

College-in-3

EXCHANGE

“Empowering students to finish their bachelor’s degree in three years will cut costs, encourage more students to pursue higher education, and give graduates a head start.” - Senator Amy Klobuchar

College-in-3 in a Nutshell

The College-in-3 Exchange is a collective of campuses engaged in conversations to design undergraduate degree options that increase student success while decreasing student costs. This idea has moved from an experiment with a few campuses to an organized movement, serving as a catalyst for reimagining undergraduate education using evidence-based practice to yield curricular options that are not only shorter and less expensive, but better.

Why College-in-3?

As Bob Zemsky, co-founder of College-in-3 and long-time professor at the University of Pennsylvania put it, “Higher education is in a funk.” The stark realities facing American higher education today are on full display. In increasing numbers, we are being asked about higher education’s value. The most critical questions come from within the enterprise itself. Why do so many U.S. students start college and never finish, especially first generation, low income, and students of color? Why is it that only 47 percent of students starting a four-year college in 2014 had graduated in four years, and 61 percent in six. How did the current college degree and experience develop? What should a college graduate know and be able to do, in the emerging context of the 21st-century? What is educational research revealing about how students learn and develop, and how can we implement those results at scale? And importantly, how can we work together across roles and disciplines to create new options for this new era? Those who serve students pursuing higher education are ideally positioned to design and implement the necessary reforms, in partnership with accreditors, policy makers, and employers. Higher education needs not just new, but dramatically different designs to achieve dramatically different results.

What are the goals of College-in-3?

- Serve as an incubator for colleges and universities engaged in innovation around the cost and quality of the bachelor’s degree.
- Create a learning community of institutions that will support and enhance their individual redesign efforts.
- Take this initiative to scale from an experiment of a few campuses to an organized higher education movement.

How did it get started?

College-in-3 got its start in 2021, emerging from conversations and co-authored publications of Bob Zemsky and Lori Carrell, Chancellor of the University of Minnesota Rochester. They shared the belief that higher education reform has to start from the inside out, with courageous conversations that institutions often avoid, such as poor student outcomes and high costs. This thinking led them to revisit Bob’s long-held conviction that a three-year degree could make a real contribution to higher education reform. Some ten institutions volunteered to serve as pilots, and College-in-3 was born.

Catching on:

The success of the first colleges and universities taking up this challenge demonstrated that it was possible to engage some (rather than all) faculty in the experiment—and for those faculty the effort was, to quote Chris Hopey, president of Merrimack College, “truly liberating.” What emerged from those initial campus-wide conversations was a process for redesign tailored to the local campus context. In April 2023, a newly launched *College-in-3* project tested this insight at a general Convening of the lead faculty from the project’s first Pilots. The convening demonstrated that there was a real spark among the Pilot institutions. Along the way, Congress invited the Project to testify to a special subcommittee on “postsecondary innovation,” applauding the early pilots for innovating at the nexus of two of higher ed’s most intractable challenges: cost and quality. Minnesota’s Senator Klobuchar and other policy partners became advocates for “Experimental Sites Status” for these redesigns, through the Department of Education. This support was magnified in March 2024, with legislative language that stated:

“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.” In March 2024, Indiana passed a higher education bill requiring most Indiana institutions to offer three-year degrees by July 2025. The media too became intrigued, with far-ranging coverage from [Forbes](#), [University Business](#), [the Boston Globe](#), [the Hechinger Report](#), [Inside Higher Ed](#), and many others.

How will College-in-3 grow? Conveners and Clusters

College-in-3 is now scaling the initiative to vastly expand the number institutions participating. To achieve this goal, we are pursuing a “Convener and Cluster” strategy: Conveners may be a lead campus, such as Merrimack University, an accreditor serving a region, or a national higher education organization. Cluster Participants will have access to the community of early innovators and other participants in their Cluster as well as the thought-leadership and consultation of the national Exchange leaders. Cluster Participants can connect to these communities virtually through ongoing conversations; further, Cluster Participants are invited to meet in person during future annual convenings. This process will support design, internal and external permission, launch, and assessment of student outcomes.

What will institutions do as members of the College-in-3-Exchange?

- Design and implement one or more 3-year degree programs of either less than 120 credits or at least 120 credits but requiring no more than 3 years of continuous enrollment.
- Participate in scheduled zoom meetings of Cluster and/or Exchange.
- Work with appropriate state regulatory bodies and accreditors.
- Participate in annual Exchange in person convening.
- Develop and implement a three-year assessment program.
- Submit biannual updates to Cluster Contact & Exchange.
- At end-of-year-3 draft summary report and submit to Exchange.

What is the role of the Conveners?

- Recruit Cluster’s Exchange members.
- Provide support for Cluster members.
- Convene Cluster members in person and by zoom, as appropriate.
- In collaboration with Exchange leaders, fund-raise to support the Cluster and Exchange activities.