



Dean of the College

PROPONENT Testimony on HB 2414

House Committee on Commerce, Labor & Economic Development

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Chairman Tarwater and members of the committee, as Dean and Chief Academic Officer of Benedictine College, I am a proponent of HB 2414.

Introduction

Benedictine College is a small private Catholic liberal arts college with a dynamic and flourishing engineering program. We are a 165-year-old mission-driven institution; our mission is the education of men and women within a community of faith and scholarship. We are a Catholic college in the Benedictine tradition, providing a liberal arts education in a residential environment.

While the College saw hard times in the late 20th century, the institution has experienced a renaissance in the past 20 years, as is evidenced by the largest enrollment in our history last fall at over 2,100 full time undergraduates. From its low point of 570 total students in 1991, enrollment has more than tripled, requiring us to build eleven new residence halls and six new academic buildings. The College has also added several popular new academic programs, including the top-rated nursing program in the state, a distinctive program in classical architecture, and the subject of my testimony today, our excellent School of Engineering.

History of the Benedictine College School of Engineering

In 2008 the college developed a major in engineering physics, but the real story of the School of Engineering starts in 2009, when a dynamic, entrepreneurial Engineering faculty member at the University of North Dakota, Dr. Darrin Muggli, contacted Benedictine College to propose a partnership between the two institutions, establishing a consortial relationship so that students could be enrolled full time at BC, but take distance-based engineering courses from UND to earn ABET-accredited degrees while the BC program was being established. Dr. Muggli had been motivated to bring his idea to us because he wanted to support small liberal arts colleges to find a cost-effective, low-risk way to develop ABET accredited degrees. Because he is a man of deep faith, he was particularly interested in supporting our mission. In fact, he was so attracted to our mission-driven model of education that he eventually agreed to come to Atchison and take the position of founding faculty member of our school of engineering. This partnership allowed Benedictine to enroll students interested in its unique liberal arts formation, while also offering students the benefit of an accredited engineering degree from UND. Dr. Muggli had an intuition that there was an untapped pool of students around the country who were interested in both a faith-based education and a rigorous engineering program. So, he built a program that would attract these students, recruiting faculty who shared his vision.

Heir to the 1,500 years of Benedictine dedication to learning, the Benedictine College mission as a Catholic, Benedictine, liberal arts, residential college is the education of men and women within a community of faith and scholarship.



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That vision certainly paid off. Starting with just a small handful of students, it immediately grew rapidly. As of Fall 2022, Benedictine's School of Engineering now employs thirteen faculty and had 260 students, making it one of the largest departments at Benedictine College. In 2014 our programs started to receive ABET accreditation (Mechanical in 2014, Chemical and Civil in 2017, and Electrical in 2020), allowing us to move away from the consortial relationship with UND and to offer stand-alone Benedictine College engineering degrees. The school now offers ABET-accredited degrees in chemical, civil, electrical, and mechanical engineering.

Our engineering program is distinctive both because it is deeply intertwined with the liberal arts program of the college (not only do the engineering students take the full 55 hours of general education required of all students, but there are specific humanities courses—Christian Moral Life in theology and Ethics in philosophy—that our engineering students are required to take) and because the faith-based mission strongly shapes the program. For example, our students put their skills to use in some of the traditional “fun” co-curricular engineering projects (like concrete canoe competitions and building intricate floats for our town's Christmas parade) but also in projects that put their skills at the service of those in need through engineering mission trips. Recent examples of these trips include building a water storage and pumping facility serving a village in Ghana or designing and building a greenhouse to support growing food for school lunches for students in a remote mountain village in Peru. One of our engineering faculty members started a chapter of the “Sleep in Heavenly Peace” charity; this organization brings together engineering and other students, faculty, and local community groups to build beds and deliver them to families that can't afford beds for their children.

But all these additional opportunities and experiences do not distract from a rigorous, career-oriented engineering program. Eleven of our thirteen faculty members have significant industrial experience in addition to their academic credentials. All our students are required to pass the FE (Fundamentals of Engineering) exam as a requirement for graduation. 90% of our engineering students have jobs secured before graduation.

About Our Graduates

Our alumni work at private and public companies, as well as several governmental organizations. The School of Engineering supports a diverse array of employers by hosting career expos twice a year. These events feature 15 to 20 organizations, but the school is in contact with over 100 employers, many of whom are based in Kansas. Altec Industries, GBA Companies, HDR Engineering, Kansas Department of Transportation, Northwind Technical, Schenck Process, Triumph, Willdan, and the US Army Corp of Engineers and Marine Corps have all vied for our Benedictine College engineering graduates.

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This distinctive program and approach proved very attractive; we regularly attract students from across the country to our school of engineering. Approximately 80% of our engineering students are from out of state. But we are happy to report that approximately 25-30% of all of our graduates take jobs in Kansas, so we are providing a net gain of engineers for Kansas.

A brief anecdote: John and Matthew Myjak came to Benedictine College from their home Oregon and both brothers graduated from BC Engineering (Matthew as his class valedictorian). John is a Mechanical Engineer working in Leavenworth at Heatron, and Matthew is an Electrical Engineer working in Atchison. Both graduates were recruited into their current positions through the School of Engineering's connections with these employers. Both brothers came to Benedictine College because of the Catholic, liberal arts mission. Neither would have attended any other Kansas institution. Based on the brothers' experience, the Myjak family wanted to be more a part of the Benedictine community, so the entire family moved to Atchison, and their third son (James) is a freshman Civil Engineer at the College this year.

While Benedictine College is a small college, and so our engineering program does not produce the volume of engineers that the larger universities produce, we do attract students from across the country who are drawn to our specific and distinctive approach to education. We fill a niche that is different from that of the Regents institutions, but that niche is contributing to the economic vibrancy of Kansas, and so we respectfully ask for support in this task.

Vision for the Future

Through the support of the State of Kansas, the Benedictine College School of Engineering hopes to continue to recruit students from across the nation who are interested in a broad-based liberal arts education upon which to build their engineering career. Funding provided through HB 2414 will contribute to our ability to recruit, retain, and train more engineers for the state of Kansas through additional scholarships and competitive internship programs. Additional funding will also allow us to recruit and retain additional faculty so that our program can grow. Finally, funding will allow us to ensure that our state-of-the-art engineering laboratories stay well-stocked with the best equipment available, guaranteeing that our graduates enter the workforce ready to build a better Kansas.

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