

## **Establishing a stackable certificate master of agriculture program at NDSU**

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### Background and Problem

Like many land-grant institutions, North Dakota State University (NDSU) has faced increasing pressure from declining college enrollments and shifting student demographics. A contributing factor has been a regional decline in the number of high school seniors graduating, which has reduced the pool of traditional college-aged students. This challenge has been compounded by policy changes in neighboring Minnesota, where the MN North Star Scholarship Program has made it more financially attractive for students to remain in-state. This is particularly impactful given that more than 50% of students in the College of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Natural Resources have historically come from Minnesota.

During this same time period, the university transitioned to a hybrid tuition return budget model. This change provides the University's six colleges with greater responsibility for generating and managing their own revenue. The shift created increased pressure but also increased flexibility at the college level. We were no longer able to rely on centrally distributed funding, and thus, there was a clear need to identify new, sustainable enrollment streams that aligned with workforce demand.

While the traditional undergraduate pipeline was becoming less reliable, there was growing demand from working professionals in agriculture and from our industry partners for flexible, career-aligned graduate education. This prompted us to rethink how our programs were structured and delivered, ultimately leading to the development of a Master of Agriculture (MAg) degree designed specifically for the workforce.

### The Project

The goal of this project was to design and implement an online Master of Agriculture degree that would be flexible, accessible, and aligned with workforce needs. The program was built around stackable certificates, allowing learners to complete shorter credentials that can later be combined into a full degree. This structure lowers barriers to entry, provides immediate value, and creates multiple pathways for working professionals to engage with graduate education.

### Progress and Future Plans

Progress on the Master of Agriculture program moved quickly and intentionally. A faculty fellow was hired to help manage the process. Stakeholder surveys were conducted in spring 2024 and helped shape program design, delivery preferences, and content priorities. Beginning in summer 2024, faculty were incentivized to develop online courses, resulting in 41 courses being supported for online development.

During the 2024–2025 academic year, 16 certificates were incorporated into the degree, including 14 newly developed and two existing certificates. These certificates and the overall program were moved through institutional and State Board of Higher Education approval processes between fall 2024 and spring 2025.

Following approval, we launched marketing efforts in summer 2025 and the first students enrolled in fall 2025. Enrollment has shown exponential growth across the first two semesters and continues to grow as we enter fall 2026.

Looking ahead, the focus will be on refining and expanding certificate and course offerings, program assessment, and strengthening connections with our industry partners. Continued attention to course quality, relevance, and accessibility will be essential to sustaining and growing the program.

### What I Gained from FSLI

When I started FLSI, I held the interim associate dean role, and initial conversations about the MAg were already underway. How I approached this project and my personal growth during this period were significantly shaped by my participation in FSLI. One of the most important lessons was learning how to navigate difficult conversations and resistance to change. Gaining faculty buy-in, especially during a time of university transformation, was not straightforward. The faculty were skeptical, especially about online courses, and FSLI helped me approach these conversations with greater confidence.

I also developed a stronger awareness of personality styles and how colleagues respond differently to change. This helped me adapt my approach, whether that meant providing more context, allowing time for processing, or reinforcing key messages in different ways.

Throughout the FSLI program, clear and consistent communication skills are emphasized. This project had an ambitious timeline with many moving parts. It was important to clearly communicate expectations and ensure accountability to deadlines. Overall, FSLI strengthened my ability to oversee this project collaboratively, building trust amongst both the faculty and the administration.