers to obtain a BSN. The availability of local community college alternatives will now offer a more affordable pathway for these graduates to continue their education, with familiar faculty, learning environments, and student supports.

“By enabling community colleges to offer the BSN degree, we are ensuring that our students have access to affordable and accessible educational opportunities,” said John Wykoff, Deputy Director of the Oregon Community College Association (OCCA), which advocated for the bill’s passage. “This legislation opens doors for students in rural areas and provides a vital local option for RN graduates to advance their careers.”

A BSN degree offers numerous advantages for nursing professionals, including expanded opportunities for promotion and higher pay. Currently, a significant percentage of nursing graduates from institutions like Chemeketa Community College, where 100 out of 175 nursing graduates in the last five years did not pursue a BSN, will now have the opportunity to continue their education locally. This change will foster a more affordable career pathway and create equitable outcomes for underserved populations who may face barriers to accessing higher education.

“In rural areas, where healthcare deserts are a pressing concern, having a local and affordable option for nursing education is crucial,” Wykoff said. “This legislation will not only help meet the healthcare needs of these communities but also improve the overall health outcomes of the population.”

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Critics have raised concerns about the capacity of community colleges to offer the RN to BSN pathway. However, the reality is that 16 out of 17 Oregon community colleges currently offer 2-year Associate Degrees in Nursing (ADN) with an impressive track record for student success. Statewide, ADN programs have a successful completion rate of 85.8% for the Registered Nurse (RN) certification exam, comparable to the 86.4% rate of BSN programs. Furthermore, an RN to BSN program does not require additional clinical training beyond what is provided in the initial RN degree.

"All nursing programs leading to RN licensure already require master's prepared nurse educators," Wykoff said. "Community college nursing faculty possess the necessary credentials to teach the BSN curriculum effectively, making them well-equipped to provide high-quality education at this level."

The passage of Senate Bill 523 represents a significant milestone in expanding nursing education opportunities in Oregon. By enabling community colleges to offer BSN degrees, the state is ensuring a more accessible and affordable educational pathway for students.

SB 523 now heads to Governor Tina Kotek's desk for signature.

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The Oregon Community College Association (OCCA) represents the 17 publicly chartered community colleges and their locally elected board members in Oregon. Founded in 1962, OCCA's purpose is to support the colleges before policy-makers and partners whose actions affect the well-being of community colleges across the state.