



HB 1220

House Education Committee

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Chair Heinert and members of the House Education Committee. My name is Lisa Johnson, and I serve as the Vice Chancellor for Academic and Student Affairs for the North Dakota University System (NDUS). I am here today on behalf of the 11 institutions of the NDUS to testify in opposition to HB 1220.

The NDUS appreciates the bill sponsor's interest in creating accelerated degrees in high-demand occupations and addressing the North Dakota workforce shortage. The State Board of Higher Education (SBHE) and the NDUS campuses are currently engaged in examining reduced credit degrees, prior to the filing of HB 1220—with some differences in our approach to accomplish the same goal, driven by significant licensing and accreditation requirements.

Attached to my testimony is the North Dakota in-demand occupations list created by using long-term employment projections from the North Dakota Labor Market Information Center and supplemented by data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. The list is reviewed and updated annually by the ND Workforce Development Council with assistance from Job Service North Dakota. The list is primarily comprised of occupations that typically require some postsecondary education up to and including a Bachelor's degree. The NDUS doesn't create the in-demand list; however, most programs offered by NDUS colleges and universities are mapped to the list of in-demand occupations. The NDUS already annually produces a list of credentials that are aligned with high-demand occupations as directed in HB 1220.

The response of the State's licensure boards regarding the directive in Section 2 to approve and recognize an accelerated degree for licensure purposes is an important feature of this bill. While this may sound like a streamlined process, it is concerning that such a significant change to licensure standards could be made without sufficient input from professional licensure boards, employers, and accrediting bodies. In my own work overseeing state authorization for ND postsecondary institutions to provide online education to individuals from other states, HB 1220 will almost assuredly negatively impact ND institutions enrolling online, out-of-state students in accelerated programs designed to lead to licensure. Since July 1, 2020, Federal Department of Education Title IV Regulations require all postsecondary institutions that offer online courses to out-of-state students to provide public disclosures and written notice to each applicant as to whether or not their programs meet educational requirements in all states and territories prior to the student enrolling into a professional licensure program. This ensures the student will be eligible to apply for licensure in the state from which they reside when they graduate.

Based on our preliminary work surrounding accelerated degrees or reduced baccalaureate degrees, I

am certain that campuses will face accreditation challenges when seeking approval for reduced credit baccalaureate degree programs through the Higher Learning Commission (HLC). HLC guidelines were released in September 2024, which included prescribed and comprehensive protocols for approval of what the HLC deems to be a substantive change at the institution. Almost assuredly, degree programs with no general education requirements will be problematic for any institution seeking approval. In fact, one of the criteria campuses must be prepared to address when submitting a request for a reduced credit baccalaureate program is:

“Provide evidence of the institution’s policies and processes for adequately incorporating general education, and the associated breadth and depth of student learning, into the reduced-credit bachelor’s degree program.” (HLC Core Component 3.B)

The removal of general education requirements for any degree program is problematic. General education courses foster critical thinking, writing, and communication skills that are highly transferable across various occupations and highly valued by North Dakota employers. By cutting out these crucial courses, institutions risk producing graduates who are narrowly skilled but lack the broader perspective and adaptability needed in the evolving job market. A viable alternative is to encourage students to demonstrate their proficiency in any number of subjects—including general education coursework through readily available CLEP tests. Currently, the NDUS recognizes CLEP tests in biology, chemistry, economics, college composition, literature, foreign languages, history, psychology, and a range of math courses in fulfillment of general education requirements. I anticipate that as the SBHE and the NDUS institutions examine reduced credit baccalaureate degrees or accelerated degrees, this approach will be included in their deliberations.

The NDUS opposes HB 1220, not because reduced credit or accelerated degrees are a bad idea, but because plans are well underway by the SBHE and the NDUS to do so in a manner that is more likely to garner greater overall success and program approval by licensure bodies, accrediting organizations, and students.

I ask the Committee for a “do not pass” on HB 1220.