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## Three May Be Better Than Four

BUSINESS RESTRUCTURING, HIGHER EDUCATION  
BY SCHNEIDER DOWNS PROFESSIONAL

With many potential college students and their families questioning the necessity and benefit of committing four years of time and money to earn an undergraduate degree, tapping and successfully reaching that market has become increasingly challenging for higher education institutions across the country. In response to those concerns, colleges and universities need to be attentive to both the affordability factor and to time requirements when they promote the virtue and value associated with obtaining a baccalaureate degree.

As a result, market savvy higher education institutions are increasingly communicating information about their three-year degree programs, complete with detailed course offerings and campus resources that will support efficient completion. Concurrently, those entities are also addressing the potential effect of the shortened programs on their annual and multiyear operating and capital budgets, looking to accommodate the looming impact in their plans for sustainable positive financial results while still providing quality services and a welcoming and safe environment to fully support best practice student learning.

By offering a three-year program, higher ed institutions give families a practical, cost-saving option. For one, obtaining a degree in three years helps avoid a fourth year of undergraduate tuition, room and board, and commits less of the student/family's financial resources and financial capacity. Plus, a student completing his or her degree in three years will be able to hit the job market or begin a graduate degree program a year earlier.

For its part in selling the idea, the institution should probably provide a worksheet of sorts on its website and in its marketing materials that spells out a total cost comparison. They can also promote the fact that annual tuition prices for full-time enrollment permit students to sign up, at no additional cost, for more credit hours than the standard 15 per semester. If the student earns 18 credits each semester, for instance, he or she would accumulate 108 credit hours in just three conventional (fall/spring) semesters and could pick up the remaining 12 credits by attending summer classes, when cost per credit hour and room and board is often lower than the tuition and living expenses charged during the regular academic year. Students who've taken college accredited classes in high school could get an additional bonus by having those credits applied to their curriculum requirements.

But the programs are not for everyone. Institutions need to be clear in explaining that acceptance of a prospective student into an accelerated program is limited to those who have earned a high quality academic ranking at their high school, and are motivated and committed to a specific three-year program and degree major. In addition, some academic programs and majors – by their nature – require more than

three years of study, so if the prospective student is unsure about pursuing a specific major, or would personally benefit from a fourth year of college life, a three-year degree program may not be the right choice.

Market-smart colleges and universities continually evaluate and implement initiatives to better address needs of students and to achieve enrollment and budget goals. Three-year degree programs are just one example, but in this case, it may be true that less is more. For more information on three-year vs. four-year programs, [contact us](#).

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