



North Dakota House of Representatives

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Good afternoon Chairman Wobbema and committee members. For the record, Mike Motschenbacher from District 47 representing Northwest Bismarck.

Today you have before you HB 1220. I just want to make it known that the first draft I received back on this bill was on June 25th of 2024, so this is not something I just threw together. I've been working on this bill for quite some time. In your packet, you have several items. In addition to my testimony, there are some amendments that I'd like the committee to adopt and I'll explain that here soon. There is a list of high demand occupations that I'll refer to shortly, and also a three-page "research paper" that will detail all the research I've done over the interim here on this bill. I won't go through the research in my testimony here, but I'd encourage you all to take a look at it as it will help you understand how I got to where we are today.

As you know there is a workforce shortage in North Dakota. So over the interim, I thought intently about what we could do as a state that could help solve the workforce shortage. As you know, the state has invested dollars in many programs such as additional scholarships for students, industry tax incentives through the career builders program which is a great program I might add, and other good and effective ideas and programs. Although these are good incentives and programs, they have not solved the workforce shortage. So, I looked at all the challenges we face as a state and I think we have a solution or at least one more tool we can put in the toolbox which will hopefully alleviate our workforce shortage.

The first thing I want to do is give you kind of a real-life scenario of what this bill would accomplish.

Let's just say that the dental industry for example is absolutely starving for dental hygienists. The dental industry goes to the ND Dental Association and expresses their concern and asks what can we do to help solve our workforce shortage. So the dental association and the industry work together and approach one of our fine institutions of higher education, let's just use BSC as an example for now, and ask them "Hey, we are in dire need of dental hygienists in ND. People are waiting six months for cleanings, and several are going out of state

for services just because we can't handle the needs. Would you be willing to offer a degree with less necessary credits so we can get the students out of college and into the workforce faster. Bismarck State says "Sure, we would be willing to offer that. Let's go talk to the licensing agency and together let's look at the requirements we have currently to be licensed to work in ND, and come up with a solution. So working together, the industry, the association, the college, and the licensing agency come up with a reduced credit degree that would be offered and implement the plan. As you can see, nobody is forcing anything on anyone, it is all the interested parties working together. You might be thinking that they can likely already do this, and they can, but the reason we need this bill is twofold. In addition to encouraging industries, colleges, licensing agencies, and associations to come up with these compressed degrees, the students would need some protection so if they choose this compressed degree path, it can't be taken away while students are enrolled in it. It would protect the students once they enroll seeking this degree. It does not prevent them from stopping the program for future entrants if they later see it as not beneficial, but just says they have to finish it out for those that are already participating in it. And this is not just dental hygienists we are trying to solve the workforce issue for, you can substitute any industry, association, and college into this example.

So if you pull out the amendments that you have in your packet, I'll run through those quickly. We passed this bill through the house but there were some clarity issues that we wanted the Senate to fix so I can run through those.

Line 7 mentions the name as an "accelerated degree". This actually may be better named as a "compressed degree". Accelerated degrees are degrees that concentrate more on getting the student to graduate faster by offering additional courses, taking additional credits and such to graduate at a faster pace but still get the full degree. Compressed degrees offer the ability to get a degree with less credits required. It may be irrelevant, but if the committee would like to change this to better reflect the accuracy of what this truly does, that would be acceptable. I don't have that in the amendment as you can see, but if the committee wants to do that, you can do so.

Section 1, subsection 1 further clarifies that offering these degrees is optional. No industry or college is mandated to offer this alternative degree. It is completely optional.

Section 1, subsection 1d specifies that any general education credits "may" not be included. Once again, this just gives them the opportunity to eliminate some of the currently necessary gen ed credits when they write the new degree requirements.

Subsection 2 on page 2 designates which areas of expertise are considered "high-demand" occupations. If you want to see what occupations are considered "high-demand", those are in your packet. This section also states

that an occupational or professional board may revoke this designation at any time like we discussed earlier, and this is also where it imposes the protection for students that are already entered and had begun the program.

Subsection 3 simply states that ND will recognize the degree as being able to be licensed to work in our state.

Subsection 4 allows the SBHE to adopt rules to implement this. Here is a link if you wish to view that section.

[Chapter 28-32](#)

So what are the advantages of this bill? First, this will graduate students with less debt. As you all know, the price of higher education is extremely high and if we can graduate our students with less debt, that is one huge advantage of this bill. Second advantage is students will be able to enter into the workforce faster thus helping out the industries in ND that are so desperately in need of employees. The third advantage is this would likely decrease the number of students that leave the state seeking employment. The reasoning behind this is that these degrees likely would not be recognized as fully accredited in other states. You may be thinking this is a bad thing, but I would ask you this. Who's workforce problem are we trying to solve? North Dakota's? Or Montana, Minnesota, and South Dakota? But, I need to stress this again. Offering these degrees is completely optional. Every institute of higher learning in our state can and likely will still offer the fully accredited degree which would allow students to move out of state if they choose that path. This compressed degree could be presented in addition by the colleges as an optional substitute for students that would like to stay in state. If later in their career they want to move out of state and they have this compressed degree, they simply would have to take a few courses like they would have had to originally to get the fully accredited degree. However, if this bill passes and other states see this model as working, it is quite possible they also may start offering these and thus would likely accept students with these degrees in the future. There are many students in the state that likely have roots here that have no intention of ever leaving, and this would give them another pathway for success and would encourage them to remain in ND. The fourth advantage is that we would likely get students from neighboring states that wouldn't mind living in ND that would attend our universities, get a job in ND, and end up raising families here. This is a good incentive for growth in our state. The last great thing in this bill, is that it costs the state nothing. As you see, there is no fiscal note attached. This is simply thinking outside the box and coming up with a plan to grow our state that doesn't require taxpayer dollars.

It's my opinion after looking at general education requirements needed to graduate, that most are unnecessary and don't help with the field of work they are choosing. I can tell you when I received my degree in electronics technology 33 years ago, I had to take several classes to get this degree that had absolutely nothing to do with electronics. I took a meteorology and astronomy class, a speech class, a math class, and an English class, none of which had anything to do with electronics and did nothing to further my career. I believe higher education should be looking at more focused and specialized approaches to educating students for their desired careers.

It turns out that many studies that have been done also agree. The **National Bureau of Economic Research** in a study found that prolonged degree completion due to non-essential courses contributes to increased dropout rates and delays workforce entry. The **Association of American Colleges & Universities** found that employers are more interested in *field-specific expertise, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills* than in broad general knowledge. Although general education credits are mostly aimed at creating "well rounded" students, research in the **Journal of College Science Teaching** highlighted concerns about the traditional university curriculum's ability to enhance critical thinking and scientific literacy. The study suggested that Gen Ed courses often fail to effectively develop these essential skills, calling into question their overall efficacy. In studying these questions, I found endless resources backing up the arguments that they are unnecessary, have a negative overall impression on the students, and are mostly not important to the organizations that are looking to hire these students.

Really quickly, I just want to address a couple things that I'm sure you are going to hear in opposition to this bill. First, you are going to likely hear that part of higher education is to create a "well rounded individual" in addition to getting them ready for their career. I have consistently challenged that, as I believe that is the job of the students family and not that of a university. The job of higher education is to get students ready for their career and not guide them in their moral beliefs and such. The second thing you may hear is that this bill would "water down" or "reduce the value" of a degree. Once again, I disagree with that. I believe the universities should focus on the career path the student is choosing and get them "work ready". However, like I've stated several times already, if a student wants to be more "well rounded", this bill will not take away their ability to do that. If they think it will "reduce the value" of the degree, then they can choose the fully accredited degree path. The last thing you may hear is that this degree would not work for some industries and I understand that. If it doesn't work for an industry, then there is no requirement for them to create the degree and/or offer it as an option. They simply won't have to participate in it if they don't want to. Let's just give them that choice. If it works for your industry great. If it doesn't you don't have to participate.

Mr. Chairman and committee members, let's be innovative, pass this bill, and give our students additional options to pursue their careers. I thank you for your time, and with that I would stand for any questions.