



# The Three-Year Bachelor's Degree: Reform Measure or Red Herring?

by Daniel J. Hurley

Director of State Relations and Policy Analysis  
and

Thomas L. Harnisch

Assistant Director of State Relations and Policy Analysis

## Context

Seeking a grand-scale solution to improving college affordability, boosting campus productivity and addressing skilled labor shortages, some policymakers and higher education officials are revisiting the notion of the three-year bachelor's degree ("three-year degree" hereafter). Some argue that condensing bachelor's degrees into three years will not only save students time and money, but also improve the efficiency of campus facilities and institutional resources. Skeptics, however, argue that this approach to baccalaureate education does not address underlying financial dynamics affecting college affordability, ignores the realities of most students' life-work balance, and may compromise core learning and personal development objectives.

Strained economic circumstances in recent years have led some top policymakers and thought leaders to champion shortened bachelor's degrees as a meaningful solution to vexing college cost challenges. U.S. Senator and former U.S. Secretary of Education and University of Tennessee President Lamar Alexander (R-TN) argued in a 2009 [Newsweek article](#) that three-year degrees are an innovative strategy to help well-prepared students save time and money. Former George Washington University President

Stephen Trachtenberg [concluded](#) that the four-year approach is "wasteful and expensive" and that three-year degrees could boost institutional productivity and expand student opportunities. University of Pennsylvania education professor Robert Zemsky [asserts](#) in his book, *Making Reform Work: The Case for Transforming American Higher Education*, that three-year degrees could lower college costs and lead to meaningful reform conversations in academia. Op-eds and editorials from other supporters of three-year degrees have appeared in [The Wall Street Journal](#), [The Washington Post](#), [USA Today](#) and [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#).

This paper will first explore the various goals and models of three-year degrees. It will then examine their growing popularity with campus- and state-level university officials and state policymakers, and discuss state-led initiatives, new state laws and campus-based programs. It will then consider the potential benefits of the three-year degree to students and institutions, as well as possible drawbacks of the degree as a meaningful answer to college costs and campus productivity challenges. The paper will conclude with commentary of this campus practice and state-level policy measure as a solution to meeting major objectives in American higher education.

## Observations

**Three-year degree programs have a broad range of program goals and may involve a number of potential changes to campus operations and curricular models.**

Shortened bachelor's degrees have been offered as a solution for a number of longstanding small- and large-scale issues in American higher education. The rationale for three-year degrees includes mitigating the trend of sharp increases in published tuition rates; the costs involved with prolonging entry into the full-time workforce; inefficient use of campus facilities; calls for more degree options; less than acceptable time-to-degree completion rates; and even poorer college completion rates.

This broad range of goals associated with the three-year degree has resulted in an array of potential changes at higher education institutions, ranging from incremental curricular reforms to comprehensive overhauls of the undergraduate education model. For example, some campuses are piloting three-year degrees in a few academic programs. Others are weighing plans to scrap the longstanding nine-month academic calendar in favor of year-around programming, a move that could make three-year degrees a prominent outcome on some college campuses.

There are at least four different three-year degree models utilized by colleges and universities today. One model relies on extensive *prior learning* credits, such as those attained from Advanced Placement (AP) and dual enrollment courses. A second approach is the *competency-based* model, which reduces time-to-degree by integrating course content across the curriculum, eliminating redundancy and assessing student knowledge and skills (as opposed to seat time).<sup>1</sup> Another method involves course reduction, slimming down the number of credits required for a given bachelor's degree. The most widely-known approach is the *compression* model, whereby the bachelor's degree is condensed into three years through the integration of summer and inter-term courses. Some three-year degree programs combine features of two or more of these models.

**Three-year degrees have long been considered a reform option for American college campuses, but in recent years have materialized into a series of new state initiatives, laws and campus-level programs.**

Shortened bachelor's degrees are not new to American higher education. Harvard University, for example, sought to reduce the time to degree completion in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, leading a significant share of its students to finish in three years. Many veterans using the G.I. Bill enrolled in summer courses to finish bachelor's degrees in three years.<sup>2</sup> Bates College, a private, non-profit institution in Maine, introduced an accelerated bachelor's degree program in the 1960s, and which continues today.<sup>3</sup> The compressed bachelor's degree model was [revisited](#) in the early 1990s as enrollment increased, states' share of funding of public higher education began its long decline, and enrollment in AP courses became more widespread.

Despite these efforts, three-year degree programs remain relatively obscure today, are more common at private colleges, and have few participants and even fewer completers. With or without the assistance of formal three-year degree formats, only a small share of students (with some estimates as low as 2 percent) complete a bachelor's degree in three years or less.<sup>4</sup> Most first-time, full-time students do not finish in four years (38 percent), instead taking five (54 percent) or six years (58 percent) to complete their bachelor's degree (See Figure 1).<sup>5</sup>

Concerns involving college costs, however, have in recent years led to a series of three-year degree proposals, policies and campus-level programs. These include new state higher education initiatives and legislation, as well as a cadre of campus-led programs at both private and public colleges and universities.

**State Initiatives.** A number of governors and state-level higher education officials have explored three-year degrees in the past two years. Among them is Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels, who called for expanding three-year degrees in 2010 as a way of boosting the number of college graduates in the workforce.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, Ohio Gov. John Kasich called for the state's public universities to offer three-year degrees in 10 percent of their degree programs by 2012 and 60 percent by 2014.<sup>7</sup>

**Figure 1. Graduation Rates of Full-Time, First-Time Bachelor's Degree-Seeking Students, by Sector and Time to Degree After Entry**  
(data in percentages)

	Overall	Public Institutions	Private, Not-for-Profit Institutions	Private, For-Profit Institutions
4 years	37.9	31.3	52.4	20.4
5 years	53.9	50.6	62.9	25.8
6 years	58.3	56	65.4	28.4

**Source:** U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Spring 2011. Includes U.S. Title IV four-year institutions only; entering cohort year 2004.

At the state system level, the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU) have [explored](#) three-year degrees and year-round course scheduling, a move that could lead to more students finishing in three years.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the state's other higher education system, the University of Minnesota, discussed year-round course scheduling in early 2012.<sup>9</sup> In California, the University of California's (UC) Commission on the Future [recommended](#) three-year "packaged options" as one strategy for reducing time-to-degree completion and serving more students.<sup>10</sup>

**State Laws.** Recently enacted state laws in Rhode Island ([2009](#)) and Washington ([2011](#)) ordered the development of three-year degrees. The Rhode Island law directs the state's higher education board and K-12 system to build a credit transfer system to foster the development of three-year degrees. The law also calls on the state's public colleges and universities to identify and implement campus-level changes to support three-year degrees, such as curricular and financial aid policies.<sup>11</sup> The Washington legislation seeks to generate more degree options for "academically-qualified" students, but does not call for three-year degree programs that include summer classes or more than a full-time class load during the standard academic year. The legislation also allows students in these programs to begin course work within their field of study during their first semester of college.<sup>12</sup>

**Campus Programs.** Institutions have historically taken the lead on the development of three-year degrees.

While each program is unique, they often have similar characteristics, such as limiting three-year degrees to selected majors, requiring students to enroll in summer courses and providing special advising services.<sup>13</sup> Many of these shortened bachelor's degree programs are relatively new. As one set of examples, the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU), a national association of private, not-for-profit postsecondary institutions, [lists](#) 19 colleges and universities that have started three-year degree programs since the economic downturn.<sup>14</sup>

In the public sector, a number of campuses have developed three-year degrees in recent years. Below is a sample of new programs offered by member institutions of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU):

- *Ball State University (Ind.).* The [Degree in Three](#) program provides students with a way to enter the workforce a year early by compressing bachelor's degree programs into three years. The condensed degree, available in 30 academic programs, involves a full-time course load during the regular academic year, as well as required summer courses. Tuition costs are comparable to the standard four-year format.<sup>15</sup> While participation and completion has been sparse, campus officials conclude that the three-year programs have resulted in increased campus efficiency.<sup>16</sup>
- *Northern Arizona University (NAU).* NAU recently partnered with Pearson Higher Education to develop [fully online, competency-based](#) bachelor's

degrees in business administration, computer information technology and liberal studies that students can complete in as little as three years.<sup>17</sup> The program is geared toward adult students with professional and life experiences who are looking to complete a college degree. The program is set to begin in early 2013 and will cost students \$2,500 every six months, allowing them to finish courses at their own pace.<sup>18</sup> The university also offers a traditional [three-year track](#) for students with prior learning credits and those who are willing to take summer and/or winter courses.<sup>19</sup>

- *Southern Oregon University*. The [Accelerated Baccalaureate Program](#) (“Acc Bacc”) mixes prior learning and course reduction with the goal of attracting academically high-caliber students, improving student retention and allowing students to finish their degree program early. Acc Bacc is limited to certain majors and [has a minimum high school GPA threshold and other requirements](#) in order for students to participate. The program uses a series of annual contracts with student participants and allows a reduction of between 21 and 45 credits of the 180-credit programs (using a quarter-based degree model).<sup>20</sup> Students can save up to 25 percent of their educational costs in this program.<sup>21</sup>
- *University of Houston-Victoria (Texas)*. The Degree in Three, (“[Dn3](#)”), launched in 2010, offers a compressed 120-credit degree format for a select number of academic majors. The program freezes tuition and mandatory fees for three years, as long as students meet specified grade and progress benchmarks. The program can save students \$1,400 on tuition.<sup>22</sup> Dn3 also includes a study abroad experience and hands-on work option.<sup>23</sup>
- *University of North Carolina Greensboro (UNCG)*. Created in 2010, the [UNCG in 3](#) is available in 17 academic programs. Students are required to have 12 hours of prior learning credit to enroll in the condensed format and can realize up to \$9,000 in tuition savings. University officials say that providing the lower-cost degree option is a smart way to use public resources and serve the institution’s large low-income student population.<sup>24</sup>

Other public colleges and universities have piloted three-year degree options, typically involving a small subset of high-demand programs. For example, the University of Wisconsin-Stout offers three-year degrees in business administration, hotel, restaurant and tourism management, and psychology. Students participating in three-year degree programs sign a contract that allows them to graduate after three years if all requirements are met. If a course becomes unavailable, the university will substitute a different course or pay for classes taken after the three years. The university aims to expand three-year degree options in coming years.<sup>25</sup>

---

*“Just as a hybrid car is not for every driver, a three-year degree is not for every student. Expanding the three-year option or year-round schedules may be difficult, but it may be more palatable than asking Congress for additional bailout money, asking legislators for more state support, or asking students for even higher tuition payments. Campuses willing to adopt convenient schedules along with more-focused, less-expensive degrees may find that they have a competitive advantage in attracting bright, motivated students.”*

—U.S. Senator Lamar Alexander (R-TN) “The Three-Year Solution,” *Newsweek*, October 16, 2009

---

**Three-year degrees can deliver a range of important student benefits.** Three-year degree programs can help students by lowering opportunity costs, reducing tuition costs, encouraging better utilization of high school, expediting the path to graduate school, and providing a predictable, structured degree program.

Overall cost savings of three-year degrees vary based on campus tuition policies and other factors. In 2010, the Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal Bureau [estimated](#) that Wisconsin students could reduce the net cost of a degree by approximately \$25,000 by finishing a year early. Such savings, however, depend on the institution attended, enrollment patterns, credits earned prior to enrollment, post-graduate salary and employment while enrolled.<sup>26</sup>

- **Lower opportunity costs.** A significant, if underappreciated, cost of attending college involves wages forgone while a student is in school. Students who finish a bachelor's degree in three years can enter the workforce early and earn additional wages. Given that the average starting salary for new bachelor's degree recipients entering the workforce in 2011 was \$41,701, the additional year of employment can add up to a considerable earnings differential.<sup>27</sup> However, the actual reduction in opportunity costs varies based on a number of factors, including choice of major, the institution attended and earnings sacrificed while the student is enrolled in the three-year bachelor's degree program.
- **Reduced tuition costs.** A three-year degree protects students from increases in tuition costs that otherwise might be realized if a student was enrolled in a four-year course format. Tuition savings will fluctuate based on campus tuition policies. If campuses charge on a "per-credit" basis, tuition cost savings on a degree with the same number of credits is minimal, if existent at all. Three-year degree students may also have to sign up for summer credits, which can be more expensive than credits taken during the academic year. Tuition savings can be realized if the campus has a flat tuition rate policy (such as charging for the same rate for 12-18 credits in a semester) and the students take the maximum number of credits. Students can also save money by taking a reduced number of college courses, a prominent feature of some three-year degree models.

An [analysis](#) of tuition savings that could be realized by students who complete a bachelor's degree in three years, included in the Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal Bureau study cited above, reveals a range of tuition savings across University of Wisconsin (UW) System

institutions. In its analysis, the bureau assumed a student would take 18 credits during the fall and spring semesters and six credits during the summer term, and that a 5.5 percent increase in tuition and mandatory fees would be incurred each year (See Figure 2).<sup>28</sup>

- **Improved utilization of high school.** Three-year degree programs can motivate students to make better use of high school, including taking AP and dual enrollment courses that count toward a bachelor's degree. The expanded availability of AP courses may make three-year degrees a possibility for a growing number of students. Among the nation's 2011 high school graduating class, 18 percent participated in at least one AP exam and earned a score of 3 or higher.<sup>29</sup>

The acquisition of pre-college credits can be a contributing factor in finishing college early. An [analysis](#) conducted by MnSCU in 2011 found that approximately 75 percent of the students enrolled at the system's institutions who finished in three years arrived on campus with some college credits; 57 percent of this population arrived with at least 16 credits, despite the fact that the system did not offer three-year degrees.<sup>30</sup>

- **Expedited path to graduate programs.** Three-year degree programs can be combined with graduate programs to cut the time-to-degree completion, resulting in potential cost savings to students. The two degrees are usually awarded together at the completion of the graduate program and are

<b>Figure 2. Estimated Tuition and Fees Charged to Students Completing a Bachelor's Degree in Three or Four Years at Selected University of Wisconsin System Institutions</b>			
	<b>Enrolled 2010-11 through 2012-13 (3 Years)</b>	<b>Enrolled 2010-11 through 2013-14 (4 Years)</b>	<b>Difference</b>
UW-Madison	\$33,646	\$40,104	\$6,457
UW-Milwaukee	\$29,838	\$35,178	\$5,340
UW-Parkside	\$24,370	\$28,741	\$4,371
UW-Stout	\$29,952	\$30,874	\$922

Source: Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal Bureau, 2010.

therefore not true “three-year bachelor’s degrees.” For example, Florida State University offers a “Two in Four” program that allows students to finish some undergraduate and graduate degree programs in four years.<sup>31</sup> Many colleges and universities offer bachelor’s and graduate degrees merged into five-year formats.

- **Improved program structure, predictability.** Three-year degree programs typically offer students a clear, structured path to completion, eliminating the existence of a complex array of course choices, whose availability may be uncertain. In some three-year programs, students are either guaranteed a seat in required classes or are given priority registration. Students may also receive comprehensive advising services. Together, these features can relieve students of the uncertainty of college course selection that can lead to wasted time and money, and increased anxiety.
- **Better work/internship opportunities.** The dominate fall/spring approach to college course scheduling leads to a disproportionate number of students applying for work and internship opportunities in summer months. Three-year degrees can relieve some of this demand by having more students enrolled in school during summer months.<sup>32</sup>

#### **Broad-based utilization of three-year degree programs can have institutional advantages.**

These may include increased productivity, greater student access and a strategy for enhancing student recruitment.

- **Increased productivity.** Institutional utilization of three-year degree programs can result in productivity gains and expanded student access. Three-year degree programs that have significant student enrollment may require a robust catalog of summer and inter-term courses that can lead to improved utilization of campus facilities. Currently, many campus instructional facilities sit idle during the summer months, yet struggle to meet demand during the academic year. These efficiency improvements can, in turn, open spaces to allow the university to serve more students. The University of California’s Commission on the Future estimates

that if 5 to 10 percent of undergraduates finished their degrees one term earlier, the university could educate 2,000 to 4,000 more students annually.<sup>33</sup>

The provision of mandatory year-round course scheduling degree programs can lead to three-year degrees while improving efficiency and increasing student access. Brigham Young University-Idaho (BYU-I), a private, not-for-profit college, employs a full-year academic calendar, resulting in the same numbers of students enrolling in the summer, fall and spring trimesters and using the same number of faculty. The year-round format has contributed to a 32 percent cost improvement.<sup>34</sup> BYU-I has also increased enrollment 50 percent over the past decade without major construction projects.<sup>35</sup> In the public sector, the University of North Texas-Dallas is also considering year-round trimester degree programs.<sup>36</sup>

- **Enhanced student recruitment.** For some institutions, providing a cadre of three-year degree options may be one strategy for attracting motivated students. This can enhance a school’s reputation for quality programming and its graduation rate.<sup>37</sup>
- **Mission alignment.** Providing students with the option of reducing their costs and entering the workforce a year early may align with institutional strategic goals and mission statements. Three-year degrees can contribute to common institutional objectives, including increasing college access to a wider array of students, demonstrating innovation in curricular programming, and boosting measures of productivity.

---

*“I think it’s just a very big mistake to approach the structure of higher education or any other education based upon any number. To my mind you’re just avoiding the crucial and, admittedly, extremely difficult question: What is the knowledge and what are the capacities that we want young people to have in order to do well in the future world they’re going to be responsible for?”*

—Columbia University President Lee Bollinger, “What’s College for Anyway?” *Newsweek*, October 16, 2009

---

**Conversely, others argue that three-year degrees are an ineffective and inequitable model with the potential to undermine undergraduate education.**

The three-year degree may not be an appropriate curricular strategy due to a lack of student demand; concerns about the model's effect on the quality of the bachelor's degree; the possibility for higher costs with too few corollary benefits; poor alignment with federal student aid programs; and the possibility of having to make considerable changes to campus operations, only to suit uncertain market demand.

- **Limited student appeal.** Three-year degree programs have historically appealed primarily to highly motivated, traditionally-aged (18-22-year-old) students who will likely finish college in a timely manner, regardless of the programming format. For populations that most need to increase college success—such as older adults, lower-income and minority students—the three-year degree can be arguably construed as largely a nonstarter due to financial realities, college preparation issues and family obligations. Because of these dynamics, there are questions concerning the equity and efficiency of the three-year degree as a premier programmatic tool for boosting productivity and achievement throughout a large swath of the American postsecondary student population.

Many of these programs serve only a few dozen students and ultimately end up graduating only a small number of students in three years. This is true for both selective and non-selective institutions. Due to lack of demand, some institutions have ceased enrolling new students in three-year degree programs.

The reasons for low student participation in three-year degree programs include the following:

- *Work and family obligations.* Many students have to work to finance their college education, including full-time work in the summer and part-time work during the traditional academic year. Further, students who have children and/or care for other family dependents may be prevented from pursuing full-time coursework.

- *Switch/addition of academic majors.* A core value of a liberal undergraduate education is offering students an opportunity to explore different courses of study. Many students do not start college with a fixed plan, and others switch or add academic programs. However, three-year degree programs generally require students to stay with a specific academic major throughout their entire course of study. Various studies have shown as many as three in four students change their major one time between their freshman and senior year.<sup>38</sup>
- *Lack of coordination with community colleges.* Many three-year degree programs are not coordinated with community colleges, thus limiting the eligible population. According to the American Association of Community Colleges, 44 percent of all U.S. undergraduates attended a community college in fall 2009, including a disproportionate share of minority and first-generation students.<sup>39</sup>
- *Limited program offerings.* Three-year degree options are often limited to selected programs and usually exclude those that require sequential courses or longer degree programs, such as engineering.
- *Remediation.* A significant share of the student population requires remedial coursework, thus lending less viability to the three-year degree as a major curricular and cost savings reform option. According to the U.S. Department of Education, more than 36 percent of first-year undergraduates in 2007-08 took at least one remedial course.<sup>40</sup>
- *Difficulty of academic rigor/course load.* Three-year degree programs may require students to take heavier course loads, as well as summer and inter-term classes. Many students find the pace to be too demanding and stressful. Further, students who enroll in shortened bachelor's degree programs may not finish in the 36-month time frame. Florida State University, for example, offered a three-year degree program in 2000, but 40 percent of the enrollees ultimately ended up staying four years.<sup>41</sup>

- *Lack of urgency.* Some students do not want to rush through college and instead use the time to explore different academic subjects, develop relationships and pursue a wide variety of on-and-off campus opportunities.

- **Potential devaluation of the undergraduate educational experience.** Three-year degree programs may address issues of time, costs and efficiency, but may not address more fundamental issues, such as the extent to which student learning is achieved, development of critical thinking skills, personal growth and civic engagement. Under a three-year model, students may participate in a sequence of courses without the time to make full meaning of their newly acquired knowledge, to take part in on- and off-campus experiences, and to make meaning of those experiences as well. Skeptics of the efficacy of the three-year degree as a major reform have argued that the conversation should be flipped—i.e., time (spent on educational tasks) should be the variable and student learning should be held constant in assessing the overarching outcomes one gains from completion of a bachelor's degree.<sup>42</sup>

Carol Geary Schneider, president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), a national organization dedicated to preserving the academic quality of undergraduate liberal education, takes issue with efforts to cut the number of credits needed for a bachelor's degree. In a 2010 [statement](#), Schneider argued that the interconnected, technological-driven world requires more knowledge, skills and opportunities. She does not, however, argue against the compressed three-year degree model, only concluding that it will serve a small, motivated subset of the student population.<sup>43</sup> The statement concludes with the following:

Americans are often prone—especially in challenging economic times—to seek silver bullets that will reliably solve important and complex societal problems. For the problems facing higher education, however, there is no silver bullet—no simple solution. To serve students and society well, we need to proceed on multiple levels: addressing purposes,

educational focus, connections across levels of learning, and clear alignment between curricular and cocurricular programs and essential learning outcomes.

We can and should use the available resources more purposefully and efficiently, as hundreds of institutions already are learning to do. But we should not squander the most important resource of all: students' own high-effort time on task.<sup>44</sup>

- **Potentially higher institutional costs with few additional benefits.** Specially-designed three-year degree programs may involve new institutional obligations that carry higher costs, such as additional courses and advising services. The benefits of such an investment may not be realized without robust student participation. Further, given the high academic abilities and fortitude required by those who enroll in a year-round, condensed program, the students likely to be interested in these programs would probably finish college in a timely manner regardless of the format.
- **Poor alignment with federal and state student aid programs.** The elimination of year-round Pell Grants may make enrollment in three-year degree programs more difficult for students from low-income backgrounds. Pell-eligible students who take a full course load in the fall and spring semesters will have exhausted their annual Pell Grant aid allotment for the summer term. If students are charged on a per-credit basis, the high credit loads may exceed federal student loan limits and lead to more students taking out costlier private loans to finance their education. Likewise, there may also be insufficient alignment between these fast-paced degrees and state student aid programs.
- **Key changes may need to be made for campus operations.** For a broad-based shift to three year degrees and year-round degree programming, campuses may need to examine whether their facilities, faculty contracts and campus operations align with changes needed in the transitioning to a condensed programming model. Officials may also need to assess staffing and energy costs associated with the shortened educational model.<sup>45</sup>

---

*“Instead of trying to stuff four years into a three-year basket, we need to start defining and differentiating courses of study while making assessment results much more transparent, so people can take their credential into the job market with confidence, regardless of how long those credentials took to earn.”*

—Kevin Carey, former policy director at Education Sector and current director of the education policy program at New America Foundation, “3-Year Degrees Are the Future, and Always Will Be,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 29, 2009

---

## Conclusion

With the wide-ranging goals and models involved in three-year bachelor’s degree programs, it is important for institutional leaders and policymakers to ask some basic questions in determining the efficacy of these shortened degrees as a major reform option, such as:

- What goals does the three-year degree seek to meet?
- Is the three-year degree a resource-efficient and equitable means of addressing these goals, for both students and the institution?
- Can utilization of the three-year degree make a considerable positive impact on students—in terms of affordability, learning outcomes and other personal development achievements—and institutions, in terms of efficiency and productivity gains?
- Is the market demand for the three-year degree sufficient? And is the target student population one that reflects a demographic that will contribute to institutional degree completion goals and state educational attainment goals?

The three-year degree as a *programmatic option* has a history of appealing to a small, motivated share of the student population whom are likely to finish college in a timely manner regardless of the program’s length. It may be useful as a recruitment tool and to

expand student choice, but campuses are not likely to witness major productivity gains by offering these condensed degrees, at least not at the outset, and not short of embedding them comprehensively as part of an overall restructured instructional delivery format. To date, three-year degree program options have failed to receive enough broad-based student participation to be thought of as a top-tier policy consideration in state efforts to expand college access and improve college affordability.

The increasingly popular competency-based bachelor’s degree programs and mandatory year-round course scheduling may hold more promise to expand student access, promote timely degree completion, diminish the rise in college costs, and improve institutional productivity. These latter programmatic approaches may reach more students and deliver more benefits than the traditional three-year degree model. Any reforms in the restructuring of the bachelor’s degree should be carefully considered and should involve collaboration, coordination and buy-in from a wide variety of stakeholders, including faculty, staff and students.

Regardless of the model employed by colleges and universities in delivering the three-year degree, students face significant financial, family and college preparation challenges in their efforts to finish a bachelor’s degree in a shortened time frame. These challenges—especially acute among growing numbers of low-income, first-generation and minority students—often result in students failing to finish a bachelor’s degree in four or five years, let alone three years. While proponents of three-year degrees are right to note the inefficiency of the dominant fall/spring approach to undergraduate education and the need to improve college affordability, the shortened programmatic model does not sufficiently align with many of the challenges facing a large proportion of today’s students. Policymakers and higher education leaders, in their quest to achieve major reforms in the cost and programmatic models of the undergraduate degree, should encourage innovation among the full range of degree formats, instructional delivery models and student success strategies that have broad-based student appeal with the likelihood of generating meaningful results in improving timely degree completion.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup>Seidman, Robert H. (2011, July 22). 'A resounding yes' to the degree in three. College, Inc.—*The Washington Post*. Retrieved from [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/college-inc/post/guest-post-a-resounding-yes-to-the-degree-in-three/2011/07/22/gIQAglcTI\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/college-inc/post/guest-post-a-resounding-yes-to-the-degree-in-three/2011/07/22/gIQAglcTI_blog.html)
- <sup>2</sup>Keller, George. (2008, November 14). Why colleges should offer 3-year diplomas. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/Why-Colleges-Should-Offer/3253/>
- <sup>3</sup>DeVise, Daniel. (2011, June 16). Three-year degrees: A closer look. College, Inc.—*The Washington Post*. Retrieved from [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/college-inc/post/three-year-degrees-a-closer-look/2011/06/16/AGSM62XH\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/college-inc/post/three-year-degrees-a-closer-look/2011/06/16/AGSM62XH_blog.html)
- <sup>4</sup>Gordon, Larry. (2010, April 22). Three-year bachelor's degree gain popularity. *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved from <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/apr/22/local/la-me-threear-20100423>
- <sup>5</sup>Knapp, L.G., Kelly, J.E. & Ginder, S.A. Enrollment in postsecondary institutions, fall 2010; Financial statistics, fiscal year 2010; and graduation rates, selected cohorts, 2002-07. *U.S. Department of Education* (2012): 7. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2012/2012280.pdf>
- <sup>6</sup>Associated Press. (2010, April 20). Indiana governor pushes three-year degrees. *The Ball State Daily News*. Retrieved from <http://www.bsudailynews.com/indiana-governor-pushes-for-3-year-college-degrees-1.2232857>
- <sup>7</sup>Farkas, Karen. (2011, April 3). Kasich asks for 3-year 'pathways' to bachelor's degrees at Ohio's four-year universities. *The Plain Dealer*. Retrieved from [http://blog.cleveland.com/metro/2011/04/kasich\\_asks\\_for\\_3-year\\_pathway.html](http://blog.cleveland.com/metro/2011/04/kasich_asks_for_3-year_pathway.html)
- <sup>8</sup>Ross, Jenna. (2011, May 20). Trendy three-year degrees gain momentum in Minnesota. *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*. Retrieved from <http://www.startribune.com/local/122271774.html>
- <sup>9</sup>Friedrich, Alex. (2012, April 3). U of M to further consider year-round schedule. *Minnesota Public Radio*. Retrieved from <http://minnesota.publicradio.org/display/web/2012/04/03/university-year-round-calendar/>
- <sup>10</sup>Gordon, Larry. (2010, March 24). UC panel proposes three-year bachelor's degrees, other big changes. *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved from <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/mar/24/local/la-me-uc-future24-2010mar24>
- <sup>11</sup>Rhode Island Legislature. Chapter 202 H 5286, 2009 Legislative Session. Retrieved from <http://www.rilin.state.ri.us/publiclaws/law09/law09202.htm>
- <sup>12</sup>Washington Legislature. Substitute Senate Bill 5442, 2011 Regular Session. Retrieved from <http://apps.leg.wa.gov/documents/billdocs/2011-12/Pdf/Bills/Senate%20Passed%20Legislature/5442-S.PL.pdf>
- <sup>13</sup>Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU). (2011, May 17). Board of Trustees Agenda Item Summary Sheet. Retrieved from <http://www.mnscu.edu/board/materials/2011/may18/asa-05-calendar.pdf/>
- <sup>14</sup>Hartford Courant. (2012, May 29). Wesleyen to offer three-year bachelor's degree. Retrieved from <http://www.courant.com/news/education/hc-wesleyan-university-three-year-college-0530-20120529,0,7403934.story>
- <sup>15</sup>Abramson, Larry. (2011, April 19). Ohio universities told to develop three-year degrees. *National Public Radio*. Retrieved from <http://www.npr.org/2011/04/19/135545481/ohio-universities-told-to-develop-3-year-degrees>
- <sup>16</sup>DeVise, 2011.
- <sup>17</sup>Kolowich, Steve. (2012, July 11). Northern Arizona U. partners with Pearson for competency-based degree programs. *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved from <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/07/11/northern-arizona-u-partners-pearson-competency-based-degree-programs>
- <sup>18</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>19</sup>Three year degree option. Northern Arizona University. Retrieved from <http://www4.nau.edu/gateway/Global/3yr/default.asp>
- <sup>20</sup>Accelerated baccalaureate program. Southern Oregon University. Retrieved from <http://www.sou.edu/abp/>
- <sup>21</sup>Wheeler, Sam. (2012, June 16). Fast track grads. Mail Tribune. Retrieved from <http://www.mailtribune.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20120616/NEWS/206160307>
- <sup>22</sup>Student can lock-in price for new three-year degree program. University of Houston-Victoria. Retrieved from <http://www.uhv.edu/asa/dn3.htm>
- <sup>23</sup>Kever, Jeannie. (2009, July 15). New UH-Victoria program to put degrees on fast track plan would lead to bachelor's degree in three years, save \$12,000 in costs. *Houston Chronicle*. Retrieved from [http://www.chron.com/CDA/archives/archive.mpl?id=2009\\_4765381](http://www.chron.com/CDA/archives/archive.mpl?id=2009_4765381)
- <sup>24</sup>DeVise, 2011.
- <sup>25</sup>Thomas, Arthur. (2012, July 11). Graduating in 3 years gains popularity. *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*. Retrieved from <http://www.jsonline.com/news/education/graduating-in-3-years-gains-popularity-cm6018j-162148015.html>
- <sup>26</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup>Ellis, Blake. (2012, January 12). Class of 2011 scores higher-paying jobs. *CNN Money*. Retrieved from <http://money.cnn.com/2012/01/12/pf/college/salaries/index.htm>
- <sup>28</sup>Pope, Emily. (2012, November 5). Potential cost savings of three-year degree programs. Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal Bureau. Retrieved from [http://legis.wisconsin.gov/lc/committees/study/2010/HIED/files/nov9memo1\\_lfb.pdf](http://legis.wisconsin.gov/lc/committees/study/2010/HIED/files/nov9memo1_lfb.pdf)
- <sup>29</sup>The College Board (2012, February 8). Advanced Placement Results for Class of 2011. Retrieved from <http://press.collegeboard.org/releases/2012/advanced-placement-results-class-2011-announced>
- <sup>30</sup>MnSCU, 2011.
- <sup>31</sup>Degree in three. Florida State University. Retrieved from <http://www.degreein3.fsu.edu/>
- <sup>32</sup>Trachtenberg, Stephen Joel. (2010, May 24). A degree in three. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/25/opinion/25Trachtenberg.html>
- <sup>33</sup>University of California Commission on the Future: Final Report, November 2010. Retrieved from [http://ucfuture.universityofcalifornia.edu/presentations/cotf\\_final\\_report.pdf](http://ucfuture.universityofcalifornia.edu/presentations/cotf_final_report.pdf)
- <sup>34</sup>Auguste, B., Cota A., Jayaram, K. & Laboissiere, M. C.A. (2010). Winning by degrees: The strategies of highly productive higher-education institutions. McKinsey and Company. Retrieved from <http://mckinseysociety.com/downloads/reports/Education/Winning%20by%20degrees%20report%20fullreport%20v5.pdf>

- <sup>35</sup>Friedrich, 2012.
- <sup>36</sup>Blumenstyk, Goldie. (2012, April 29). Business advice meets academic culture. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/At-UNT-Dallas-Consultants/131736/>
- <sup>37</sup>MnSCU, 2011
- <sup>38</sup>Patterson, Kathleen Flanery. (2006). Changing their majors: How do students choose their majors and why do so many change?" Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Minnesota.
- <sup>39</sup>American Association of Community Colleges (2012). 2012 Community college fast facts. Retrieved from <http://www.aacc.nche.edu/AboutCC/Documents/FactSheet2012.pdf>
- <sup>40</sup>U.S. Department of Education (2011). *Digest of Education Statistics*, Table 243. Retrieved from [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d11/tables/dt11\\_243.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d11/tables/dt11_243.asp)
- <sup>41</sup>Shellenberger, Sue. (2010, May 12). Speeding college to save \$10,000. *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703565804575238341696523742.html>
- <sup>42</sup>Goldstein, Evan R. (2009, November 8). Renewed debate over the 3-year B.A. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/Renewed-Debate-Over-the-3-Year/49043/>
- <sup>43</sup>Schneider, Carol G. (2010, June 3). The Three-Year Degree is No Silver Bullet. Association of American Colleges and Universities. Retrieved from <http://www.aacu.org/about/statements/2010/threeyears.cfm>.
- <sup>44</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>45</sup>MnSCU, 2011

#### Contacts:

Daniel J. Hurley, Director, State Relations and Policy Analysis • [hurleyd@aascu.org](mailto:hurleyd@aascu.org)  
Thomas L. Harnisch, Assistant Director, State Relations and Policy Analysis • [harnischt@aascu.org](mailto:harnischt@aascu.org)  
ph 202.293.7070 • [aascu.org/policy](http://aascu.org/policy) • Twitter @aascupolicy