

Statement of the Massachusetts Teachers Association and our Higher Education Leadership Council on the proposed regulations that would allow for 90-credit degree programs.

Max Page

President

Massachusetts Teachers Association

Why a sub-120 credit Bachelor's Degree Undermines the Mission of Public Education

"The mission of the Board of Higher Education is to ensure that Massachusetts residents have the opportunity to benefit from a higher education that enriches their lives and advances their contributions to the civic life, economic development, and social progress of the Commonwealth. To that end, the programs and services of Massachusetts higher education must meet standards of quality commensurate with the benefits it promises and must be truly accessible to the people of the Commonwealth in all their diversity."

— Massachusetts Board of Higher Education

The union leadership of the Massachusetts community colleges, state colleges and universities and the UMass system stand together in opposing the BHE pilot proposal which would open the door for the creation of bachelor's degrees requiring fewer than 120 credits. If this program is piloted within our public higher education system, it will be in direct conflict with the BHE mission. Reducing the credit requirement would compromise both the quality and the purpose of higher education in the Commonwealth. Our 120-credit bachelor degrees reflect national standards that integrate general education, major studies, and opportunities for exploration. Compressing that structure undermines the promise of a higher education that "enriches lives" and supports "civic life, economic development, and social progress".

The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) affirm that the strength of American higher education lies in its commitment to broad, rigorous liberal education. A shortened degree would undercut that foundation, narrowing learning to short-term job training rather than preparing graduates for lifelong adaptability, civic engagement, and intellectual growth.

The [AAC&U's 2023 Employer Report](#), based on a national survey of more than 1,000 employers, provides evidence that employers do not want less education, rather they want *better, broader education*. Eight in ten employers agree that a college degree is worth it and that higher education prepares graduates to succeed in the workforce. Employers consistently identify the skills developed through liberal education, including critical and creative thinking, written and oral communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and adaptability, are most important for long-term career success. They also value interdisciplinary learning, exposure to diverse perspectives, and hands-on experiences such as internships, community-based projects, and leadership roles. These findings show that workforce readiness depends on the depth and breadth of learning, not on reducing degree requirements. In addition, according to the report, three-quarters of employers report that they look more favorably on graduates from institutions that protect academic freedom and support open discussion of ideas. In summary, employers want graduates who can think critically, work collaboratively, and continue learning across their careers. These are the outcomes of a liberal education, not a shortened, workforce-focused program of study.

At a time of rapid change driven by AI and automation, the future workforce will need *more* grounding in the humanities, ethics, and critical thinking—not less. Humanities cultivate a unique set of skills that are critical in the age of AI – communication, ethical reasoning, critical thinking, and a human-centered approach – which serve as the foundation for driving responsible innovation. These core human skills enable us to ask questions such as “Why?” or “Should we?” Students, who are our future workforce, acquire and develop these skills while in college. A key component of higher education teaching and learning is to enable our students to become critical thinkers. However, a 3-year degree program which eliminates general education courses and electives in these disciplines would be a disservice to our students as it would ill-prepare them for the rapidly changing, AI-driven future.

Moreover, we contend that a shortened bachelor’s degree would strip away the flexibility that students need to discover their academic and professional paths. Many students begin college undeclared, unsure of their eventual career direction. The current 120-credit structure allows them to explore different fields, change majors, add minors, and pursue second-language study. A limited-credit degree would make such exploration nearly impossible, locking students into early choices and limiting their intellectual development and career paths. It would also disadvantage graduates who later wish to pursue graduate education, particularly in fields that require specific prerequisites or state licensure. These students could find themselves ineligible or unprepared for advanced study or career advancement

undermining both their personal goals and the Commonwealth's long-term workforce needs.

Opening the door to sub-120-credit degrees would be a seismic shift affecting not only the bachelor's level but also associate and graduate programs. It would disrupt the integrity of associate-level degrees and the Commonwealth's MassTransfer system. The MassTransfer framework is built upon shared learning outcomes for foundational courses, developed collaboratively by faculty from community colleges, state universities, and the UMass system. These outcomes ensure that associate-degree holders enter baccalaureate institutions prepared to complete the final two years of study. A 90-credit bachelor's degree would break that alignment. The result would be the erosion of liberal education outcomes for associate-degree students and the destabilization of the Commonwealth Commitment, a commitment to equal opportunity across campuses.

Reducing degree credits also risks creating a two-tiered system of higher education. First-generation, working-class, and low-income students, many of whom attend Massachusetts's public colleges, would be disproportionately funneled into fast-track programs that limit their exposure to the liberal arts and humanities. This model imagines students as workers to be quickly credentialed rather than as whole persons and citizens to be educated. The result would be a diminished college experience and restricted career flexibility for those who most need the full benefits of a college education. At a time when our public colleges are increasingly Hispanic-serving and minority-serving institutions, we should be expanding support for equity and student success, not compressing the curriculum. The value of a degree from an institution of higher education must not be limited to serving the needs of industry.

If the state's goal is to help students complete degrees more efficiently and enter the workforce, there are better solutions than cutting the credit requirement. The Commonwealth should make all of its public undergraduate programs free—or at least debt-free—for Massachusetts residents, in line with recent implementation of free community college. This should include providing adequate financial aid to allow students to afford room and board as well as tuition. Freeing students from high tuition and fees would allow them to reduce the need to work excessive hours while studying and to take fuller course loads. The state should also hire and retain more full-time faculty and staff to provide the advising, mentoring, and academic support that help students persist and graduate. Finally, rather than changing the structure of associate level and baccalaureate degrees, the BHE can encourage proposals that expand pathways for certificates and micro credentials to help students gain targeted skills without sacrificing a liberal education.

For those reasons the Board should reject these proposed regulations. If the Board insists on going forward, the regulations should be strengthened to require that applicants demonstrate the following about any proposed BA program based on fewer than 120 credits:

1. It reflects national standards that integrate general education, major studies, and opportunities for exploration as effectively as existing four-year programs.
2. It supports critical and creative thinking, written and oral communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and adaptability, as effectively as existing four year programs.
3. It would not reduce the flexibility that students need to discover their academic and professional paths.
4. It would not disadvantage graduates who later wish to pursue graduate education, particularly in fields that require specific prerequisites or state licensure.
5. It would not be more likely to attract those who face economic barriers including first-generation, working-class, and low-income students, creating a two tiered higher education system in the Commonwealth. [The commonwealth should instead eliminate those barriers directly by using Fair Share funds to let all students graduate from college debt free]