COLLEGE-IN-3 STARTER KIT

Getting Started

More than a dozen years ago, Jon Meacham made the idea of a Three-Year Baccalaureate a Newsweek cover story featuring former Secretary of Education and Tennessee Senator Lamar Alexander. It was an idea that went nowhere without much notice.

On occasion old ideas can resurface in new circumstances. Lori's son Cody was a Ph.D. student in chemistry at Colorado State. Closed out of their labs by COVID, Cody and his fellow grad students turned to an old idea that was new to them. Collectively they became bakers of San Francisco style sourdough bread, initially using a starter developed by one of the more intrepid among them. Impressed with his initial success, he dropped off a small jar of his bubbling starter on the doorstep of a quarantined colleague. And then the collective at-home experimenting began in earnest, with various types of flour and wait-times and the starter spread doorstep to doorstep. And they weren't alone — with yeast shortages and a surplus of domestic time, sourdough starters were trending in 2020. Young people everywhere were discovering what their grandmothers already knew — this edible art form that can produce breads as varied as dried cherry cardamom and Tuscan herb depends on having an authentic starter. The starter provides the leavening for each new batch, and while there are literally dozens of starter-kit recipes, they all pretty much begin with the same fermentation process that feeds on flour and water. The trick is to keep the starter alive by feeding it and passing samples of it among your community of friends, recruiting them into your circle of sourdough aficionados.

Musing about Cody's experiences helped us understand that what our Three-Year Degree project needed was something very much like a sourdough starter kit. In addition to our Kit and your fellow bakers, what you will need to get started is an appetite for the unknown tempered by a commitment to the possible.

Cooks in the Kitchen

What *College-in-3* has in mind begins with a process designed to develop the definitions and evidence that will make possible a careful consideration of the potential advantages and disadvantages of offering a Three-Year program leading to a Baccalaureate degree. And talking is the necessary first step. *College-in-3* is in pursuit of what the anthropologist Anthony Wallace called revitalization, the kind of fundamental change that requires a willingness to be painfully truthful with oneself — in higher education's case that requires an acknowledgement that today — in spite of good intentions — most undergraduate programs of study fail millions of students across the full gamut of institutions, squandering human potential and looking the other way. Our governing assumption is simply stated: the necessary and corrective innovation will occur at the intersection of decreased student costs and increased quality, through a redesigned and shorter curriculum with equity in educational attainment as the expected result.

What is required as well is a campus management process that encourages broad participation and makes clear that there is a job to be done now. To get your starter bubbling will require a deliberative conversation that inspires the necessary sense of urgency. This effort begins by talking first with the Presidents. In many cases that's the leader who needs to be in charge. An alternative worth considering is your Chief Academic Officer, whether a Provost or an Academic Vice President

(AVP). In institutions with well-established curricular change processes, the Chair of the Curriculum Committee is a possibility as is the head of your faculty organization, or a respected leader of your campus teaching and learning center, if you have one. The change process leader needs to be an accomplished facilitator, have broad campus credibility, and be committed to aggressively exploring the possibility of a Three-year Baccalaureate degree. And most certainly, just like our extra time at home during quarantine made labor-intensive bread baking possible, that facilitator will need to be given time to lead this effort.

The make-up of your Starter Team is no less important. It needs to be reasonably small and at the same time broadly representative, composed of members who have demonstrated their capacity to collaborate across disciplines and other campus silos. Individual members will have to commit to regular team meetings of several hours each. There is a persuasive argument for providing release time for faculty Team members (or a stipend, though time is more valuable than money to most academics). Collectively the Team needs skeptics who know how to say yes along with campus politicos with reputations for feasting on questions that challenge them. Collectively this Starter Team requires a commitment to look straight at the evidence detailing what a new curriculum should achieve.

You might begin by focusing on a one-page report summarizing your campus retention of first year students and their degree completion, disaggregated by demographic categories. The Team needs a sober glance at this collective outcome so that the protection or defense of the status quo does not stall the conversation. Then, the group can do a mind-dump of their own reactions to the idea of a Three-Year degree as a solution. Here what is required is a frank summary of the fears, hopes, and questions the idea of Three-Year Degree raises among you and will likely occur to your colleagues across campus as well. Among the questions to be explored in this initial set of conversations are *What is the purpose of a Baccalaureate degree? What is the history of current degree requirements on our campus?* and *What should the holder of a Bachelor's degree be able to do?* Ultimately, identified competencies will need robust refinement, as a process of backward design from the outcomes ensues. Rather than imagining the incremental modification of an existing degree and major, we encourage the team to cook up their ideas from scratch asking, *"How best can the identified competencies be taught and learned in three years, with attention to student development and wellbeing?"*

Next the Team will need to focus on its schedule, particularly for the first six months. That schedule will require real goals and no-nonsense due dates. Once the schedule is in hand it can serve as a key element in the announcement informing your campus community that you and your colleagues are thinking seriously about offering a Three-Year Baccalaureate.

The schedule with its cemented-in milestones and due dates is one element of the campus announcement that will need to be made sometime in the first six months. The other element is a carefully crafted statement discussing the problems to be addressed including issues of accreditation, federal regulation, athletics and student life, the prospects for success, and a promise to engage the entire campus community — including students — in the consideration of a Three-Year Degree option.

Starter Analytics

Next on the agenda is a rumble with two critical topics of inquiry. As already noted, the first focuses on retention and asks, just *what is our first-to-second year retention rate and why is it not higher, what types of students are we failing, and who starts but never finishes our undergraduate degree programs?* We regularly encounter institutions with eighty percent first-to-second year retention rates who think they are doing fine. They are not. They have set the bar too low. For the 2018-2019 academic year, the mean first-to-second rate for four-year private, not-for-profit institutions was 75.5 percent; for public four-year institutions the rate was a percentage point lower at 74.5 percent. Across both sets of institutions, ten percent had first-to-second year retention rates below sixty percent. That graduation rates for four-year degrees are reported as six-year graduation rates is revelatory, with the overall 6-year rate for first-time, full-time undergrads who started in 2014 at only 64 percent (63 percent at public institutions, 68 percent at private nonprofit institutions, and 29 percent at private, for-profit institutions).

The goal ought to be to have first year retention rates of ninety percent or more, the rate regularly achieved by high-cost, highly selective institutions, and to have degree completion rates at least equal to 75 percent. To fully understand the import of these numbers the Starter Team will need to spend time listening to former students' explanations as to why they left the institution. Survey results and representative stories are important supplements to retention data. Some common reasons for dropping out include a lack of perceived relevance or connection to eventual employment as well as lack of a "sense of belonging," but the specifics of your institution are important to surface as you prepare to design a curricular solution. Established evidence-based practices that increase retention need to be embedded in the design if better completion outcomes and deeper learning are to be achieved. Experiential learning is essential.

The next inquiries derive from the first. *Is a balanced budget possible having first reduced our revenues from tuition by as much as twenty-five percent? What retention and completion rates are necessary to make a three-year degree financially viable? And, how can we embed evidence-based practices in and out of the classroom to support that needed increase in retention and degree completion?*

Accreditors in the Kitchen

The important topics of accreditation and state regulation are top of mind, with federal regulators at the Department of Education now on board thanks to recent legislative language (March 2024) that states: *"Experimental Site Initiative.—The Committee encourages the Department to pilot activities to support and encourage accelerated, cost-effective, 3-year bachelor's degree programs, such as the 'College-in-3' project."* At the same time, accreditors are opening their minds and doors to a variety of innovative designs, with the Northwest Commission approving a 90-credit degree at BYU-Idaho in 2023 and the New England Commission of Higher Education providing official guidelines for accelerated bachelor's degrees (2024). Internal and external permissions are critical steps between design and implementation.

The *College-in-3* project has taken our own best advice. Key staff of four accrediting agencies are already providing critical help. While they cannot promise a successful conclusion, they are working actively towards that end. Our advice — trust your accreditor to give you good and accurate counsel throughout the design process, keeping student learning at the center.

There are Always Logistics

We believe eighteen months will prove sufficient to design and plan the implementation of a Three-Year degree. It's not as if you have nothing else to do, restarting after the pandemic disruptions and assessing how much long-term damage has been done. Time will prove an ever-scarcer commodity. Our best advice: set a schedule and stick to it. It is important that you think of your participation in the *College-in-3* project as an eighteen-month experiment to expand your campus's definition of the possible, with the initial request for a six-month exploratory conversation. On some campuses, rapid innovation teams are being deployed, with time set aside for design sprints that substantially decrease the overall time of the project.

The first six-month period is for conversations or dialogues that have as their primary goal the testing of the feasibility of what you have in mind, on the one hand, and, on the other, for gauging whether your campus will have sufficient appetite to proceed towards implementation. The next six months are most likely to be the most contentious because it is during this period that your community will wrestle with exactly what will be taught, in what kind of bundles, and by whom. There won't be any easy answers. The final six months will include detailed conversations with your accrediting agency. But don't rush your process. What your accreditor will rightly want to know is exactly what you are planning and why, as well as how you will measure student outcomes. And, as our early Pilots have learned, some events beyond your control such as leadership turnover, financial woes, faculty union perceptions, or state regulations may interfere with your timetable.

The Sweet Smell of Success

Our early campus pilots have learned lessons that may help those campuses now joining the *College-in-3* Exchange:
1. Campus conversations to design three-year options are not only possible but have been invigorating, even in a time of disruption and challenge.
2. The prototypes emerging from these campus conversations decrease student costs while also helping stable institutions sustain their financial viability.
3. To achieve better student outcomes, including equitable retention, completion, and career launch, these new programs need to embed evidence-based learning design; that is, the pilots that can predict better outcomes are those that apply educational research to practice.
4. Partnerships with employers to discern desired competencies and proficiencies can play important roles in assisting faculty as they develop the necessary curricular designs.
5. A variety of design options are viable, with some capitalizing on competency-based approaches, others using pre-college credits or summers more intentionally, and still others reducing the total number of credits necessary for a college degree.
6. Accreditors are open to these innovative approaches, affirming the critical need to focus on the assessment of learning outcomes.

Neither Simile Nor Metaphor

One final observation. Bob and Lori take seriously our evoking of the Sourdough Starter as the seminal idea behind our *College-in-3* project. Lori learned the mysteries of Sourdough from her son Cody. Bob was taught by his mom. What both came away with was a sense of how the product belonged not to individuals but to a community of bakers. To understand how the process works, you need to appreciate how each starter batch brings a portion of its magic to a successor, making sourdough baking an exercise in community and creativity. Here's how Wikipedia explains the phenomenon:

> Sourdough baking has a devoted community today. Many devotees share starters and tips via the Internet. Hobbyists often proudly share their work on social media. Sourdough cultures contain communities of living organisms, with a history unique to each individual starter, and bakers can feel an obligation to maintain them. Many like to think that their sourdough is unique, or their creation, or one that's been handed down for generations, or been over the Chilkoot Pass, et cetera. Because [starter] is 'alive' some tender hearts feel an obligation to its permanent health and survival. The different yeasts present in the air in any region also enter sourdough, causing starters to change depending on location.

Three years into this experiment it is that sense of enthusiasm and common purpose — in bread baking and college revitalization -- that gives us faith, allowing our project to grow by attracting an ever-larger community of experimenters to the now expanding, *College-in-3* Exchange.