

EDITORIAL

A bachelor's in three years? Colleges just got a green light to get in the game.

Merrimack College and New England College are working on shortened degree programs, and others should take a careful look at an approach that could lower costs.

By [The Editorial Board](#) Updated March 6, 2024, 3:09 p.m.



Snow fell near the campus of New England College in Henniker, N.H. The school hopes to begin offering three-year bachelor's degrees in criminal justice. GEOFF FORESTER/ASSOCIATED PRESS

For decades, the four-year bachelor's degree, with its requirement for 120 credits of classwork, has been the unquestioned standard. But as Wayne Lesperance Jr., president of New England College in Henniker, N.H., asks, "Why is 120 a magical number?"

It's not. And as tuition and fees rise, some students would likely benefit from a bachelor's degree that could be completed more quickly, potentially in three years.

The New England Commission of Higher Education had been among the last of the national accrediting agencies to refuse to consider accrediting a bachelor's degree program with fewer than 120 credits. That changed Wednesday when the commission announced that for the first time it would consider proposals for programs that allow students to earn a bachelor's degree with fewer than 120 credits.

"The impetus is to find a way to reduce college costs and get people out into the market sooner," commission president Lawrence Schall said.

The announcement is an important positive step that should encourage the rise of innovative programs that let students obtain a degree more quickly and cheaply. It will not be right for every school, major, or student, but colleges should think seriously about whether a shorter degree program would appeal to some of their students. As schools begin to implement these programs, the data that emerge could provide valuable insights into how to make college more efficient without compromising quality.

Some schools already offer three-year degrees, but they still require 120 credits. Students either get credits for Advanced Placement tests or early college programs or they take classes year-round. But in the last few years, a national initiative spearheaded by Robert Zemsky, a retired University of Pennsylvania professor, and Lori Carrell, chancellor of the University of Minnesota Rochester, has gotten about 20 schools to commit to piloting a three-year bachelor's degree with fewer than 120 credits.

The two New England schools that have expressed interest are Merrimack College in North Andover and New England College.

New England College is exploring a 100-credit degree in criminal justice. The program cuts some electives and combines general education and criminal justice classes, for example, by letting students fulfill a science requirement by taking forensic science.

Lesperance said he thinks the program will attract students who are not interested in the full college experience of sports and extracurriculars but who want a credential for a job — for example, police officers who would get paid more with a college degree.

Merrimack College officials have said, in [a presentation](#) to NECHE, that they are envisioning a pilot program with a small number of students in a handful of non-licensure majors like business, health science, physics, and liberal arts. It would target lower-income, high-ability students who plan to pursue a graduate degree.

A handful of schools elsewhere — including Brigham Young University-Idaho and its affiliated Ensign College, University of Minnesota campuses in Morris and Rochester, and West Virginia-based American Public University System — have had similar programs approved under different accrediting bodies. But New England schools have been stymied until now by NECHE’s unwillingness to approve these programs.

NECHE’s [new guidelines](#) say any program must be at least 90 credits with classes in a major, general education classes, and electives. It needs to have a degree name that distinguishes it from a typical bachelor’s degree, and the school must be transparent in marketing materials that some graduate schools or employers might not consider it a bachelor’s. The school needs to assess program outcomes related to student retention, graduation rates, learning, and employment.

Offering a lower-cost, shorter degree could increase chances of student success. Over the years, college tuition and fees have [steadily risen](#), and many graduates leave school with enormous [student loan debt](#). Around one-quarter of first-time bachelor’s degree students and 40 percent of all undergraduate students drop out before obtaining a degree, according to [the Education Data Initiative](#), often for [financial reasons](#).

Michael Poliakoff, president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, a nonprofit focused on improving educational quality, suggested that colleges could cut electives, revise core curriculums, and still offer a quality education. “A well designed 90-credit-hour program could get students ready for work and citizenship without the financial and

opportunity costs,” Poliakoff said. “For accreditors to dig their heels in and say only a 120-hour program will be sufficient is simply ignoring reality.”

There are existing [tests](#) that measure how colleges are performing and whether students are learning, which could be used to assess how much students are learning from a shortened bachelor’s program compared to a traditional degree. As Michael Horn, an education writer and lecturer at Harvard who cofounded the Clayton Christensen Institute for Disruptive Innovation, said, “I’d much rather be certifying demonstrations of learning as opposed to focusing on is it three years or is it four years.”

It’s an attitude accreditors and schools should adopt. Ensuring students are learning well is more important than regulating how long it takes them to learn.

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