

Colleges Consider 3-Year Degrees To Save Undergrads Time, Money

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In an era when college students commonly take longer than four years to get a bachelor's degree, some U.S. schools are looking anew at an old idea: slicing a year off their undergraduate programs to save families time and money.

Advocates of a three-year undergraduate degree say it would work well for ambitious students who know what they want to study. Such a program could provide the course requirements for a major and some general courses that have long been the hallmark of American education.

The four-year bachelor's degree has been the model in the United States since the first universities began operating before the American Revolution. Four-year degrees were designed in large part to provide a broad-based education that teaches young people to analyze and think critically, considered vital preparation to participate in the civic life of American democracy.

The three-year degree is the common model at the University of Cambridge and Oxford University in England, and some U.S. schools have begun experimenting with the idea. To cram four years of study into three, some will require summer work, others will shave course lengths and some might cut the number of credit hours required.

"It will not be easy to produce a low-cost, high-quality three-year curriculum for a college degree, but now is the time to try," Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.), a former education secretary and a past president of the University of Tennessee, told a group of educators this year. "Today's economic crisis and tight budgets are the best time to innovate and change."

But critics said they fear that an undergraduate's academic and social experience would be compromised by shortening it to three years. College would tilt more toward job training and away from the broad-based education many U.S. schools have offered.

"Most high governmental officials who speak of education policy seem to conceive of education in this light -- as a way to ensure economic competitiveness and continued economic growth," said Derek Bok, president emeritus of Harvard University. "I strongly disagree with this approach."

Others point to failed experiments with the model. Only five students chose a three-year program at Upper Iowa University when it was offered several years ago, and all ultimately decided to stay for four years.

But discussions among educators and students about what constitutes a 21st-century college education in the information age increasingly include talk about how the economic downturn is making it more difficult for families to afford college -- and about how schools must be more creative in assisting them.

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Many students have extended their undergraduate stays for a variety of reasons, including the need to work to pay high tuitions.

The most recent statistics from the Education Department, from 2001, show that 4.2 percent of U.S. undergraduates finished with bachelor's degrees in three years, 57.3 percent graduated in four years and 38.5 percent took more than four years to graduate.

A new survey conducted by Junior Achievement and the Allstate Foundation found that 55 percent of teens had changed their college plans because of the economy.

Justin Guiffre, 19, a sophomore at George Washington University, said financial considerations might lead him to graduate in three years, an opportunity he has because of credits for Advanced Placement courses he took in high school.

Noting that the sticker price to attend the university is about \$54,000, he said, "A three-year program could be appropriate for students who demonstrate commitment, academic excellence and maturity."

At a February conference of the American Council on Education in Washington, Alexander said a three-year bachelor's degree for motivated students would cut "one-fourth the cost from a college education" and save students considerable time.

"I think we are going to see more colleges offering the three-year degree and better marketing," said Molly Corbett Broad, president of the nonprofit council and a former president of the 16-campus University of North Carolina.

Such programs have existed for several years at a number of schools, including Bates College in Maine and Ball State University in Indiana, which offers three-year degrees in about 30 areas. But more are jumping in, said Tony Pals, director of public information for the nonprofit National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities.

"They will be watched closely by other colleges, as well as policymakers," he said.

Lawmakers in Rhode Island's House recently approved a bill that requires all state institutions of higher education to create three-year bachelor's programs that would begin in fall 2010.

This fall, Hartwick College in New York is cutting a year -- and more than \$40,000 in costs -- off its undergraduate degree program. Lipscomb University in Nashville will offer a three-year degree this fall that requires students to attend two summer sessions (shortening the time they can earn money at summer jobs). The school says students will save about \$10,000.

At Chatham University in Pittsburgh, a three-year bachelor of interior architecture will be offered without summer courses, allowing students to get into the job market a year earlier, school officials said. School officials reconfigured the four-year degree by cutting the studio classes from 14 weeks to seven.

"It's a creative solution to a lot of different things," said program director Lori Alexander. "Students enter the workforce quicker, they save a year of tuition and they can go on sooner for graduate study. And no, they aren't missing anything. Academic quality stays the same."

As if three years isn't enough of a departure, Purdue University's College of Technology in Indiana just announced a two-year bachelor's degree starting this summer. It is aimed at educating unemployed auto

and manufacturing workers but is open to anyone, created with the idea that workers whose companies are eligible for federal economic stimulus funds would go to school while receiving unemployment checks, a school spokesman said.

Johnson Sattiewhite, 21, a junior at Howard University, is taking five years to get his bachelor's degree because, he said, he did not decide to major in advertising until his sophomore year and needed to catch up on course work. A three-year bachelor's might work for some students, he said, but many need more time.

College, he said, is about more than academics. It involves social networking and learning how to deal with life.

"We have four years to set up our future outside of college," he said. "Why give up one?"

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