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To: House Committee on Higher Education and Workforce Development

From: Devon Backstrom

RE: HB 2864

Hello Chair Reardon, Vice-Chairs Alonso-Leon and Whisnant, Members of the Committee,

My name is Devon Backstrom. I'm currently finishing my last class for my biology degree at Portland State University. I'm speaking today to reinforce to you the importance of cultural competency in education

I was raised by a single mother who didn't look like me, people always asked if I was adopted. They would ask my mom whose child I was. They constantly reminded me I was different. For some reason, I couldn't figure out why people treated me differently. While my brother was wondering about which sport to play, I was asking my mother what race was, what a racial pejorative my peers had used to describe me meant, why I was different? These were all questions she couldn't answer, in her world equality was universal, but here she saw firsthand a burden I carried that neither of my siblings did. In school, I achieved record scores on my standardized testing. I scored 1470 on my SAT. I was a Boy Scout. All things considered I was precocious and set for future success. However, when I told my advisors I wanted to go to MIT they laughed in my face. In every meeting, I remember keeping track of the number of times I received a comment on not sounding like I look. Then when I was 16 I was called into a counselor's office and screamed at for me and my people bringing "crime" to my high school. I have no criminal record then or since. I was told that maybe people like me should just drop out. My mother wasn't happy.

At Portland State University, I've been involved in three separate discrimination complaints sent to the Global Diversity and Inclusion office. Repeatedly the office found that while discrimination did occur there were no damages warranting any action. This always struck me as odd, as a close friend of those affected I saw the emotional and mental pain which influenced them for weeks. Two of the three wanted to drop out because of the actions which supposedly weren't "damaging" in the monetary sense of the word. This concept always struck me as odd. How do you calculate damage, When you leave a student with thousands of dollars of debt and no degree? Or when We give up on Our dreams because We can no longer cope with the constant specter of discrimination? One of the most commonly cited reasons for dropping out is mental health, and stress. There's a direct link between our outcomes and cultural competency. At PSU our discrimination survey found up to a third of teachers regularly used words which were oppressive. In such an environment how does anyone succeed? Yet we do.

I think back on my history and wonder every day, what if my mother wasn't white? What if my parents didn't speak English? What if I had come out recently and been kicked out of my home? What if I had believed the people who on a weekly basis judged me not on the contents of my



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character, but on the color of my skin? Would I be graduating from College? I'm here to represent the voice of those who didn't make it. Of those who dropped-out at my high school, never having the opportunity, and for the thousands who give up on their dreams after making it to college.

The disparity we see amongst people in higher education is the result of people not knowing how something is racist or sexist, not understanding that a joke in poor taste is all it takes to remind us about our past. To tell us that we don't belong. For marginalized communities, there is NO voice telling Us that We are appreciated, that We can contribute to society, that We can achieve Our dreams. That's what cultural competency is. It's the opportunity to tell those who have felt excluded their entire lives that they do belong. That their ambitions are worth pursuing. So I ask you to remember that cultural competency isn't just a class, or a bill, it represents the ability of marginalized communities to become an integral and successful part of our society. I ask for your support of HB 2864. Thank you.