

WRITTEN TESTIMONY

**Before the
Pennsylvania Senate Education Committee**

Public Hearing on
Reduced-Credit Baccalaureate Degrees

Presented by
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Chair Culver, Chair Minority Chair Lindsey Williams, Vice Chair Doug Mastriano, members of the Senate Education Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify regarding the proposal to permit Pennsylvania institutions of higher education to offer reduced-credit baccalaureate degrees.

I am Warren Hudak, an Enrolled Agent and President of Hudak & Company, a Central Pennsylvania accounting and tax firm serving small businesses. I serve on the Pennsylvania NFIB Leadership Council and on the board of the Pennsylvania Society of Enrolled Agents. I have also worked on statewide education and workforce issues, including through the Pennsylvania Commission on Education and Economic Competitiveness, and served on the Diocese of Harrisburg Education Commission.

I appear today in my individual capacity. The views I offer are solely my own and do not necessarily reflect those of any organization with which I am affiliated.

The question before the Committee is not simply whether Pennsylvania can deliver a bachelor's degree with fewer credits. It is whether this can be used to build a better, more affordable, and more reliable path from education to productive work.

Pennsylvania employers already face a serious gap between the people they need and the preparation too often being produced. Small-business surveys regularly document employers' difficulty filling open positions and finding qualified applicants. Employer surveys across the country tell a similar story: businesses continue to face challenges finding workers with the skills needed for today's jobs.

But the problem is broader than a shortage of technical knowledge or a particular credential.

After three decades of training employees and working with employers across industries, I see a recurring readiness problem. Too many otherwise capable people need repeated direction, reminders, deadline management, prioritization coaching, and unusually close supervision. Employers are looking for people who can think critically, follow instructions, ask appropriate questions, communicate with coworkers and customers, check their work, meet due dates, accept feedback, and take responsibility for completing a task.

Those are not minor or "soft" skills. They are the executive-function and professional habits that turn knowledge into dependable performance.

I also want to be clear that higher education cannot and should not be expected to solve every workforce-readiness challenge alone. Many of the habits employers seek, including responsibility, communication, time management, follow-through, teamwork, and problem-solving, should begin developing long before a student reaches college. Primary and secondary education, families, community organizations, employers, and institutions of higher education all have a role to play. The question before us is not which institution bears sole responsibility, but whether every stage of the education-to-work pipeline is reinforcing the knowledge, habits, and competencies that lead to success in both work and life.

When those habits are missing, small businesses absorb the cost. They create more reminders, more check-ins, more layers of review, and more rework. Owners and experienced employees spend time compensating for problems that should have been addressed earlier in a student's education and training. That reduces productivity, raises costs, and makes it harder for a small employer to grow.

This proposal can be a path forward, but only if it is not treated as a shortcut or a lower-standard degree.

A reduced-credit baccalaureate degree should allow institutions to remove unnecessary duplication, reduce cost, simplify pathways, and help students complete sooner. For many students, every additional semester represents not only tuition and fees, but delayed earnings, delayed savings, delayed home ownership, and delayed economic independence.

But reducing credits should also give Pennsylvania an opportunity to be more intentional about what students must be able to demonstrate before they graduate.

Ultimately, workforce readiness is not the responsibility of a single institution. It is the product of a pipeline that begins in elementary school and continues through secondary education, postsecondary education, work-based learning, and employment itself.

Employers do not hire credit hours. They hire competence.

That does not mean employers expect a new graduate to arrive fully trained in every employer's software, workflow, customer base, quality standards, or workplace culture. Much of that is and should be learned on the job. The more basic question is whether the graduate is prepared to learn productively.

The National Association of Colleges and Employers defines career readiness through competencies such as communication, critical thinking, professionalism, teamwork, technology, and career and self-development. In practical terms, that means demonstrating dependability, communicating effectively, seeking and applying feedback, asking appropriate questions, and pursuing continued learning.

There is also a generational reality worth acknowledging. Many students look at higher education today and wonder whether the path from education to employment has become unnecessarily complicated. In the language of younger generations, it can sometimes feel like one long "side quest": accumulate additional credits, complete additional requirements, earn another credential, incur more costs, and then discover that employers still expect you to demonstrate the ability to communicate,

meet deadlines, solve problems, and work effectively with others. Students are asking a fair question: *what is the payoff?* If the answer is simply more time, more debt, and more credentials without a clearer connection to employment, it can begin to look like the same system, different font.

Critical thinking, communication, dependability, problem-solving, and the ability to lock in, focus on a task, and follow through are not soft skills. They are the skills that make technical knowledge valuable in the workplace. If students can demonstrate those capabilities through apprenticeships, internships, supervised work experiences, dual enrollment, military service, industry experience, or other competency-based pathways, we should be willing to recognize those achievements rather than require additional educational side quests that add cost without adding value.

That distinction matters. A degree can demonstrate academic preparation and, where applicable, satisfy licensure requirements. It cannot substitute for the ability to listen, follow instructions, manage commitments, accept feedback, adapt to workplace expectations, and complete work with limited supervision. In my experience working with small employers, those are the habits that make employer-specific training effective.

Pennsylvania already recognizes the value of combining education and workplace learning through registered apprenticeship programs. A reduced-credit degree should likewise be judged not merely by what material is removed, but by whether graduates leave with demonstrated competence and the capacity to learn, adapt, and contribute in a real workplace.

That means a reduced-credit degree should require evidence that graduates can:

1. Think through a problem rather than wait to be told every next step.
2. Read, understand, and follow detailed instructions.
3. Prioritize competing deadlines and deliver accurate work on time.
4. Communicate professionally in writing and in person.
5. Work with customers and coworkers, receive feedback, and adjust.
6. Use technology responsibly while applying judgment and attention.
7. Demonstrate field-specific knowledge in a real or realistic work setting.

These outcomes can be taught and measured without adding cost or unnecessary complexity. In fact, a more focused degree pathway may make that easier. Institutions can replace redundant course requirements with integrated, applied learning: client-based projects, supervised internships, team assignments, presentations, work simulations, cumulative capstones, and clear performance checkpoints.

The Commonwealth should require participating institutions to demonstrate that reduced-credit programs maintain academic rigor and accreditation standards while improving value.

Pennsylvania should measure outcomes that matter after graduation: whether students obtain and retain employment, advance in their careers, increase earnings, remain in Pennsylvania, succeed in further education where applicable, and meet employer expectations.

Pennsylvania has developed extensive measures for participation, credentials, career-readiness activities, work-based learning, and postsecondary enrollment. The Commonwealth tracks industry credentials, work-based learning experiences, career-readiness indicators, and postsecondary enrollment. Those are important measures, and they provide valuable information about what students do while they are in school.

But educational activities are not the same thing as workforce outcomes. We know a great deal about participation, completion, credential attainment, and enrollment. We know less about whether those experiences translate into employment, earnings, advancement, employer satisfaction, and long-term economic independence.

If Pennsylvania moves toward reduced-credit degree pathways, success should ultimately be measured not by how many credits students accumulate, but by what happens after graduation. Do graduates find meaningful employment? Do they remain employed? Do their earnings increase? Do employers believe they are prepared? Do they achieve economic independence? Those are the outcomes that matter.

I would also encourage annual reporting on graduation rates, employment outcomes, earnings outcomes where available, employer satisfaction measures, graduate-school acceptance rates, and other indicators that allow policymakers to evaluate whether these programs are delivering on their promises.

Students and families deserve clear information about total cost, expected time to completion, transferability, graduate-school implications, and any effect on professional licensure.

I support this proposal if it is designed as an outcomes-based reform. Pennsylvania should not reduce credits merely to produce degrees faster. It should reduce unnecessary cost and complication while increasing access to an education that prepares people for actual work and economic independence.

We have an opportunity to make higher education more affordable without lowering expectations, and to make it more connected to the workforce Pennsylvania is trying to build.

We count credits. We count credentials. We count participation. What we need to get better at counting is success.

The goal should be a direct pathway to competence, not a collection of academic side quests.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I would be pleased to answer any questions.