

November 22, 2024

Dear Dr. Angie Paccione, CDHE staff, and esteemed members of the CCHE,

We represent the faculty of Colorado’s four-year institutions of higher education and write to you today to advise on future revisions to Colorado Revised Statutes section 23-1-125(1)(a) and/or section 23-1-125(2) that might allow for reduced-credit hour degree programs (i.e., “bachelor’s” degree programs with fewer than 120 credit hours). The chairs/presidents of Faculty Governance Groups at our 15 institutions met on October 10 and 17, 2024, to discuss the Higher Learning Commission’s (HLC) recent [guidance](#) on offering reduced-credit bachelor’s programs. Following these conversations, faculty leaders returned to their campuses to discuss reduced-credit hour degree programs with faculty on their campuses. Faculty governance groups at each of the signatory institutions voted to endorse this letter. Drawing from our perspectives and experiences with Colorado’s undergraduate student body, the signatories agree that while reduced-credit degree programs may fill a new and useful niche, they are not equivalent to traditional bachelor’s degrees and should not include the word “bachelor’s” in the title (perhaps Applied Arts and Sciences degree would be more appropriate). State lawmakers should be cautioned that calling a three-year degree a bachelor’s degree represents false advertising for our students and their future employers.

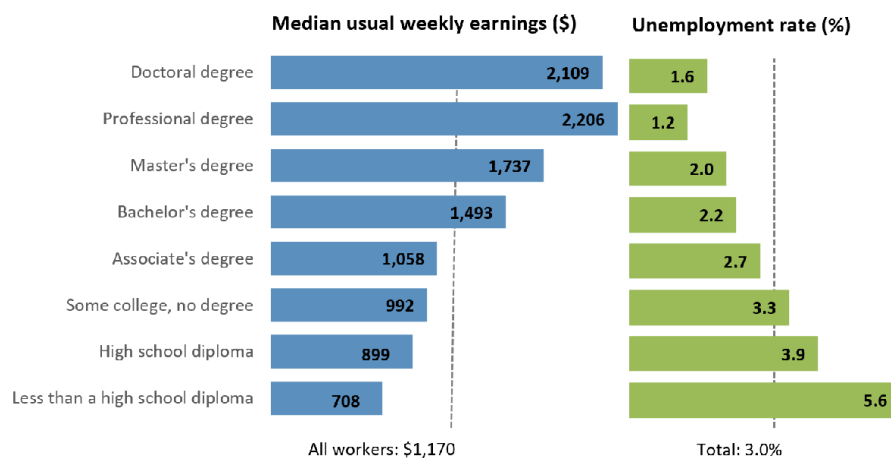
There are at least three unintended consequences that could negatively impact Colorado students, families, and employers if a three-year credential is called a “bachelor’s” degree:

- Diminished prospects for Colorado students
- A less prepared, less educated Colorado workforce
- Increased inequality among Colorado families

### 1. Diminished prospects for Colorado students.

More time in the classroom, on average, results in better financial outcomes and career prospects for students ([Figure 1](#)). “The earnings gap between college graduates and those with less education continues to widen” ([APLU](#)), indicating that higher education is more important than ever.

**Figure 1. Earnings and unemployment rates by educational attainment, 2023**



Note: Data are for persons age 25 and over. Earnings are for full-time wage and salary workers.  
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey.

An associate degree requires 60 credits, and is a necessary prerequisite for a number of career paths. A 90 credit degree program would likely result in better career outcomes for students than an associate degree. By credentialing students, a 90 credit program could give students the flexibility to choose from a variety of future careers. However, a reduced-credit hour degree is not a bachelor's degree. The bachelor's degree has been a symbol of broad academic achievement since the medieval period, and the standard of 120 credit hours to earn a bachelor's degree at American institutions traces back over a century. While some argue that these credits include "unnecessary" free electives, in our experience, students use these 120 credit hours to explore and identify what they are passionate about and to diversify their educational experience by earning credentials such as minors and certificates that provide them with a broad set of transferable skills. Practicing a diverse set of skills makes them adaptable to a rapidly changing job market, where students may need to be [prepared for multiple careers](#) in their futures. Over the course of 120 credit hours, students practice and master a variety of skills related to adaptability, communication, critical thinking, teamwork, leadership, time- and personal-management, digital literacy, civic responsibility, and intercultural fluency, which are [core skills that employers need their workers to possess](#). Less time in the classroom would provide students with a less developed and diverse skill set that could make them less adaptable, and less likely to advance, in the future workforce.

Colorado institutions have a responsibility to students to be clear about what a degree program represents without false advertising. If a three-year degree includes the word "bachelor's," there is an assumption of equivalency. Students may opt for a three-year degree because it would be cheaper and faster than a traditional bachelor's degree without understanding the potential negative impact on their lifetime earnings compared to a four-year degree. This misrepresentation could result in long-term consequences for students' career and financial prospects. Students may be less prepared for the workforce and may not be promoted into leadership positions at the same rates as students who completed 120 credit hour degrees.

Better financial prospects for our students are not the result of having a credential with the word "bachelor's" degree in the title (Figure 1). Instead, this documented success comes from the education students receive over the course of 120 credits as they gain intellectual maturity and hone "communication, leadership, critical thinking, problem-solving, and analytical skills" ([Joubert, 2020](#)).

## **2. A less prepared, less educated Colorado workforce.**

The negative outcomes of mislabeling a new reduced-credit hour credential may be felt most acutely by Colorado employers, who will recruit new employees who are less prepared to do the work that employers' need. Additionally, some degree programs, such as teacher licensure programs, take four years to complete. These programs could become less attractive to students and exacerbate existing teacher- and other workforce-shortages.

To better define educational options for students and employers, the state could create a new credential that distinguishes the two programs so that employers can opt to hire students with three- or four-year degrees, depending upon their needs. This way, employers need not guess whether their new employees will be prepared for the jobs they need to fill.

To meet the complex social, economic, and health challenges facing our state and country, a well-prepared, well-educated workforce is imperative. Leaders in the national scientific community warn that

the United States is ceding its global scientific leadership to other countries ([McNutt, 2024](#)). Equating a three-year degree with a four-year bachelor's degree weakens our ability to be global leaders.

### **3. Increased inequality among Colorado families.**

College is designed to be the great equalizer. At first glance, a three-year bachelor's degree would seem to even the playing field by reducing financial barriers to higher education. However, reduced-credit hour degree programs will likely have the most unintended consequences for low income, first generation, and underrepresented students. These students from families with more financial constraints may feel significant pressure to opt for a three-year "bachelor's" degree assuming it will open the same doors as a four-year bachelor's degree. However, 120 credit hour degrees will likely remain necessary for admission to graduate schools and advantageous for promotion into leadership roles.

Students who opt for three-year degrees due to financial constraints may realize only too late that their three-year "bachelor's" degree does not open the doors it promised to open. A three-year "bachelor's" program lures students with less social and financial capital into worse financial outcomes through false advertising about the equivalency with a four-year bachelor's degree. If these students later realize that they need a more robust bachelor's degree to compete or to go on to graduate school, they may have difficulty getting financial aid when they already have a "bachelor's" degree. They may have increased cost due to changes in residency and may have trouble completing the 120-hour degree in just one additional year, depending upon how the major and general education requirements for the 90 credit program are structured. This could result in substantially more time and money for these students. Instead, students should be given the option to earn a stackable credential that does not limit their future prospects, but instead broadens their educational choices.

A three-year higher education credential could offer students a new option that would likely lead to better educational outcomes and career preparation than an associate degree. However, assuming that students with a three-year bachelor's degree will have similar outcomes to students with a four-year bachelor's degree is flawed and not backed by data. It assumes that graduating with a bachelor's degree is important because it is a credential to add on a résumé and ignores the education behind it where students practice skills that they will use throughout their careers.

Instead of diminishing what a bachelor's degree represents, which could result in worse career prospects for students and lower levels of workforce preparation for Colorado's employers, let us work together to re-envision what Colorado students and employers need by creating a new, appropriately labeled, three-year credential that provides options for students looking to advance their career prospects.

Sincerely,



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Faculty Senate Chair  
On behalf of University of Northern Colorado Faculty Senate



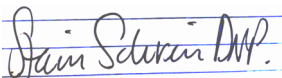
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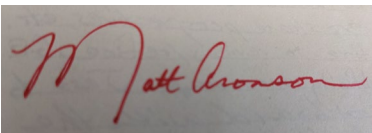
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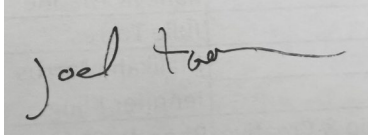
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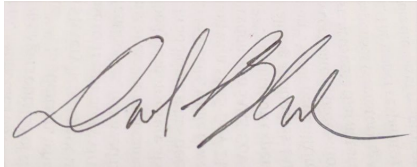
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