

Dear members of the House Committee on Higher Education,

My name is Karla de Lima Berg and I am a BUILD EXITO alum and second-year latina PhD student at Portland State University. I graduated from Century High School in Hillsboro, OR and began my Bachelor's in Biology at PSU believing that I wanted to be a veterinarian. However, my experiences in BUILD EXITO radically changed my career goals. Because of the skills I developed in BUILD EXITO and my undergraduate research, I am now a Fellow of the highly competitive National Science Foundation's Graduate Research Program (GRFP), which provides financial support and additional training opportunities for those pursuing a career in academic research. It is my goal to conduct professional research in academia or in the public sector to further plant conservation efforts. I am providing this testimony in the spirit of the -2 amendment to HB 3120, but I ask that the committee request an amendment to allow programs like BUILD EXITO, which has a demonstrated history of providing college success and access for historically underrepresented groups in post-secondary education, to access these funds.

When I started my bachelor's degree, I knew nothing about and had no interest in academic research. In contrast to my initial ambivalence, I am now so grateful for the opportunity to have participated in this program. BUILD EXITO paired me with peer and career mentors that supported me throughout my undergraduate degree and the graduate school application process. This mentoring not only helped me navigate the challenges of juggling full-time coursework and independent research, but also taught me the importance of quality mentoring for young researchers.

In addition to mentoring, BUILD EXITO allowed me to join a research lab at PSU to conduct my own independent research. I was interested in plant biology and evolution, so I joined Dr. Mitch Cruzan's lab to study two poorly understood selective processes that occur during the reproduction of flowering plants. I became so passionate about research and my project that I designed a follow-up experiment, applied for, and received additional funding through the Spike Wadsworth and Y. Sherry Sheng Fund for Biology. These early experiences in research were essential to my successful grad school and GRFP applications. Moreover, these experiences inspired me to continue my research in the Cruzan lab as a grad student and to pursue a career in evolutionary biology and conservation research.

Finally, the BUILD EXITO program fostered my success in the lab by providing training in basic research skills and ethics. I learned how to understand scientific papers, how to create and present a poster and talk at a conference, how to network, and how to collaborate with other researchers. This training set the foundation for my professional development as a researcher. The mentoring, hands-on research experience, training, and the overall culture of celebrating diversity combined, created a supportive environment during a time when graduate school and a career in research seemed daunting and unattainable.

I have since learned that there is a major problem in STEM—students from marginalized communities are significantly less likely than white, male students to attend graduate school and persist in the field. This problem arises from systemic racism and an education system that emphasizes lecturing over active learning. Programs like BUILD EXITO are desperately needed

to address this problem. In fact, the biggest asset of programs like BUILD EXITO is their ability to foster a sense of belonging in science—a trait that has been shown to be a strong predictor of academic success and persistence. I believe these programs will help us foster a more diverse community of researchers that can collaborate creatively to solve complex problems. While I appreciate the sponsor's intention to give the HECC maximum flexibility, I would respectfully ask that the committee consider allocating directly to the 5 original programs from House Bill 2412 last session. These programs have a proven track record of success in student access and diversity.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Karla de Lima Berg