

Dr. Naomi C. Gades  
Department of English and Foreign Languages



March 21, 2025

Dear Chair Pamela Beidel, Vice Chair Antonio Hayes, and Esteemed Members of the State Finance Committee,

I appreciate the opportunity to support HB0799. As part of the University System of Maryland, Frostburg State University furthers the mission of “improv[ing] the quality of life for the people of Maryland” in our academic offerings, as well as “programs and services that are responsive to the needs of the citizens of the state and the nation.” Our role in that endeavor comes in our FSU mission to provide “experiential opportunities” and “regional and statewide economic and workforce development.” The Bobcat Innovation Launchpad exemplifies service to our state and region by equipping students with entrepreneurial drive and connections.

When I pitch this hackathon/Shark Tank experience to students, I emphasize free meals. That gets them in the door. But they stay, giving up an entire weekend—Friday evening, Saturday, Sunday—often with extra late nights, because they are engaged in meaningful creative and business experiences with “SMEs,” or subject matter experts: people who have successfully made differences in their corporate, local, or regional communities. As part of the planning committee, I worked this year to bring in the Executive Director of the Allegany Arts Council, President and CEO of the Garrett County Action Committee, and Executive Director of Savage Mountain Punk Arts. Students working on their teams certainly learned how the arts can power economic development, how to leverage community assets, and what it takes to rise to a position of leadership to drive change. I teach a lot in my classes about research and communities, but experiences like this help students sharpen those skills, use them in a business environment, and see first-hand what professional excellence looks like.

I was fortunate enough to be a roamer: I checked in on different groups, made sure SMEs were doing well, etc. I encountered a conversation in which a SME discussed being on the lookout for a promising student to whom to offer an internship. I watched one of our SMEs adopt three different groups as she stayed after hours to keep working with our students. I think, however, the most affecting moment was watching a group pitch a solution for rural food insecurity, leading with one student’s personal experiences growing up in poverty locally. If we want to develop a workforce, if we want to inspire students to better their communities through innovative action, and if we want them to do all of that in a space they find exciting and meaningful, so much so that they allow it to crowd out everything else that might call for their attention over an entire weekend, I can’t imagine what would be better than this.

Respectfully,

Naomi C. Gades  
Assistant Professor of English  
Bobcat Innovation Launchpad Planning Committee Member