



TO: House Committee on Higher Education and Workforce Development
FROM: Lynette H. Bikos, PhD, ABPP; Dean, School of Graduate Psychology, Pacific University Oregon
RE: Testimony in Support of HB 3129
DATE: February 25, 2025

In this letter, I offer testimony supporting HB 3129, establishing the Higher Education Behavioral Health Workforce Expansion Fund.

I am coming to you as a Licensed Psychologist with Board Certification in Counseling Psychology. I am also the Dean of the School of Graduate Psychology in the College of Health Professions at Pacific University Oregon. The School of Graduate Psychology offers a Masters in Applied Clinical Psychology, a PsyD (practice-focused doctoral degree) in Clinical Psychology, and a PhD (a research-focused doctoral degree) in Clinical Psychology. Each of these programs holds secondary accreditation from their respective accrediting bodies. Pacific University is also home to a Master's in Social Work program. Our contribution to training in mental health has a long history; our PsyD program celebrates its 40th anniversary in 2025.

Annually, Pacific University Oregon contributes approximately 120 graduates eligible to be licensed as mental health providers at the master's level and 50 graduates who (with a year of post-doctoral supervision) are license-eligible at the doctoral level. The School of Graduate Psychology is also home to an Oregon Health Authority Certified clinic, the Pacific Psychology & Comprehensive Clinic, that served 568 distinct patients in its Hillsboro and downtown Portland locations during its 2023-2024 academic year. The majority were Oregon Health Plan members. Additionally, our psychology students participate in clinically supervised placements/practica in the region, serving an additional 11,799 patients in 125 sites during this same timeframe.

Oregon is Experiencing Significant Shortages in Behavioral Health Care

In 2021, HB 2086, passed by the Oregon Legislature, led to a review of the behavioral health workforce. This report was created by Oregon Health & Science University's Center for Health Systems. Across the U.S., the 10 years between 2010 and 2020 have seen dramatic increases in behavioral health conditions. For example, among adolescents, the proportion who experienced major depressive episodes more than doubled. Across the US, Oregon has the fourth highest rate of unmet need for mental health treatment in the country. Wait times for treatment are lengthy, and increase when there is a requirement for specialization, including language services or culturally specific treatment.

With its focus on bolstering education and training pathways to careers in behavioral healthcare, HB 3129 would address some of the unmet needs identified in the report mentioned above.

Economic Challenges in Higher Education

During the admissions process, applicants (particularly those from first-generation and minoritized backgrounds) express worries about how to pay for their education. As written, funds established under Section 4 of HB 3129 would provide scholarships or stipends. Direct funding that reduces the up-front costs functions to lower barriers to entry by reducing the financing needed through loans. When loan amounts are decreased, applicants, particularly those from minoritized and lower SES backgrounds, are

more likely to accept admission into the programs and, in turn, increase the diversity among behavioral healthcare providers.

The enrollment/demographic cliff is a significant challenge to public and private institutions. While enrollments remain steady in behavioral health graduate programs, the larger institutions' squeeze is stressing the institution's behavioral health programs. As written, funds established under Section 3 of HB 3129 could be used by the institution to expand or stabilize behavioral health training programs. At Pacific University, a goal that is consistent with the culturally responsive intentions of HB 3129 is to re-establish a Latine Mental Health Program – where students would receive didactic instruction and clinical supervision to serve members of the Hispanic/Latine community – which is ~30% in the Hillsboro/Forest Grove area. The possibility of re-establishing this project would be significantly enhanced if students received scholarships and there was funding for salaries for faculty and clinical supervision.

Graduates of Behavioral Health Programs Seek to Work in Medically Underserved Communities

Many applicants to our programs express a desire to provide socially and culturally responsive services to medically underserved communities. A recent analysis of data for Pacific University's PsyD Program in Clinical Psychology indicates that across two recent cohorts of graduates (i.e., those graduating in the 2022-23 and 2023-24 academic years), 65% were employed in communities designated as medically underserved.

To conclude, I strongly recommend the enthusiastic passage of HB 3129. By providing financial support directly to students and behavioral health training programs, you will begin to close the gaps in behavioral healthcare in Oregon.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this critical issue.