



## HB 1220

Senate Workforce Development Committee

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Chair Wobbema and Members of the Senate Workforce Development Committee -

My name is Lisa Johnson. I serve as the Vice Chancellor for Academic and Student Affairs with the North Dakota University System (NDUS). If there was a theme for my testimony, the theme for my testimony related to this bill would be “managing expectations” from several perspectives.

### **Legislative Expectations**

I know the bill sponsor emphasizes that HB 1220 has no directive, no mandate for any institution under the control of the SBHE to do anything in response to HB 1220 by pointing out the use of the word “may” in Line 1. But assuredly, there will be an expectation and possibly another more punitive bill in the next session if the NDUS is deemed to have made insufficient progress towards compliance with an impossible request.

### **Accelerated Degrees and Reduced Bachelor’s Degrees Are Not the Same Thing**

The bill sponsor cites the need for “accelerated degrees” but supplies additional written testimony about the need for “reduced credit bachelor’s degrees”. There are important and notable differences between the two offerings.

It is important for this Committee to know that the availability of accelerated degrees in in-demand programs of study are prevalent within the North Dakota University System—and mostly concentrated in high demand occupations like healthcare, education, engineering, and business. Testimony from the North Dakota Board of Nursing indicates in their neutral testimony that “accelerated nursing degrees are already available in North Dakota and approved by NDBON. These programs require general education prerequisites to ensure students meet the necessary academic foundation (including relevant coursework in sciences, psychology and sociology).” Accelerated pathways are uniquely tailored in a manner that works best for each student or program. It may be a jump start by enrolling as a dual credit student while in high school, for others it may be enrollment in summer coursework and/or an increased class load, testing out of program or general education requirements, and several programs exist where students complete BOTH a bachelor’s and a master’s degree in four years through a very prescribed sequence of undergraduate and graduate level coursework. Accelerated bachelor’s degrees are 120SH in length in compliance with SBHE policy, contain 36SH of general education requirements, and at least 30SH of upper division coursework. Accelerated degrees are readily accepted by accreditation and licensure organizations.

## **Higher Learning Commission Issues Guidance for Reduced Credit Bachelor's Degrees**

Local and national dialogue around “reduced credit bachelor’s degrees” is relatively new. So new, that NDUS institutions’ accrediting body, the Higher Learning Commission, didn’t even put out [guidelines](#) until September, 2024. The bill sponsor references those guidelines in his written testimony. The HLC guidelines, while supportive of reduced credit degrees, are also intended to be used by the institution and the system’s governing body to develop policies around such programs that are mindful of peripheral implications of reducing the credit hours of bachelor’s degree programs to less than 120SH. Here are some key excerpts from the HLC guidance (2024):

“Special attention should be given to issues such as transfer pathways, opportunities for graduate education, and any implications for licensure, as applicable.” (Core Component 2.B)

“The institution’s plans for coordinating ongoing compliance with respect to any state authorization or approvals, including as required for licensure; and any accreditation with any other recognized accreditors.” (Core Component 2.B)

What are “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.” (Core Component 3.B)

Almost assuredly, degree programs with no general education requirements and recruit/graduate students who are ineligible to sit for licensure will be problematic for any institution seeking approval from accreditors and pose legal risks to the institution and the state.

## **ND Licensing Boards Anticipate “No Impact” on Producing Additional Licensed Workers**

The directive in Section 2 that states that “an occupational or professional board to approve a North Dakota accelerated degree and recognize the degree as an accredited program for licensing purposes” is important aspect of this bill. The theme among responses of the state’s licensing organizations was that program specific accreditation (nursing, dental association, teacher education) would not likely approve programs with no general education requirements or compromised a student’s eligibility for licensure in ND or any other state

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 programs designed to lead to licensure that have no general education requirements. 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 that student’s program of study meets the educational requirements in the state or territory from which they applied. This regulation was intended to ensure the student will be eligible to apply for licensure in the state from which they reside when they graduate.

## **Local Business and Industry Convey Their Support for General Education Coursework**

Experts estimate that people change careers between three to seven times during their lifetime. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the agency within the Department of Labor tasked with

collecting all sorts of employment-related data, released the results of a 2015 report that looked at the number of times people changed jobs. This report was limited in that it only considered job changes that occurred between the ages of 18 and 48 and only looked at a small subset of the population—those born between 1957 and 1964, a segment defined as "young baby boomers." The report showed that those people changed jobs, on average, 11.7 times.

The removal of all general education requirements from accelerated or reduced bachelor's degree programs is problematic considering the growing number of individuals no longer working in the field for which they intended to pursue. 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 listening session comprised of industry representatives and thoughtful leaders on ND workforce needs was held last month (February 2025) at Bismarck State College that included the participation of Rep. Julie Fedorchak. The NDUS was surprised by the resounding support and call for the colleges continued emphasis on general education requirements that provide the strong foundational skills that business and industry continue to build on in their respective organization—to think critically, to have strong communication skills, to have been exposed to other cultures, to be mathematically proficient, to have engaged in work with others as a team are still highly valued by business and industry.

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 and accrediting organizations and most of all, lead to the successful employment of our students.

I ask the Senate Workforce Development Committee for a "do not pass" on HB 1220.