

**WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF JOSEPH J. MCCARTHY, PROVOST AND SENIOR VICE
CHANCELLOR, UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH**

Submitted to the Pennsylvania Senate Education Committee, October 12, 2026

Chairwoman Schlegel Culver and distinguished members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today and to submit my testimony on this important issue. My name is Joseph J. McCarthy, and I serve as Provost and Senior Vice Chancellor at the University of Pittsburgh. We are a proud state-related institution, serving more than 30,000 students on five campuses spread across western Pennsylvania. We are consistently ranked among the top public universities in the country and routinely recognized for our strong retention and graduation rates and an excellent post-graduation outcomes rate, which has topped 94% for the last five years. As we work every day to make a world-class education more accessible and affordable for our students, I appreciate the Committee's interest in exploring options.

I respectfully submit this testimony about proposals that could reduce credit-hour requirements for bachelor's degrees. While I understand and support the intent behind these efforts, I believe that it is critically important for prospective students to have a clear understanding of the value of the degree that they pursue. The expected investment and the expected return on investment must be completely transparent to students. Employers, of course, require equal transparency regarding the credentials that are awarded by their partners in higher education.

A bachelor's degree is a credential that employers, graduate programs, licensing boards, and other institutions rely on to signal a certain depth of knowledge within a discipline complemented by a breadth of knowledge that spans disciplines and skill sets. The current benchmark of at least 120 credit hours, while not an immutable standard, reflects decades of consensus among institutions, licensing bodies, accreditors, and employers about what it takes to build both specialized expertise and the broader skills that define a college graduate, including critical thinking, written and oral communication, quantitative reasoning, and the ability to learn and adapt. The value for both students and employers has been established over time.

I began my career at Pitt as a faculty member in the Department of Chemical Engineering at the Swanson School of Engineering. I served as the Vice Chair for Education within that department and saw firsthand how chemical engineering students' understanding and competency build over the course of their undergraduate studies and are deepened by the broad knowledge base they develop through a comprehensive curriculum.

Employers in our state consistently tell us they want graduates who are technically prepared and also able to communicate clearly, work in teams, solve unfamiliar problems, and adapt as their industries change. Currently, earning a bachelor's degree conveys that a graduate has developed these skills. Shorter degrees leave less room for applied learning, internships, and hands-on experience, and could make it more difficult to develop those additional workplace skills. At Pitt, we have found that experiential learning opportunities prepare students to be job-ready on day one. Pennsylvania's workforce depends on a talent pipeline that employers trust, and that trust is built on credentials that carry consistent, recognizable value. Changing that signal could make it harder for our graduates to compete for jobs, and harder for our state to attract and retain the employers who create them.

Other states are certainly exploring reduced-credit undergraduate offerings, and we understand they are considering questions that will also be important for Pennsylvania. For example, is there evidence of unmet student demand? Is there evidence that a program's graduates could enter an occupation with growing demand? Will the program meet regulatory and licensure requirements? How will a student in such a program be affected if they determine, during their course of study, that it is not of interest to them after all? Will these programs offer the same flexibility, afforded in today's bachelor's degrees, for a student to change tack without needing to start over completely? How, and over what timeframe, will the program be assessed to ensure that it is delivering on its promises?

As reduced-credit requirements are considered, it will also be important to be aware of these questions and the risks associated with some possible answers. For example, many fields, including engineering, nursing, education, accounting, and the health professions, depend on programmatic accreditation and state or national licensure requirements that specify minimum coursework and clinical or practical hours. Reducing credit hours could put our institutions at odds with these external standards, forcing programs to seek costly exceptions or risk losing accreditation. If Pennsylvania's degrees come to be seen as less rigorous than those of other states, our graduates, not our institutions, will bear the cost. The value of a 120-credit degree has been established over time. Students and employers understand what they are getting when someone holds a bachelor's degree, and we would need to be careful to build the same foundation for any new paradigm. Specifically, the value of a shorter degree would need to be established and clearly articulated, while the inherent differences between undergraduate credentials would need to be transparent. If the value of a shorter degree is conflated with the currently understood value of a bachelor's degree, it could lead to confusion among students and employers and negatively affect education across the Commonwealth.

I believe that student access and affordability are the driving goals around a reduced-credit bachelor's degree option, and these are goals that the University of Pittsburgh and I firmly support. However, the link between fewer required credits and lower student costs is not as direct as it may appear. The biggest drivers of college costs are not the number of required credits, but factors such as public funding of higher education, credit portability, and student financial aid. Students who leave without a degree, or who take longer than anticipated to finish, often do so because of course inflexibility, financial pressures, or competing obligations. A lower credit threshold does not address these challenges.

For consideration, I would suggest a few targeted approaches that deserve equal focus, each of which could reduce the time and cost of earning a degree:

- Creating stronger partnerships and transfer agreements between community colleges and public institutions. Pitt has established articulation agreements with dozens of community colleges, has a robust transfer tool, and saw more than 700 transfer students in this year's entering class, over 30% of whom transferred from community colleges. We have been intentional in fostering bi-directional partnerships and a clear 2+2 route that reduces lost credits, traditionally the biggest hidden cost for transfer students.
- Expanding accelerated bachelor's/master's programs, which allow students to earn both degrees in a compressed timeframe by counting select graduate-level courses toward both credentials, thus shortening time to an advanced degree and reducing costs. For example, the Combined Applied Studies in Education (CASE) program is a dual-certification, dual-degree program in the School of Education, which prepares students for both Pennsylvania PK-4 General Education and PK-12 Special Education certifications.
- Expanding hybrid and online offerings and credit for prior learning through Pitt EDGE, reducing overall cost. Additionally, there may be creative possibilities such as offering accelerated three-year tracks for well-prepared students, rather than reducing hours or reshaping the whole degree.
- Adjusting programs to fit the needs of today's students, such as Pitt's hybrid Master of Science in Nursing program designed to meet the growing demand for advanced nurse practitioners, and the forthcoming hybrid Dental Hygiene bachelor's program that will operate from regional training centers throughout the Commonwealth.
- Increasing access to dual enrollment and early college programs. Multiple Pitt campuses offer College in High School programs, and these programs serve around 7,500 students per year.
- Strengthening recruitment and success of students from underserved areas, like rural communities, to increase the number of workers in the pipeline. Pitt's Partners for Rural Student Success Impact & Mobility (PRSSIM) provides supports including recruitment and pre-college programming, career and major exploration, academic workshops, financial literacy, tutoring and mentoring, specifically to support rural students.
- Addressing credit mobility head-on through systematic changes to advising, general education, and academic regulations that apply across all of Pitt's undergraduate schools and campuses. Pitt's advising coordination program and general education reform efforts are advancing these very goals.

These approaches preserve strong academic standards while addressing real barriers students face. Pitt's outstanding post-graduation outcomes rate reflects that these strategies are valuable to employers and graduate programs, and we would welcome the opportunity to work with the Committee to expand them.

Chairwoman Schlegel Culver and members of the Committee, thank you again for the opportunity to provide my perspective. I share your commitment to making college more affordable and accessible for our state's students and families, and recognize the need to produce well-educated graduates to address the Commonwealth's workforce shortages.

I urge the Committee to carefully consider the impacts of modifying credit-hour requirements, with an eye toward ensuring that the value proposition of both current and future credentials is clear to both prospective students and employers. Pitt has worked hard to develop effective and valuable educational strategies, and I would be glad to serve as a resource to the Committee and its staff as this important discussion continues. Our aim at Pitt is to help the Commonwealth be a model of access and affordability as well as academic excellence and positive workforce outcomes through cooperation, forethought, and transparent communication.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joseph J. McCarthy". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Joseph" and last name "McCarthy" clearly distinguishable.

Joseph J. McCarthy