

Greetings and Good Morning, Chair Sanchez, Vice-Chair Moore-Green, Vice-Chair Nosse and members of the committee. My name is Dr. Keleigh Blount. I am here testifying in support of House Bill 2949 and the -5, -7 and -8 amendments.

As an Assistant Professor within the Graduate School of Counseling at George Fox University and a licensed mental health professional, I would like to take time to share two main points with you in my limited time this morning. The first being what a Masters level degree in the mental health field entails, and what that experience is like for students of color who enroll in these programs.

I would like to begin by establishing what masters level counseling training and education consists of. Programs are typically between 60 to 65 credit hours, and an accrediting body approves classes and syllabi to ensure that learning outcomes are consistent across programs and states. Mental health programs, including marriage couple and family and clinical social work programs, include a practicum and internship component, where students must engage in supervised clinical practice; we call this practicum and internship. During this time, students engage in a minimum of 700 supervised clinical hours. There is a double layer of supervision, as they seek counsel from their university supervisor and their site supervisor. Both are licensed mental health professionals, often with advanced supervision training and experience. This lays the foundation for concrete and core counseling skills and supervision.

So what is this special experience like for students who identify as Black, Indigenous and Persons of Color? Every semester, a student of color tells me that I am their first Black professor in life. I have had students share that it is a struggle to participate in class because they are in awe at seeing me, a counselor and a professor that looks like them. We recently had a town hall meeting, and some of my students of color attended. They sent me emails of how excited they were to see Asian, Latinx, and a Black male identifying counselor. They asked if they could reach out and message them. As a professor, students crowd my office hours for a moment to feel seen and valued as a human, while navigating a system that discriminates against them. Students want to find internship sites and supervisors that identify as BIPOC so they can assist the community they identify with. Increasing the pipeline and supporting counselors of color already in the field is vital for our community.

Let me end with this story. When I first moved to Portland last year, like many who move I was on the hunt for new friends and building new friendships in the community. Over and over, I would meet people of color who would find out I was a therapist and they would clearly state, they did not want to be my friend they wanted to be my client. They knew counselors couldn't be friends with their clients. They shared how they were waiting up to 3 or 4 months to see a mental health professional of color, sometimes even driving up to 3 hours to Seattle to find a therapist of color. As an educator, I recruit students and I work hard to retain them in my program. Today, I am asking you to consider supporting and retaining BIPOC counselors with intersecting identities, the community needs us.

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