



March 17, 2026

The Honorable Brian Feldman, Chair,
Education, Energy, and Environment Committee
2 West Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Chairman Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and the Honorable Members of the Education, Energy, and Environment Committee,

The Maryland Higher Education Commission (MHEC) respectfully submits this Letter of Information for Senate Bill 983.

The current landscape of academic program approval for colleges and universities in Maryland is the result of a multi-year, consensus-driven effort to balance institutional agility with the state's deep commitment to equity. SB 983 seeks to repeal the "graduate" distinction and return undergraduate programs to the objection and duplication review process.

In 2021, the Maryland General Assembly enacted legislation (HB 1/SB 1) that provided a historic \$577 million settlement for Maryland's four Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Part of the settlement, as established by legislation, required the Department of Legislative Services to contract with a third-party to study the academic program review process in Maryland to prevent future "de jure" duplication.¹

The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) was selected as the third-party vendor, conducted its mandated review, and released its findings in August and September 2022. Following the release of the report, the Maryland General Assembly utilized the findings to identify a need for further transparency and data-driven alignment with workforce demands², and in 2023, established a legislative workgroup to issue a report on eight specific reform items. The workgroup was required to make recommendations in developing measurable criteria to determine when a proposed new program is considered unreasonable, unnecessary, or duplicative, while balancing the need for objective data to determine if proposed programs support State workforce needs and economic competitiveness.

¹ https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/2021RS/chapters_noln/Ch_42_sb0001E.pdf

² Part 1:

https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/mgawebsite/Committees/Media/false?cmte=eee&clip=EED_1_26_2023_meeting_1&ys=2023rs

Part 2:

https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/mgawebsite/Committees/Media/false?cmte=eee&clip=EED_1_26_2023_meeting_2&ys=2023rs

The legislative Program Approval Process Workgroup was co-chaired by Senator Nancy King and Delegate Stephanie Smith. This group included representatives from all of Maryland's higher education stakeholders, including the University System of Maryland, Maryland Independent Colleges & University Association, Morgan State University, St. Mary's College of Maryland, and the Maryland Association of Community Colleges.

During the workgroup process, members discussed the department's existing unreasonable program duplication process and the intentional focus the department took on vocational/technical, occupational, graduate, and professional programs. The workgroup's final report retained the focus on unreasonable program duplication on graduate and professional programs, rather than choosing to expand to include undergraduate core programs consisting of basic liberal arts and sciences disciplines. The Workgroup's entire set of recommendations was finalized in January 2024.³

The workgroup's recommendations were codified in HB 1244 of 2024, which focused on concerns about program duplication in graduate programs. All institutional members of the Workgroup testified in support of the legislation. It made several foundational changes, including the establishment of an ongoing Program Review Process Advisory Council, which includes the same membership as included on the legislative Program Approval Process Workgroup as established by MHEC bylaws, and the establishment of a "Letter of Intent" process so institutions of higher education would collaborate with one another on program design and development.

A critical component of HB 1244 was the explicit amendment of Education Article § 11-206.1, adding the word "graduate" to focus duplication concerns and formal objection processes on graduate programs. MHEC began implementing the various new provisions in HB 1244 immediately and continues to establish processes and procedures that are aligned with HB 1244.

Therefore, consistent with revisions to Education Article § 11-206.1, MHEC now conducts duplication analysis for all graduate programs and for undergraduate programs that require new institutional resources. Between July 1, 2024, when HB 1244 took effect, and March 1, 2026, MHEC received 58 graduate proposals for new degrees/certificates or substantial modifications to existing degrees/certificates that required the department to conduct a duplication analysis.

At the same time, MHEC received 122 undergraduate proposals, more than double the number of graduate proposals, for processing and approval. Undergraduate programs implemented using existing resources are not subject to the statutory objections process and are not reviewed for duplication, and none of the 122 proposals reviewed would have required new institutional resources.

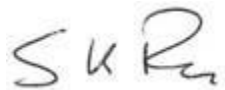
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https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/meeting_material/2024/pap%20-%20133501424854751600%20-%20001_PAP%20Draft%20Workgroup%20Recommendationsstacy%20edits.pdf

MHEC remains committed to implementing the law, derived from the multi-year, consensus-driven effort to balance institutional agility with the state's deep commitment to equity, and to the continued guidance from the Maryland General Assembly.

MHEC remains available to provide additional information as needed.

Yours in Service,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "S K Rai". The letters are cursive and somewhat stylized.

Secretary Sanjay Rai,
Maryland Higher Education Commission