

## The Push for a 3-Year Bachelor's Degree

Representatives from a dozen colleges met at Georgetown University last week to discuss three-year bachelor's degree pilot programs. Their ambitions are grand, but the future is uncertain.

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Huddled around a table in the Georgetown University Alumni House, roughly two dozen academics convened last week to address two of the most persistent challenges in higher education: improving student outcomes and lowering the cost of a bachelor's degree. Their proposed solution is an unconventional one—to create a three-year bachelor's program equivalent to a four-year college degree.

Unlike the other three-year options that exist on the market, their proposal isn't focused on accelerating bachelor's degree programs but rather redesigning them to fit within three years. That means cutting off chunks of credits and building a tightly packaged curriculum with all the essentials. While the standard bachelor's program is 120 credit hours, their proposals require 90 to 100 credits.

"The four-year degree isn't working for a lot of people," Lori Carrell, the chancellor of the University of Minnesota at Rochester, told her colleagues around the table, noting higher education's high cost and low degree attainment, which has "squandered human potential at times."

Carrell was flanked by Robert Zemsky, an elder statesman of higher education, author and longtime professor at the University of Pennsylvania, which has named a medal for innovation in his honor. Zemsky, who has long pursued the idea of a three-year degree, held court at Georgetown alongside Carrell with representatives from a dozen colleges in attendance.

"There is plenty of time in three years to do almost anything you want to do," Zemsky told the group's members, all of whom are working on three-year-degree pilot programs at their institutions.

For Zemsky, the idea has been in motion for well over a decade. In 2009, *Newsweek* featured him in a [cover story that explored the idea of a three-year bachelor's degree](https://www.newsweek.com/debate-higher-ed-and-three-year-degree-81429) (https://www.newsweek.com/debate-higher-ed-and-three-year-degree-81429). Zemsky argued at the time that a college degree could be "compressed" and simplified. But the idea never took off, Zemsky believes, because accreditors were resistant to a three-year degree.

Now, nearly 15 years later, the idea has fresh momentum. A dozen colleges are pursuing pilot programs, and accreditors are increasingly willing to consider them.

## The Idea

Leveraging their combined connections, Zemsky and Carrell found partners willing to explore the three-year bachelor's degree and commit to building pilot programs to that end.

The institutions with pilot programs are the American Public University system, Brigham Young University Idaho, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Georgetown University, Merrimack College, New England College, Northwood University, Portland State University, the University of Minnesota at Morris, the University of Minnesota at Rochester, the University of Wisconsin at Oshkosh and Utica University. Together they represent a diverse mix of public and private colleges ranging in geography, demographics and program ambitions.

All 12 pilot programs are in different stages of progress. Some institutions, like Georgetown, are only beginning to explore the idea. Others, like Merrimack College and BYU Idaho, have developed ready-to-launch proposals that they hope their respective accreditors will approve. And other institutions have dropped out along the way, shrinking the pilot pool from 14 to 12.

Zemsky and Carrell did not provide a template for a three-year degree, tasking the participants involved with developing their own programs. Zemsky compared it to a box of Lego bricks, noting that colleges can build what they want, "but you have to put it together in a way that makes sense."

The colleges involved are exploring different pathways to the idea. Officials at Merrimack College note that the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic prompted faculty members to consider new approaches, which opened the door to pursuing a three-year degree program.

"What attracted us to this was an invitation to try to build something new. And this came in the summer of 2021, so we had gone through a very challenging year where a lot of faculty had been forced to do things that they never would have imagined doing if it hadn't been for the pandemic," said Sean Condon, provost and senior vice president of academic affairs at Merrimack College.

Indiana University of Pennsylvania decided to explore three-year degrees for an entirely different reason: the loss of faculty members to retrenchments and retirements, said Lori Lombard, a professor and chair of the Department of Communication Disorders, Special Education and Disability Services. Those losses led her to rethink the program's curriculum.

"We slimmed down our curriculum to what we thought were essentials," Lombard said, noting that the proposal for her department includes "courses in our curriculum from social sciences and theater" to provide a holistic, multidisciplinary experience packaged in a three-year format. "We took credits away from ourselves and added credits from other disciplines," Lombard said.

Some institutions suggest cutting electives. The American Public University system, which enrolls a large population of adult learners, is proposing a 90-credit-hour bachelor's of science in cybersecurity

that would eliminate 30 hours of electives while retaining general education courses.

At BYU Idaho, which also enrolls a high number of adult learners, the focus is on building a “nested certificate structure,” according to a summary of the plan, which would offer three certificates plus general education courses that would add up to a total of 90 credit hours for a bachelor’s degree. As with APU, electives would be axed to shorten the degree program.

Neither institution has made a formal proposal to its respective accreditor yet.

But some colleges have taken their plans for a three-year degree to their accrediting body. In March, New England College proposed a 100-credit bachelor’s degree in criminal justice to the New England Commission of Higher Education, which requires 120 credit hours for a bachelor’s degree but may consider exceptions as part of its Policy on Innovation. Ultimately, however, NECHE denied New England College’s request on the grounds that “graduates of 100-credit baccalaureate programs would not receive equivalent benefit” to those pursuing a 120-credit degree, according to a summary of the proposal shared with *Inside Higher Ed*.

New England College may bring a revised proposal to NECHE in the future, the summary notes.

## The Obstacles

Though NECHE dealt a blow to the three-year bachelor’s degree—and has yet to approve a single such program—the commission remains open to the idea.

“The requests before the Commission under its Policy on Innovation to award a baccalaureate degree with fewer than 120 hours has been and will continue to be given extensive and serious attention by the Commission. We applaud all our institutions for their innovative thinking and practices in service to their students,” NECHE president Larry Schall said by email.

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges has a similar 120-credit hour requirement, though none of the institutions in the pilot programs are accredited through SACSCOC. But if a college were to pursue such an idea, SACSCOC would consider it.

President Belle Whelan said by email that SACSCOC “would consider approving a three-year degree” depending “on the justification provided” and what might be excluded from the program.

The Higher Learning Commission also told *Inside Higher Ed* that it would be willing to consider a three-year degree, though colleges would need to provide a justification.

Some accreditors, such as the WASC Senior College and University Commission and the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, do not have minimum credit policies, meaning there are

fewer obstacles for a three-year, 90-credit degree.

“When I’ve spoken to Robert Zemsky and Lori Carrell about this initiative, I have emphasized that the exciting opportunity is not to essentially repack the same pieces into a smaller suitcase, but to fundamentally rethink the capacities and coherence we expect of the bachelor’s degree,” Jamiene Studley, president of WSCUC, wrote in an email to *Inside Higher Ed*. “As an accreditor WSCUC would consider it our responsibility, even privilege, to work with institutions to evaluate whether their reconceived program met our standards for quality and student success.”

Sonny Ramaswamy, president of NWCCU, said that while his organization has not received a proposal from BYU Idaho yet, he expects it will soon. In considering a three-year bachelor’s degree, he said it’s vital that students “demonstrate the same learning outcomes as a student getting a four-year degree.” He added that the conversations he’s had around the possibility of launching a three-year degree have been “exciting” and that NWCCU looks forward to receiving the proposal.

But even if accreditors are willing to sign off on a three-year degree, state lawmakers also have to be convinced. Some states, including California and Pennsylvania, have laws requiring a minimum of 120 credit hours for a bachelor’s degree, which would require changes to open the door to a three-year degree and a reduced load culminating in a baccalaureate.

Beyond accreditation and state law, there’s also the matter of how tradition has shaped the bachelor’s degree in a sector that is notoriously slow to change, even as employers and students demand more from colleges.

“The 120-hour degree is codified by tradition. That’s all it is. It’s really not even based on strong learning science—it’s just been adopted, like many things in this country, and codified. And it’s now created a wonderful amount of chaos,” said Merrimack College president Chris Hopey.

He also compared conversations around three-year bachelor’s degrees to discussions about online education 20 years ago. And just as those who were slow to adapt to online programs are playing catch up, so too will those who resist three-year degree programs, he said, suggesting a lack of imagination for the higher education community even as the status quo remains mired in degree-completion challenges and ever-climbing costs. Though he said it may take 10 to 15 years for the three-year-degree idea to become popular, many colleges will not survive over that timeline.

Zemsky, however, stressed that “weak institutions cannot do this,” noting that the pilot colleges leading the charge are spending their own money without funding from major national sponsors. He discouraged colleges from looking at the three-year degree as their financial salvation, arguing instead that it is simply another option that colleges can offer to consumers to reduce costs. The idea also comes with financial questions, given the loss of a fourth year of tuition, though Zemsky suggests a dip in tuition revenue may be countered by increased enrollment in such programs.

So far, Zemsky and Carrell have been unable to attract major foundation support, which he said is needed for coordinating functions, not program development, since colleges have been spending their own money to advance pilot programs.

“Lori and I have carried this as far as we can,” Zemsky said. “What we need for this to work is a paid-for infrastructure. And the only game in town to do that, I fear, is a foundation.”

Another potential obstacle to the three-year bachelor’s degree is perception. While participants note student feedback has been enthusiastic, questions linger about transfer pathways given the tight focus of the programs as well as how three-year degrees might be viewed by graduate programs. Though those questions are yet to be answered, Boyd Baggett, director of institutional effectiveness and accreditation at BYU Idaho, said he’s had promising conversations with officials in a dozen graduate programs who said they would recognize a three-year degree.

Lynn Pasquerella, president of the Association of American Colleges & Universities, expressed cautious optimism about the idea, noting the importance of innovation and exploring new models amid national concerns about the value of higher education while also raising concerns about what might be lost as institutions trim credits, particularly electives.

“The first thing that comes to mind is if it’s a proposal to reduce, does that mean a reduction in general education or the liberal arts and sciences at a time when that type of education is more critical than ever for addressing the wicked problems and grand challenges of which COVID-19 was emblematic?” Pasquerella said. “I also think about our employer surveys, where employers consistently make clear their desire that students have more than narrow disciplinary training, and broad training in the liberal arts and sciences that allows them to integrate what they’ve learned in different disciplines to address the unscripted problems of the future.”

## The Path Forward

As the Georgetown sessions—sponsored by Strada Education Network—drew to a close, Zemsky laid out the needs and ambitions for the three-year bachelor’s degree proposal. Though a dozen institutions are already pursuing the idea, he hopes that 500 will be on board within the next five years. Carrell has also discussed the idea with lawmakers to garner support and said she is hearing bipartisan interest. A book promoting the idea of the three-year bachelor’s degree is also in the works, likely to be published next year.

Now Zemsky and Carrell are trying not to lose the momentum around the idea, which they see not as replacing the four-year degree but rather providing consumers with another option.

Though the proposal had excitement in 2009 that faded away, Zemsky remains undeterred.

In 2020, before the three-year bachelor's degree advanced to the stage of pilot programs, Zemsky told this reporter (<https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/3-year-college-degree-programs-what-to-know>), he was just “throwing pebbles into the pond. And there are some ripples.” Now, with 12 institutions pursuing pilot programs and accreditors willing to consider a three-year bachelor's degree, it seems the idea is making waves.

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