

To: Chair Wobbema and the Workforce Development Committee
From: The University Senate of the University of North Dakota
Subject: Opposition to House Bill 1220
Date: March 21, 2025

Dear Chair Wobbema and members of the Education Committee,

I am Zarrina Azizova, an Associate Professor of Higher Education and Chair of the University Senate at the University of North Dakota. On behalf of the University Senate, I express our opposition to House Bill 1220, which seeks to create a North Dakota accelerated degree for high-demand occupations by allowing institutions under the State Board of Higher Education to offer degrees without general education requirements.

We recognize the importance of aligning educational pathways with workforce needs. Historically, since the founding of the colleges, the workforce-related purpose of higher education (with the “workforce” definition constantly evolving yet always returning to the pragmatic value of serving and leading through expertise in areas of community and industry needs) has always been at the center of all curricular development and innovation in all types of higher education institutions in the U.S. Deferring to curricular expertise of academic institutions is the strength of the American higher education, not a weakness. But productive and innovative curricular development requires an academic policy development and flexibility at the institutional level to align with unique academic missions, faculty expertise, and professional standards. Because of a great diversity of higher education institution types in our state and the country as whole, public laws regulating curricular content and requirements will not be helpful as they lump diverse institution types into an impossible idea of a singular curricular for all at the state or national levels.

To put this differently, higher education institutions can and should govern their curricular without legislative interference for several reasons.

- 1) **Legislative Overreach.** HB 1220 is redundant and represents an unnecessary legislative overreach into higher education governance. It undermines the authority of the State Board of Higher Education and disregards existing accreditation mechanisms that already allow institutions to have a credit and structure flexibility to design degree programs tailored to workforce demands. HB 1220 is therefore redundant and risks creating unnecessary regulatory mechanisms.
- 2) **Regulating General Education.** The most troubling feature of HB 1220 is that this bill aims to restrict and regulate general education. General education requirements are fundamental to developing well-rounded graduates equipped with critical thinking, communication, analytical, interpersonal, and problem-solving skills, to name a few. Removing these foundational courses in favor of a narrowly focused degree may produce graduates with technical competencies but without the essential analytical and transferrable skill sets. Generations of research have proved that general education leads to student learning outcomes, including development of skills that technology or technical expertise alone is not capable to offer to industries and communities. In the wake of the generative AI and potential changes in workforce, the need for a well-rounded education is greater to be able to prepare for the “future-proof” careers and high demand

occupations that do not exist today but may emerge suddenly and soon. Yet the bill aims at a short-term impact in narrowly defined “high demand occupations” without considering a potential damage to all education programs and long-term impact on career readiness and workforce development from a larger perspective.

- 3) **Impact on Student Learning.** Another most troubling feature is a learning loss because a tightly specialized accelerated degree could limit students' career exploration and flexibility. How can we assume that young students will know on day one/semester one that this is the degree and a profession for them? By rushing or “accelerating” students to an early specialty commitment without a career exploration and learner development, we risk facing higher attrition rates in year two or three of these programs or even a student burnout from the condensed curricular. Emerging research on the impact of accelerated degree programs on students in select fields does show that student perspective on such degrees is not positive. Specifically, there is a risk to decelerate for students who may struggle academically or personally, which would lead to their decisions of dropping out from the programs completely. Other concerns include a sense of isolation from their 4-year program peers, who learn, study, and socialize at a different pace. Less opportunity to changing career decisions and being stuck in a rigid (non-transferable) credit structure is yet another concern that cannot be disregarded.
- 4) **Lack of Career Mobility due to Accreditation and Licensing Concerns.** These concerns are real because HB 1220 mandates that professional and occupational boards approve North Dakota accelerated degrees for licensing purposes but does not ensure these degrees will align with national accreditation standards. How can/will these programs be able to recruit any students when their credentials are not recognized outside the state? This move of what we may call as a higher education “balkanization” between the states is unprecedented and will not serve our students in the state and the country well.

Thus, the University Senate recommends a **DO NOT Pass** on HB 1220. Instead of imposing legislative mandates on degree structures and general education, we encourage investments in institutional-led solutions and targeted workforce partnerships that maintain high educational standards while addressing workforce demands. We stand ready to collaborate on sustainable approaches that prepare students for both immediate employment and long-term career success without compromising the integrity and quality experience of higher education in North Dakota.

Respectfully submitted,

Zarrina Azizova, Ph.D.

2024-2025 Chair, University Senate of the University of North Dakota