

Testimony on Creation of a ND Accelerated Degree for In-Demand Occupations

House Education Committee

January 20, 2025

House Bill 1220

Chairman Heinert and Honorable Members of the House,

Good morning, I'm Dr. Billie Madler, Associate Dean of Nursing at the University of Mary. I stand before you today to oppose House Bill 1220, which seeks to reduce the general education requirements for in-demand professions. I have 30 years of experience in the field of nursing as a critical care nurse, a nurse practitioner, and a nurse educator. I urge you to consider the crucial role that a well-rounded education, including a robust foundation in general education, plays in preparing nurses for their demanding and complex roles in patient care and how this legislation would compromise patient care.

Diminishing the educational requirements for nurses, particularly by reducing the emphasis on general education, undermines both the professionalism of the nursing profession and the quality of patient care. It sends a message that a strong, well-rounded education is not valued in preparing nurses for their essential roles in healthcare and the subsequent patient outcomes they influence. National thought leaders in nursing and nursing programmatic accreditors, such as the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE), who best understand the demands of the role and the necessary educational preparation to safely and effectively function in the role, have consistently emphasized that nursing education must be built on a solid liberal arts foundation. In fact, the CCNE Criterion and Standard for Accreditation [attached], in Standard III Key Element III-F states;

- The curriculum is logically structured and sequenced to achieve expected student outcomes.
- Baccalaureate curricula **build on a foundation of the arts, sciences, and humanities**. [Pg. 19]
- Elaboration: **Baccalaureate degree programs demonstrate that knowledge from courses in the arts, sciences, and humanities is incorporated into nursing practice.**

Therefore, CCNE nursing programmatic accreditation, a requirement for new nurse graduates to receive authorization to take national licensure examinations, expects the above criteria are met in nursing education curricula.

Rather than reducing educational standards, we should be investing in stronger, more comprehensive educational programs that allow nurses to build the full range of knowledge and skills necessary for their demanding roles. Education is the foundation upon which safe, effective, and compassionate care is built.

The Importance of General Education in Nursing

Nurses are the backbone of healthcare systems, and their responsibilities extend far beyond the clinical tasks they perform. Nurses are critical thinkers, effective communicators, and compassionate caregivers. A broad-based general education provides nurses with the knowledge and skills necessary to adequately perform in these areas, ensuring they are prepared to meet the multifaceted challenges of modern healthcare and the diversity of patient populations they encounter. General education courses—such as those in the humanities, social sciences, mathematics, and communications—equip nurses with essential skills in clinical reasoning, research, leadership, communication, problem-solving, cultural competency, and ethical decision-making. Removing or diminishing these requirements would deprive future nurses of a comprehensive education that supports their professional development and would threaten quality of care and patient safety.

Research from the National League for Nursing and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation underscores the fact that the current academic/practice gap nurses face negatively impacts both quality of care and patient outcomes. Reducing educational requirements by eliminating essential general education courses would further widen this gap, leaving new nurses with insufficient preparation to meet the complex demands of their role in the clinical setting.

Nurse executives, federal agencies, the military, leading nursing organizations, healthcare foundations, Magnet hospitals, and minority nurse advocacy groups all recognize and support the distinctive value that baccalaureate-prepared nurses bring to health care. For example:

- The American Organization of Nurse Leaders (AONL) has previously released a statement calling for all registered nurses to be educated in baccalaureate programs to adequately prepare nurses for the complex roles they fill, illustrating nurse executives desire for a more highly educated nursing workforce in the interest of improving patient safety and nursing care.
- The Institute of Medicine has called for increasing the number of baccalaureate-prepared nurses in the workforce to 80% and,
- Dr. Patricia Benner and her team at the Carnegie Foundation released a study recommending preparing all entry-level registered nurses at the baccalaureate level and requiring all RNs to earn a master's degree within 10 years of initial licensure.

The Impact of a BSN on Patient Outcomes

Nurses with a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) are better equipped to improve patient outcomes. Reduced educational requirements have proven to have significant and detrimental outcomes for patients and healthcare organizations. I have pulled out only a few examples of why a highly educated nursing workforce is critical to patient safety and patient outcomes taken from AACN Impact of BSN Education and provided for you with my testimony. I encourage you to review the many additional research-based findings bulleted in that document.

- Nurses with a BSN are associated with lower mortality rates, fewer medication errors, and better overall patient outcomes.
- Hospitals with a higher proportion of BSN-prepared nurses see a **10-30% reduction in patient mortality and a 7% decrease in adverse patient events.**
- The journal, *Health Affairs*, reported that a 10-point increase in the percentage of nurses holding a BSN was associated with an average reduction of 2.12 deaths for every 1000 patients, and for a subset of patients with complications, an average reduction of 7.47 deaths per 1000 patients.
- There is a “substantial survival advantage” if treated in hospitals with higher proportions of nurses educated at the baccalaureate or higher degree level.
- The AACN reports that **increasing the number of BSN nurses by 20% could prevent over 40,000 deaths annually in our country.**

The comprehensive education afforded by a BSN is essential for addressing the increasingly complex healthcare environment. Removing general education requirements would diminish these critical competencies and ultimately compromise patient safety and care quality, which could negatively impact third-party reimbursement. Rigorous BSN educational preparation is critical to the outcomes of our patients and the health of citizens in North Dakota and across our nation. The nursing profession must continue to prioritize the academic preparation of its workforce to ensure high-quality healthcare for all.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I strongly oppose House Bill 1220 as it seeks to diminish the educational requirements for nurses, weakens the foundation of nursing education, and ultimately puts patients at risk. The importance of general education cannot be overstated, and reducing these requirements would be detrimental to the professional development of nurses and to the overall quality of patient care. Research clearly demonstrates that higher levels of education, with its comprehensive educational foundation, leads to improved patient outcomes. We must continue to support the education of nurses at the highest standards, ensuring they are fully equipped to meet the challenges of modern healthcare.

I urge you to reconsider this bill and instead advocate for policies that support a more robust and comprehensive education for future nurses.

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