



TO: House Committee on Behavioral Health
FROM: Lynette H. Bikos, PhD, ABPP; Dean, School of Graduate Psychology, Pacific University Oregon
RE: Testimony in Support of SB 1547
DATE: February 18, 2026

In this letter, I offer testimony supporting SB 1547, establishing the *Behavioral Health and Wellness Practitioner* credential as a license to be administered by the Oregon Board of Psychology (OBOP).

In support of SB 1547, my letter outlines three general points. First, Oregon is experiencing significant shortages in behavioral healthcare, and Behavioral Health and Wellness Practitioners could expand services. Second, there are substantial threats to graduate programs in higher education. Thus, Behavioral Health and Wellness Practitioners could bridge the service gaps. Third, the programs at Pacific University Oregon have the capacity and sincere interest in supporting this credential and its implementation.

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 specialized services are required, including language services or culturally specific treatment.

SB 1547's expansion of pathways to careers in behavioral healthcare would address some of the unmet needs identified in the report mentioned above. This could be especially helpful for medically underserved populations and communities.

Economic Challenges in Graduate Education may Threaten the Behavioral Health Workforce

The One Big Beautiful Bill (OB BB) Act has fundamentally changed how students pay for graduate school. Prior to the OB BB, graduate students could use Grad PLUS Loans to borrow up to the full cost of attendance (e.g., tuition plus expenses). OB BB eliminates the Grad Plus program for new borrowers, and students will be capped at fixed dollar amounts (irrespective of what their school actually costs). Further, the OB BB limits master's level credentials to \$20,500 per year and a \$100,000 aggregate. In the case of behavioral health, only clinical psychology doctoral students can qualify for the higher (\$50,000 annually; \$200,000 lifetime) amounts. In many cases, these larger allowances are likely to leave funding gaps, and students will need to turn to private loans (of which 40-50% are denied).

Additionally, the One Big Beautiful Bill (OB BB) introduced stricter accountability measures that evaluate programs based on the debt-to-income ratio of their graduates. While intended to curb predatory programs, this could lead universities in the behavioral health sector (where starting salaries are historically lower than in other medical fields) to shrink or close programs to avoid failing federal *value* metrics.

At Pacific University, we are concerned that qualified students will accept admission to our graduate behavioral health programs and then withdraw before matriculating due to difficulties in arranging their financial aid. For our clinical psychology doctoral programs, specifically, we worry that students may complete the en-route master's degree, and then withdraw.

Both the failure to matriculate and withdrawing at the master's level could lead to a shortage of behavioral health professionals. Thus, credentialing at the bachelor's level can help fill the gaps.

Pacific University Oregon Has the Capacity and Interest to Help

I am 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 Master's in Applied Clinical Psychology, a PsyD (practice-focused doctoral degree) in Clinical Psychology, and a PhD (research-focused doctoral degree) in Clinical Psychology. Each of these programs holds secondary accreditation from its respective accrediting body. Pacific University is also home to a Master's in Social Work program (accredited by the Council on Social Work Education) as well as bachelor's degrees in social work and psychology.

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 annually serves over 550 patients; the majority of whom are Oregon Health Plan members. Additionally, our psychology students participate in clinically supervised placements/practica in the region, serving an additional 11,800 patients in 125 sites.

With academic programs and an established network of community-based field/practicum placements, the social work and psychology programs at Pacific University Oregon have the capacity, interest, and commitment to provide an educational pathway for *Licensed Behavioral Health and Wellness Practitioners*.

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