

LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE MINUTES

SB19

Bill as Introduced

SB 19 - AS INTRODUCED

2021 SESSION

21-0419
04/06

SENATE BILL **19**

AN ACT relative to the degree granting authority of Signum university.

SPONSORS: Sen. Ward, Dist 8; Sen. Carson, Dist 14; Sen. Ricciardi, Dist 9; Sen. Hennessey,
Dist 1; Sen. Kahn, Dist 10

COMMITTEE: Education

ANALYSIS

This bill authorizes Signum University to grant degrees in New Hampshire.

Explanation: Matter added to current law appears in ***bold italics***.
Matter removed from current law appears [~~in brackets and struckthrough.~~]
Matter which is either (a) all new or (b) repealed and reenacted appears in regular type.

STATE OF NEW HAMPSHIRE

In the Year of Our Lord Two Thousand Twenty One

AN ACT relative to the degree granting authority of Signum university.

Be it Enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives in General Court convened:

1 1 Signum University; Authority to Grant Degrees. Signum University is hereby authorized to
2 confer degrees upon its graduates, subject to the authority of the higher education commission under
3 RSA 21-N:8-a. The degrees shall be specified by the higher education commission as provided in
4 RSA 292:8-h, III.

5 2 Effective Date. This act shall take effect 60 days after its passage.

Committee Minutes

SENATE CALENDAR NOTICE

Education

Sen Ruth Ward, Chair
Sen Erin Hennessey, Vice Chair
Sen Denise Ricciardi, Member
Sen Jay Kahn, Member
Sen Suzanne Prentiss, Member

Date: January 7, 2021

HEARINGS

Tuesday	01/12/2021	
(Day)	(Date)	
Education	REMOTE 000	9:00 a.m.
(Name of Committee)	(Place)	(Time)
9:00 a.m.	SB 24	relative to the Brewster Academy charter.
9:30 a.m.	SB 19	relative to the degree granting authority of Signum university.
9:45 a.m.	SB 20	relative to one year certificates of eligibility to teach.

Committee members will receive secure Zoom invitations via email.

Members of the public may attend using the following links:

1. Link to Zoom Webinar: <https://www.zoom.us/j/94252317947>
2. To listen via telephone: Dial (for higher quality, dial a number based on your current location): 1-301-715-8592, or 1-312-626-6799 or 1-929-205-6099, or 1-253-215-8782, or 1-346-248-7799, or 1-669-900-6833
3. Or iPhone one-tap: 13126266799, 94252317947# or 19292056099, 94252317947#
4. Webinar ID: [942 5231 7947](https://www.zoom.us/j/94252317947)
5. To view/listen to this hearing on YouTube, use this link:
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjBZdtRjRnQdmg-2MPMiWrA>
6. To sign in to speak, register your position on a bill and/or submit testimony, use this link:
<http://gencourt.state.nh.us/remotecommittee/senate.aspx>

The following email will be monitored throughout the meeting by someone who can assist with and alert the committee to any technical issues: remotesenate@leg.state.nh.us or call (603-271-6931).

EXECUTIVE SESSION MAY FOLLOW

Sponsors:

SB 24

Sen. Bradley

Rep. J. MacDonald

Rep. Marsh

Rep. Deshaies

SB 19

Sen. Ward

Sen. Carson

Sen. Ricciardi

Sen. Hennessey

Sen. Kahn

SB 20

Sen. Kahn

Sen. Ward

Sen. Watters

Ava Hawkes 271-4151

Ruth Ward
Chairman

Senate Education Committee

Ava Hawkes 271-4151

SB 19, relative to the degree granting authority of Signum university.

Hearing Date: January 12, 2021

Time Opened: 9:30 a.m.

Time Closed: 9:45 a.m.

Members of the Committee Present: Senators Ward, Hennessey, Ricciardi, Kahn and Prentiss

Members of the Committee Absent : None

Bill Analysis: This bill authorizes Signum University to grant degrees in New Hampshire.

Sponsors:

Sen. Ward

Sen. Carson

Sen. Ricciardi

Sen. Hennessey

Sen. Kahn

Who supports the bill: Senator Ruth Ward (Senate District 8), Senator Sharon Carson (Senate District 14), Senator Erin Hennessey (Senate District 1), Senator Denise Ricciardi (Senate District 9), Senator Jeb Bradley (Senate District 3) Corey Olsen (Founder and President of Signum University), Laurie Alden

Who opposes the bill: None

Who is neutral on the bill: Director Stephen Appleby (Division of Educator Support and Higher Education, NH Department of Education), Shannon Reid (CCSNH)

Summary of testimony presented in support:

Senator Ruth Ward - Senate District 8

- Senator Ward introduces SB 19.
- This bill authorizes Signum University to grant degrees.
- Signum University offers a totally online program with a focus on language arts and other sophisticated subjects.
- Signum University needs legislative approval in order to proceed to the next level of their accreditation process.
- Signum University already has the approval of the NH Board of Higher Education.
- Signum University's programs have proven helpful for high school teachers who teach subjects such as language arts and English.
- Easy way to earn master's degree virtually without having to attend in-person.

Dr. Corey Olsen – Founder and President of Signum University

- Signum University was reviewed by NH's Higher Education Commission and unanimously approved in 2018.
- The Commission conducted a comprehensive review of Signum's operations.
- In October 2020, Signum University's review was unanimously extended. For new institutions, they are approved for a period of time, in Signum's case, two years, and subject to a new review. The university made great progress towards the benchmarks set by NH's Higher Education Commission; Signum was granted an extension which postponed their review.
- One major requirement is to pursue the legal requirement for degree granting status from the legislature.
- Dr. Olsen founded the university ten years ago in Delaware. As of current, Dr. Olsen, the institution and all operations have moved to New Hampshire.
- One of the primary beneficiaries of our degrees, specifically their master's degree programs, are teachers.
- There are two stages left of their accreditation process.
 - First, it was the higher education commission. Next, legislative approval. Lastly, the accreditation process where legislative approval is a prerequisite.
- They have already begun the accreditation process in parallel with the legislative process.
- Signum University is an entirely online university and their courses are primarily synchronous. This creates a dynamic learning environment.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, they have launched a remote mentorship program and have worked with institutions who have been trying to adapt to entirely remote learning.
- Senator Prentiss asked whom Signum University's primary audience is, who generally enrolls in their programs and who are the students.
- Dr. Olsen said their master's program students are post-grad students who have a passion for learning.
- As the university is still in the accreditation process, it is difficult for students to officially use their courses. For example, teachers do not currently qualify to use Signum credits at their schools.
- Their primary audience is people who love learning. Few current students desire to use their degrees in career-oriented ways. Some students have gone to present at conferences and publish articles in scholarly journals.
- Senator Prentiss asked the cost of tuition and what financial aid might be available.
- Tuition is extremely low. One of the mission statements of the university is to keep tuition low enough that students can undertake their program without debt.
- Opposition to the student debt crisis is one of the defining elements that led to the founding of the university.
- Each course costs \$650. Not credit, but each entire course. The entire master's degree costs \$7,000.
- They do have a financial aid program and do not participate in federal financial aid. They would not qualify to do so prior to accreditation; however, the university has no active plans to participate in federal student loan programs.
- Their current financial aid program freely remits the tuition for any student who wants to take courses. It is a work-study program. If a student is willing to do volunteer labor for 40 hours per semester, the university remits their tuition.
- This work-study program has become a great part of the university's community.
- There has never been a student who sought classes at Signum University and were turned away because they could not afford it.
- Senator Ward asked Dr. Olsen to discuss the courses offered by the university.
- The university's master's program focuses on language and literature.
- They also have an entire concentration in Germanic philology.
- Niche specialties also include fantasy literature, especially J.R.R. Tolkien, classical literature, medieval literature, and renaissance literature.
- Senator Kahn asked if Dr. Olsen could give another sense of the breadth of the courses offered.
- Dr. Olsen reiterated focuses on the classical, medieval, and renaissance periods. Those are their

primary topics of study. They have also offered courses on topics from classical mythology to Shakespeare. Courses are also taught in Anglo-Saxon, Middle English, Gothic language, etc. Germanic philology is still one of their growing programs as this concentration is dying out around the globe.

- Senator Kahn noted the tabling of a similar bill in the House last session (2020) and an email exchange between Dr. Olsen and a NH State Representative.
- Dr. Olsen noted his confusion with the process in the House and the final result regarding this legislation in the House, as it passed the Senate unanimously.
- Senator Prentiss asked for clarity regarding the university's role in workforce development, such as teachers wishing to apply their degrees towards language arts in their classrooms. Senator Prentiss also noted her appreciation of students who do not intend to apply their degree towards a career path, however, have an interest in a specific area.
- Dr. Olsen said there are two primary ways in which the university's degrees could be applied in the workforce. First, the enrichment of teachers by providing them an opportunity to learn, broaden and deepen their own education. In addition, once the accreditation process is complete, teachers would be able to use their master's degree in continuing education credits and count credits towards a promotion.
- Senator Prentiss asked if school systems would accept this degree to fulfil a requirement. Dr. Olsen said yes, once the accreditation process is complete.
- Senator Kahn asked how many students are currently enrolled. Dr. Olsen said 120 students.
- Senator Kahn asked if all students are part-time. Dr. Olsen confirmed all students are part-time.
- Senator Kahn asked if Signum University has filed a financial statement and if they are registered in NH as a business. Dr. Olsen said yes and plans to confirm that their 2020 financial statement submission has been sent through.
- Senator Kahn reiterated his concerns regarding the email exchange that took place between Dr. Olsen and a NH State Representative. Senator Kahn also noted that said exchange creates trouble for him to vote in favor of this bill.
- Dr. Olsen notes that this email exchange may not have been read by all committee members. However, he believes the tone and intent of the exchange is misunderstood.

Senator Jeb Bradley – Senate District 3

- Senator Bradley testified in favor of SB 19.
- Senator Bradley has not had the chance to speak with Dr. Olsen, however, he has read the email exchange between Dr. Olsen and a NH State Representative.
- Senator Bradley hopes this bill's merit is not based on a previous email exchange, as what Signum University is trying to do is noteworthy.
- Senator Bradley hopes NHDOE can testify on behalf of this bill and the rigorous process that Signum University has gone through to get to this point.
- Online education is increasingly important in our country, even before the pandemic and, now, post-pandemic.
- On a cost basis, this is vitally important.

Laurie Alden

- Resident of Plainfield, NH.
- Former graduate of Signum University and was a work-study student.
- As of January 2012, Ms. Alden began taking courses while raising two middle school children, attended to her mother in the last year of hospice care, and supported her police officer wife, all while working part-time.
- Ms. Alden sought new ways to advance herself and stay stimulated. Signum University exposed her to world-class professors and the value of superlative scholarship.
- Signum University has always prioritized full accessibility through their low-cost and fully online programs.
- Once her master's qualifications were completed, Ms. Alden became an adjunct professor of

English at River Valley Community College in Claremont.

- Enjoys teaching and uplifting her students.
- Through her education at Signum University, she was afforded the opportunity to participate in a project developing the latest techniques in digital humanities research.
- Had classmates from all over the world.
- About a year ago, Ms. Alden opened a writing center through the community college.
- Senator Kahn asked what other degrees Ms. Alden holds. Ms. Alden holds a Bachelor of Arts from Bowdoin College and a credential as a religious educator.
- Senator Kahn noted how exciting the writing lab she offers to her students is.

Summary of testimony presented in opposition: None.

Neutral Information Presented:

**Stephen Appleby – Division Director of Educator Support in Higher Education, NH
Department of Education**

- Director Appleby made himself available to answer any questions regarding the accreditation process and provide facts.
- Not testifying in favor nor in opposition to this bill.

amh

Date Hearing Report completed: January 18, 2021

Speakers

Name	Representing	Position	Testifying
Ward Senator Ruth	Senate District 8	Support	Yes
Appleby Steve	NH DOE	Neutral	Yes
Alden Laurie	Myself	Support	Yes
Olsen Corey	Signum University	Support	Yes
reid shannon	CCSNH	Neutral	No
Hennessey Sen. Erin	SD1	Support	No
Ricciardi Sen. Denise	SD9	Support	No
Carson Sharon	Myself	Support	No

Testimony

Ava Hawkes

From: Sparrow F. Alden <lfsalden@gmail.com>
Sent: Tuesday, January 12, 2021 9:20 AM
To: Ava Hawkes
Subject: In support of SB19

Fellow Granite Staters, Good morning,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you about SB 19, relative to the degree granting authority of Signum University. I am Laurie Alden, a resident of Plainfield, New Hampshire.

In January of 2012, I began taking courses at Signum while I raised two middle-school children, attended my mother in the last year of her life, supported my police officer wife, and performed my half-time job. I desperately needed new thoughts, new ways to keep my brain stimulated, new ways to advance myself.

Signum University exposed me to world-class professors on the edge of our field, training me in exacting habits of mind and discernment. Integral to the concept of Signum University has been the value of superlative scholarship, embodied first in its professors and then, through their example, in its students.

Equal with that value of excellence, Signum has always devoted itself to full accessibility. From the no-building, low-cost infrastructure to the global reach of the internet, Signum strives to be open to everyone with a desire to learn in this small but active corner of academia. Rural residents of Coos County, veterans or elders with mobility impairment, and even tired sandwich-generation moms from Plainfield can challenge ourselves, better ourselves, as long as we have a public library with internet access.

I completed my Master's qualifications at Signum including a project learning and helping develop leading edge techniques of digital humanities. Then I realized a dream and became an adjunct professor of English at River Valley Community College, based in Claremont: home of the famous Claremont decision, where enthusiastic, excited teachers make a world of difference in our community.

Since then, through the community college, I have opened a writing center called WriterSpace at River Valley, a free place for writers of all kinds to encourage one another and get work done. When the pandemic struck our nation, WriterSpace became virtual - and now we help writers from all over the country as well as our neighbors in Canada.

Signum University is a great resource for New Hampshire residents. Yet I have had classmates in Alaska, Tasmania, and Israel. The rigorous standards of online education which the State has learned to implement and assess make Signum's approval an excellent move for the state as a whole: the high quality of Signum University's online educational programs will be a signal to our global neighbors that an authorization from the State of New Hampshire means thorough vetting, high standards, a degree which can be held up with any other Master of Arts in Literature and Language.

Thank you,
I am pleased to answer questions here or to respond to email inquiries about Signum University.
Laurie Frances "Sparrow" Alden
297 Porter Road
Plainfield, NH 03781

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Sparrow F. Alden, CRE, MA; *she, her, hers, herself*
Independent scholar taking a digital humanities look at Tolkien
Director of WriterSpace: poet and author.
Works available through Amazon

Voting Sheets

Senate Education Committee
EXECUTIVE SESSION RECORD
2020-2021 Session

Bill # SB19

Hearing date: 1/12/21

Executive Session date: 1/25/21

Motion of: OTP Vote: 4-1

Committee Member	Present	Made by	Second	Yes	No
Sen. Ward, Chair	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sen. Hennessey, VC	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sen. Ricciardi	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sen. Kahn	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Sen. Prentiss	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Motion of: _____ Vote: _____

Committee Member	Present	Made by	Second	Yes	No
Sen. Ward, Chair	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sen. Hennessey, VC	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sen. Ricciardi	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sen. Kahn	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sen. Prentiss	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Motion of: _____ Vote: _____

Committee Member	Present	Made by	Second	Yes	No
Sen. Ward, Chair	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sen. Hennessey, VC	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sen. Ricciardi	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sen. Kahn	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sen. Prentiss	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Reported out by: Sen. Ward

Notes: _____

Committee Report

STATE OF NEW HAMPSHIRE
SENATE
REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE

Monday, January 25, 2021

THE COMMITTEE ON Education

to which was referred **SB 19**

AN ACT

relative to the degree granting authority of Signum
university.

Having considered the same, the committee recommends that the Bill

OUGHT TO PASS

BY A VOTE OF: 4-1

Senator Ruth Ward
For the Committee

Ava Hawkes 271-4151

EDUCATION

SB 19, relative to the degree granting authority of Signum university.

Ought to Pass, Vote 4-1.

Senator Ruth Ward for the committee.

Docket of SB19

Docket Abbreviations

Bill Title: relative to the degree granting authority of Signum university.*Official Docket of SB19.:*

Date	Body	Description
1/5/2021	S	To Be Introduced 01/06/2021 and Referred to Education; SJ 2
1/7/2021	S	Remote Hearing: 01/12/2021, 09:30 am; Links to join the hearing can be found in the Senate Calendar; SC 6
1/25/2021	S	Committee Report: Ought to Pass, 02/04/2021; SC 9
2/4/2021	S	Ought to Pass: RC 20Y-4N, MA; OT3rdg; 02/04/2021; SJ 3
3/10/2021	H	Introduced (in recess of) 02/25/2021 and referred to Education HJ 4 P. 48
3/17/2021	H	Public Hearing: 03/25/2021 09:00 am Members of the public may attend using the following link: To join the webinar: https://www.zoom.us/j/96421714087 / Executive session on pending legislation may be held throughout the day (time permitting) from the time the committee is initially convened.
5/12/2021	H	Executive Session: 05/20/2021 09:00 am Members of the public may attend using the following link: To join the webinar: https://www.zoom.us/j/92551660487
5/25/2021	H	Committee Report: Inexpedient to Legislate (Vote 20-0; RC) HC 26 P. 19
6/3/2021	H	Inexpedient to Legislate: MA VV 06/03/2021

NH House

NH Senate

Other Referrals

Senate Inventory Checklist for Archives

Bill Number: SB 19

Senate Committee: Education

Please include all documents in the order listed below and indicate the documents which have been included with an "X" beside

Final docket found on Bill Status

Bill Hearing Documents: {Legislative Aides}

- Bill version as it came to the committee
- All Calendar Notices
- Hearing Sign-up sheet(s)
- Prepared testimony, presentations, & other submissions handed in at the public hearing
- Hearing Report
- Revised/Amended Fiscal Notes provided by the Senate Clerk's Office

Committee Action Documents: {Legislative Aides}

All amendments considered in committee (including those not adopted):

- ___ - amendment # _____
- ___ - amendment # _____
- Executive Session Sheet
- Committee Report

Floor Action Documents: {Clerk's Office}

All floor amendments considered by the body during session (only if they are offered to the senate):

- ___ - amendment # _____
- ___ - amendment # _____

Post Floor Action: (if applicable) {Clerk's Office}

- ___ Committee of Conference Report (if signed off by all members. Include any new language proposed by the committee of conference):
- ___ Enrolled Bill Amendment(s)
- ___ Governor's Veto Message

All available versions of the bill: {Clerk's Office}

- ___ as amended by the senate
- ___ as amended by the house
- ___ final version

Completed Committee Report File Delivered to the Senate Clerk's Office By:

Committee Aide

Date

Senate Clerk's Office 