

Written Testimony of AFT Pennsylvania President Wendy G. Coleman

Pennsylvania Senate Education Committee Public Hearing on Reducing Credit Hours for Bachelor's Degrees

Chairwoman Culver, Chairwoman Williams, and esteemed members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

I am Wendy G. Coleman, President of AFT Pennsylvania. AFT Pennsylvania represents more than 36,000 members from 76 different local unions of educators and professionals across the Commonwealth, including faculty and staff working in higher education.

We at AFT Pennsylvania share the goal behind this proposal: making college and university more affordable and accessible for Pennsylvania students.

Reducing a bachelor's degree from 120 credits to 90 credits, however, not only addresses the wrong problem but could ultimately create new problems for students pursuing higher education.

Ultimately, Pennsylvania does not need to condense a bachelor's degree; we need to make a bachelor's degree more affordable.

Offering a 90-credit bachelor's degree represents a 25 percent reduction from the traditional 120-credit degree, and those 30 credits have to come from somewhere.

Will we reduce coursework in a student's major? Writing? Mathematics? Science? Humanities? General education? Electives, internships, or other experiences that prepare students for careers and graduate education?

These concerns are shared nationally.

In June, AFT President Randi Weingarten and American Association of University Professors President Todd Wolfson warned that accelerated three-year bachelor's degrees risk undermining academic integrity by replacing a comprehensive education with a stripped-down curriculum focused primarily on speed.

They make an important point: a bachelor's degree is more than a credential for getting the first job after graduation.

Higher education should prepare students for the workforce, but it should also provide broad intellectual development, deep learning, and sustained engagement with faculty and other students.

Reducing the curriculum risks weakening precisely the skills employers and our society increasingly need: critical thinking, communication, scientific literacy, problem-solving, and civic understanding.

Before Pennsylvania removes one-fourth of a bachelor's degree, we should be certain we are not diminishing the long-term value of that degree.

We must consider what happens after graduation.

Will employers view a 90-credit bachelor's degree the same as a 120-credit degree? Will graduate and professional schools accept it without additional prerequisites? What happens if a graduate moves to another state? How will professional accreditation and licensing requirements be affected?

We should not put Pennsylvania students in a position where they have to explain why their bachelor's degree required 90 credits when someone competing for the same job earned 120.

There is also an equity issue.

We cannot allow higher education to become a system where students who can afford it receive the traditional 120-credit bachelor's degree, while working-class, first-generation, and lower-income students are steered toward a shorter degree because it costs less.

Affordability should not determine the quality or breadth of a student's education.

We are also particularly concerned about the potential impact on Pennsylvania's community colleges.

For decades, community colleges have provided one of our most affordable pathways to a bachelor's degree.

A student can earn approximately 60 credits toward an associate degree close to home and then transfer those credits to a four-year institution to complete a bachelor's degree.

That is the foundation of the traditional 2+2 model.

A 90-credit bachelor's degree changes that equation.

If a four-year institution can enroll a student directly and award a bachelor's after 90 credits, we need to ask what that does to the incentive for students to begin at a community college and earn a 60-credit associate degree.

We could unintentionally put four-year institutions into greater competition with our community colleges for the same students.

That could reduce community-college enrollment, undermine existing articulation agreements and transfer pathways, and further strain institutions already operating with limited resources.

It could also fundamentally distort the value of the associate degree. We would be creating a system in which an associate degree represents roughly 60 credits, while a bachelor's degree could require only 30 additional credits.

Before Pennsylvania makes such a significant structural change, we also need to fully understand what it would mean for community college enrollment, transfer agreements, institutional finances, and the students who depend on those institutions.

Our community colleges are essential economic and workforce-development institutions. They educate nurses, technicians, first responders, skilled workers, paraprofessionals, early-childhood educators, and thousands of students who transfer to four-year institutions.

We should be investing in that system, not creating a new degree structure that could weaken it.

And that brings us to the fundamental issue: the problem isn't 120 credits.

The problem is what students and families are being asked to pay for those 120 credits.

As Presidents Weingarten and Wolfson have argued, shortening a bachelor's degree may create the appearance of reducing costs, but it does not address the underlying causes of the higher-education affordability crisis.

If we want students to have the opportunity to graduate faster and with less debt, Pennsylvania already has better options available.

We can increase state operating support for our community colleges and public universities, strengthen PASSHE, and expand PHEAA grants and need-based financial aid. We can invest in faculty, staff, academic programs, and student-support services. We can expand dual enrollment and early-college opportunities, and we can strengthen articulation agreements so students can move from community colleges to all four-year institutions without losing credits.

At the federal level, we should also strengthen programs such as Pell Grants and TRIO that help students afford college and successfully complete their degrees.

Those existing policies can reduce the cost and time required to earn a bachelor's degree without reducing the education represented by that degree.

Pennsylvania needs more nurses, teachers, engineers, scientists, skilled professionals, and educated workers. Reducing the number of credits needed for a bachelor's degree will not help us meet the growing demand in those professions.

Our colleges, universities, and community colleges are not simply expenses in the state budget; they are economic and workforce infrastructure.

If Pennsylvania wants more residents to earn bachelor's degrees, we simply can not give Pennsylvania students less education and call it affordability.

Invest in our institutions. Invest in our students. Reduce the cost—not the education.

AFT Pennsylvania urges the General Assembly to reject the 90-credit bachelor's degree and instead pursue sustained investment in public higher education, particularly our community colleges and public universities, so every Pennsylvanian has access to an affordable, high-quality degree that carries its full value throughout their career.

Thank you.