

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee,

I am Dan Leingang, and it's my great fortune to be president of Bismarck State College, North Dakota's Polytechnic Institution. Thank you for the opportunity to address you today regarding the potential impact of the change to the Higher Education Funding Formula related to Out-of-State Online Students (OSOS).

The North Dakota University System (NDUS) will provide data for each North Dakota Postsecondary Institution with the headcount of students classified as OSOS. The common perception of students enrolled in this format appears to center on their connections to courses or programs that focus on the humanities or social sciences. This is not the case with Bismarck State College. A vast majority of the part-time students defined as OSOS are in fact enrolled in the college's energy related programs. Those students listed as non-degree are also energy related students. In these cases, individuals enrolled are there because companies have selected certain courses to meet targeted skill needs, as they were developed around current industry standards and employer-driven competencies. These students are often working professionals or career changers seeking specialized training to advance within their careers. BSC designs these pathways for non-degree enrolled students to meet these training needs while also maintaining the options for a smooth transition into degree pathways if the student's educational goals change. Ultimately, BSC's customized training online model leverages credit-bearing coursework and non-credit flexibility to meet the specific skill needs of energy companies quickly and effectively.

First and foremost, a potential change to the funding formula and its potential impact on workforce education and training for this sector is of high interest to our industry partners. Included with this testimony are letters of support from Mr. Ron Ness, President of the North Dakota Petroleum Council, and Mr. Jonathan Fortner, President and CEO of the Lignite Energy Council. These letters caution against reduced funding support for energy sector programs with online enrollments, citing the potential impact on the workforce pipeline and on employers and workers who depend on “technical advancement and career progression.”

The impact of a proposed change for online students extends beyond the online classroom. Bismarck State College’s energy curriculum is embedded in all classes, both online and face-to-face formats. The highly technical learning modules, which have been created with large local industry partner investment, are used to support both online and face-to-face learners. BSC’s workforce training in these energy programs is unique to the state and, in many cases, has been in place for over a quarter of a century. The college has created a well-thought-out, mature, and industry-focused approach to energy education, and BSC has advanced beyond a model that separates online and face-to-face educational settings. They have evolved to a fully integrated approach that benefits all students. Likewise, BSC’s energy partners maintain a strong local and statewide presence, but make no mistake, their operations and workforce needs extend well beyond the borders of North Dakota. To be clear, these partners’ workforce needs exist within a national and international arena, but their investment in BSC is done on a local level.

I urge all of you to consider the potential impact of changes to the Higher Education Funding Formula on high-need, high-demand workforce programs, such as those shared today, which are connected to the energy sector. An uninterrupted investment in North Dakota's energy workforce education and development is a need supported by multiple partners connected to the State.

Thank you.



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October 30, 2025

ND Interim Higher Education Funding Review Committee

RE: Oil & Gas Industry Support for BSC's Online Courses

Given the critical importance of online education in preparing North Dakota's energy workforce, the North Dakota Petroleum Council strongly requests the ND Interim Higher Education Funding Review Committee and the ND State Board of Higher Education continue supporting state funding for online courses at Bismarck State College (BSC).

As policy and energy leaders in the region, we are concerned about the potential \$6 million biennial financial impact to BSC if online credits are excluded from funding. Such a reduction would compromise the quality and availability of education and training, increase costs for students, and limit the future workforce in the energy sector.

Funding from online courses enables BSC to maintain its industry recognized online and face-to-face curriculum, retain highly specialized faculty, and provide hands-on training to operate equipment used in oil and gas operations.

Flexible, online delivery has proven vital in meeting the realities of today's workforce. Through these programs, BSC has empowered North Dakota workers to advance their careers—regardless of location—while ensuring energy employers have access to a skilled and reliable talent pipeline.

Even though many oil and gas companies are head quartered outside of ND, they have invested significantly in our state and have provided support to BSC's energy programs through donations and the hiring of students for excellent paying jobs in ND. Continuing to fund BSC's online courses is a good return on investment. The development of a higher skilled workforce will increase the opportunities to fill critical positions needed by the energy industry in ND.

We appreciate your thoughtful consideration of this decision and its lasting impact on our state's energy workforce.

Sincerely,

Ron Ness
President



November 1, 2025

ND Interim Higher Education Funding Review Committee

RE: Industry Support for BSC's Online Credit Courses

As vital partners in North Dakota's energy economy and workforce, the Lignite Energy Council respectfully urges the ND Interim Higher Education Funding Review Committee and the ND State Board of Higher Education to maintain full funding for online credit courses at Bismarck State College (BSC). These programs are essential to sustaining and expanding the skilled workforce that powers North Dakota's energy sector.

The energy industry faces a growing workforce challenge, with a significant portion of its employees approaching retirement within the next decade. BSC plays a critical role in preparing the next generation of technicians, operators, and engineers who will replace this experienced workforce. The college's ability to deliver flexible, high-quality online education ensures that both current employees and new students can gain the skills needed to keep our state's energy systems reliable and competitive.

BSC's model of affordable, industry-responsive education has earned it national recognition as the Energy Center of Excellence. Its success is built on a foundation of accessibility and strong partnerships with companies that invest in and operate in North Dakota. Many online students are employed by energy companies with major North Dakota operations but corporate headquarters in other states. Removing state funding for these online credits would penalize employers and workers who depend on BSC's programs for technical advancement and career progression.

Since 2001, BSC's online programs have been a trusted and proven pathway for developing talent in the lignite, power generation, refining, and utility industries. If online courses lose eligibility for state funding, BSC stands to lose \$6 million per biennium, reducing its capacity to retain specialized instructors, update laboratory equipment, and maintain nationally recognized curriculum standards. Such a loss would reverberate through the entire energy workforce pipeline, leading to higher training costs and fewer qualified workers at a time when North Dakota needs them most.

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We strongly urge the Committee and the State Board to preserve funding for online students and protect BSC's unique role in building and sustaining the state's energy workforce of the future.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Fortner", is positioned above the printed name.

Jonathan Fortner
President & CEO
Lignite Energy Council