

**Dr. Lance Kennedy-Smith, Interim Senior Vice Provost for Student Success
The Pennsylvania State University**

**Senate Education Committee: *Reduced-credit Baccalaureate Degrees*
Tuesday, October 20, 2026**

Chair Culver, Chair Williams, and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony regarding the proposal to provide Pennsylvania colleges and universities with the flexibility to offer three-year bachelor's degree programs.

My name is Lance Kennedy-Phillips, and I serve as the Interim Senior Vice Provost for Student Success at Penn State. In this newly established role, I am leading the development of the University's Office of Student Success, an effort designed to bring greater coordination and focus on how we support students throughout their educational journeys. Our goals include improving retention and graduation rates, increasing opportunities for students to complete their degrees on time, reducing barriers to degree attainment, and ensuring that students are prepared for meaningful careers, lifelong learning, and civic engagement. Central to this work is a commitment to improving student outcomes at scale while recognizing the diverse needs of students across our campuses and academic programs. The issues before the Committee today—affordability, time to degree, educational quality, and workforce preparation—are closely aligned with these priorities.

As Pennsylvania's sole land-grant university, Penn State shares the General Assembly's commitment to expanding educational opportunity, improving affordability, strengthening workforce development, and ensuring that students are well-prepared to meet the needs of a rapidly evolving economy. We appreciate the Committee's interest in examining innovative approaches that may help address these important challenges.

Higher education institutions nationwide are exploring how best to deliver high-quality academic programs while reducing barriers to degree attainment. As policymakers, employers, and educators seek solutions to rising costs, changing workforce demands, and evolving student expectations, a variety of models are being considered. Reduced-credit bachelor's degrees represent one of several approaches that warrant thoughtful examination.

Penn State recognizes that reduced-credit bachelor's degrees are intended to address legitimate concerns regarding affordability, access, and time to degree completion. We also recognize the potential value of new pathways that allow students to enter the workforce more quickly while maintaining the knowledge, skills, and experiences necessary for long-term success.

Additionally, institutional flexibility is particularly important because academic programs vary significantly across disciplines. The preparation required for success in engineering, nursing, education, agriculture, business, and other fields differs considerably. Decisions regarding degree requirements should therefore be informed by careful evaluation involving faculty, academic leaders, accrediting organizations, employers, and other stakeholders who understand the competencies graduates must possess to succeed in their chosen professions.

For example, programs in engineering, nursing, education, and other licensed or highly regulated professions often operate within accreditation standards and professional requirements that limit the extent to which degree requirements can be reduced. Employers in these fields seek graduates who possess not only technical knowledge but also substantial laboratory, clinical, design, field-based, or supervised practical experiences. In many cases, the challenge is not identifying excess coursework but ensuring that students have sufficient opportunities to develop the increasingly complex competencies required in today's workforce.

At the same time, other disciplines may offer opportunities to explore alternative pathways that maintain educational quality while reducing costs or accelerating completion. Programs that incorporate internships, cooperative education, apprenticeships, prior-learning assessment, competency-based education, or other forms of experiential learning may provide promising models. These approaches can help students apply classroom knowledge in real-world settings while earning academic credit and developing the critical thinking, communication, problem-solving, and collaborative skills that employers consistently value.

As we consider these possibilities, it is important to recognize that reducing the number of credits required for a degree does not necessarily guarantee a reduction in the time or cost of completing that degree. The actual benefits to students will depend on how programs are structured, how courses are delivered, and whether students can access the courses and experiences they need to graduate on time. Any evaluation of reduced-credit degrees should therefore consider their practical impact on affordability, completion, and student outcomes.

Discussions regarding reduced-credit bachelor's degrees should also be driven by the long-term outcomes for students. Students pursue bachelor's degrees for many reasons, including securing meaningful employment, advancing their careers, contributing to their communities, and pursuing graduate or professional education. Any new degree pathway should provide confidence that graduates will remain competitive in the job market and retain access to advanced educational opportunities.

Ultimately, the question is not simply how many credits a bachelor's degree requires, but whether graduates possess the knowledge, skills, and experiences necessary to succeed in the workforce and pursue future educational opportunities. This makes engagement with employers, industry leaders, graduate and professional schools, accrediting agencies, and higher education institutions especially important. The success of any alternative degree model will depend in large part on whether the competencies and outcomes associated with that degree are recognized and valued by those who hire, employ, and educate our graduates.

A collaborative approach involving education, government, and industry can help ensure that innovative degree pathways expand opportunities for students rather than unintentionally creating new barriers.

Penn State continues to actively examine a range of strategies to increase student success, improve affordability, enhance workforce preparation, and strengthen the undergraduate educational experience. Through our new Office of Student Success and broader University initiatives, we are placing particular emphasis on helping more students graduate on time,

improving coordination of academic and student support services, and ensuring that students have access to meaningful educational and career development opportunities.

We believe there are multiple pathways worthy of consideration, including reduced-credit bachelor's degrees, and institutions should have the flexibility to determine which approaches best serve their students and communities. Innovation in higher education should not be limited to a single degree structure but should encourage institutions to examine how they can deliver high-quality educational experiences more effectively and affordably.

As these conversations continue, we should remain focused on a central question: What knowledge, skills, abilities, and experiences must graduates possess to thrive in today's workforce and tomorrow's economy? Affordability and timely completion are important goals, but they must be pursued in ways that preserve the quality, relevance, and long-term value of a Pennsylvania bachelor's degree.

Penn State appreciates the Committee's thoughtful examination of these issues and welcomes continued dialogue regarding innovative approaches to higher education. We look forward to working collaboratively with members of the General Assembly, employers, accrediting organizations, and our higher education partners to identify solutions that expand educational opportunity, reduce barriers to degree attainment, support workforce development, and, most importantly, help our students succeed.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony.