

**Testimony for the 69th Legislative Assembly – Senate Workforce Development
March 19, 2025**

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Bill: HB 1220

Chairman Wobbema and members of the Senate Workforce Development Committee:

My name is Eric Link, and I serve as the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs at the University of North Dakota. Joining me as co-signatories for this testimony are Dr. Holly Gruhlke, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs at Dickinson State University, and Dr. David Bertolini, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs at North Dakota State University.

We submit this testimony in opposition to HB 1220 and urge a **NO** vote on HB 1220.

We want to begin by acknowledging Representative Motschenbacher and the co-sponsors of HB 1220 for their work on this bill. Striving to directly address workforce needs in North Dakota and providing pathways for students to be able to enter the workforce with recognized credentials is important work, and it is something we are all working on—in the North Dakota legislature, across the NDUS broadly, and within our specific institutions.

Our opposition to HB 1220 as drafted is based on several issues:

First, to the extent that HB 1220 seeks to provide a pathway toward meeting workforce needs in high-demand professions, the bill as drafted would not fulfill that objective. Reducing the time to degree or the requirements associated with a degree or credential would not ultimately result in increasing the supply of appropriately credentialed graduates in the workforce. While it may initially increase the speed in which graduates enter the workforce, the difficulty remains in attracting the number of students to close workforce gaps and progressing them towards graduation while ensuring they are prepared. For instance, if 20 students choose as freshmen to pursue nursing, then 20 graduates (at most) will enter the workforce, whether that be in three years, or four years, or according to whatever timeline. All that will have changed is the level of university training they will have when they enter the workforce.

Second, HB 1220 calls for the establishment of a “North Dakota accelerated degree.” HB 1220 also stipulates that such degrees shall be recognized by “occupational or professional boards” as an accredited program for licensing purposes. This directive may, we believe, pose considerable challenges for institutions, for licensing bodies, and for students themselves. Institutions across the NDUS have obligations—set by regional and national accrediting bodies—to meet a variety of standards. Failure to meet these standards may result in the loss of accreditation. Students would then be faced with the challenging prospect of being competitive in the marketplace when being ranked against graduates from accredited programs, putting North Dakota students at a distinct

competitive disadvantage. Any recognition extended to a “North Dakota accelerated degree” by virtue of HB 1220 may not have the force of law beyond state borders. Thus, students may wind up with degrees that do not have the status of regional or national accreditation, do not meet the standards for licensing outside of the state of North Dakota, and the reputation of the NDUS as a provider of world-class, nationally-normed and accredited degrees may be diminished accordingly.

We are also concerned that the long term effect of requiring students with such credentials to have to work in North Dakota will actually depress salaries for these individuals, for North Dakota employers will not have to compete with others in the region for these employees. That may place downward pressure on salaries for such employees, which will draw down tax receipts, and so on.

The net effect of this would be a loss of licensure reciprocity between North Dakota and other states, limiting student mobility and employment opportunities, creating an isolated island of non-portable degrees (and employees) within the state, and possibly contributing to the depression of salaries for people who might choose to work in these high-demand fields.

Third, HB 1220 states that universities must “not require a student to obtain general education credits for a North Dakota accelerated degree.” This will pose challenges for students/graduates, and many graduates with such degrees will enter the workforce underprepared for the rigors of the contemporary marketplace. The *National Association of Colleges and Employers* (NACE) provides results of an annual survey of employers that highlights their feedback about what they are looking for in successful employees. Consistently, the skills and abilities employers are seeking align with the skills and abilities students learn through their general education requirements. The latest NACE survey results indicate that employers are seeking employees with strong communication skills, professionalism, critical thinking ability, career and self-development, teamwork, and leadership skills, among others. These skills directly align with the general education learning outcomes NDUS institutions require. The aim of general education is to help students develop into skilled employees.

The elimination of general education from “North Dakota accelerated degrees” may put institutions out of compliance with accreditation standards in certain key, high-demand fields such as Nursing and Education. For example, at UND, nursing programs are nationally accredited by CCNE. CCNE expects that nursing programs will provide students with a well-rounded education that includes general education courses in areas such as humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, mathematics, and communication. Per *Key Element III-F: The curriculum is logically structured and sequenced to achieve expected student outcomes*: “Baccalaureate degree programs demonstrate that knowledge from courses in the arts, sciences, and humanities is incorporated into nursing practice” (CCNE, 2024, page 19). In addition, *The Essentials: Core Competencies for Professional Nursing Education (Essentials)* (AACN, 2021) which is a required professional standard for CCNE accredited programs, supports general education as noted in their required domains. Particularly, *Domain 1: Knowledge for Nursing Practice*, which notes that preparation in both liberal arts and sciences and professional nursing coursework provides graduates with the essential abilities to function as independent, intellectually curious, socially responsible, competent practitioners (Tobbell, 2018 (as cited in AACN, 2021, page 27)).

In summary, while the intention behind HB 1220 to address workforce shortages is commendable, its proposed approach—eliminating necessary educational requirements and establishing an unaccredited "North Dakota accelerated degree"—poses significant risks. Reducing training and accreditation standards may lead to unintended consequences, such as diminishing the competitiveness of North Dakota graduates in national and regional job markets. Furthermore, by eliminating general education requirements, we risk depriving students of essential skills highly valued by employers, potentially undermining their long-term career success.

Given these concerns, we urge legislators to reconsider the long-term consequences of HB 1220 and explore alternative solutions that prioritize the quality and competitiveness of North Dakota's workforce while addressing the real challenges in recruiting and retaining skilled professionals.