Arnold Ventures

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College-in-3 EXCHANGE

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Redesigning Time to Degree: A Framework for High-Quality Three-Year Bachelor's Degrees

National Task Force on Three-Year Degree Pathways



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Opening Letter to Students

Dear Students,

You are the reason this work exists.

Before we say anything about workforce, cost, or what goes into a bachelor's degree, we want to say this plainly: every recommendation in this report was written with your time, your money, and your future in mind. Too often, conversations about higher education happen *about* students rather than *with* them in view. We didn't want to make that mistake. As you read what follows, we hope you recognize yourselves in it — as people trying to build a life, often while working, raising families, or carrying debt that shapes decisions long before and after graduation.

WHY NOW

Today, students are being asked to invest significant time and money in higher education, often while balancing work, family, and other responsibilities, and they deserve confidence that the path they choose will help them reach their goals.

Three-year bachelor's degrees offer one potential way to rethink that path. Done well, they could allow students to earn a high-quality bachelor's degree with fewer required credits, enter the workforce sooner, and begin realizing the value of their education earlier. But shorter is not automatically better. What matters is whether these programs deliver the learning, opportunities, and outcomes students should expect from a bachelor's degree.

WHY WE STARTED HERE

Many colleges are building pathways to help students complete their degrees more efficiently, and most students are trying to balance the cost of earning a college degree with the value it will deliver. In this context, three-year bachelor's degrees are another innovation to help students balance affordability and value. At the heart of this Task Force's work is our commitment to identifying what must be true for a shorter bachelor's degree to be high-quality, so that students can feel confident selecting the degree pathway best for them. We considered how employers might view these options and examined elements like general education, experiential learning — including internships and project-based learning — and whether all programs can be converted to three-year pathways.

Our North Star in our deliberations was you, the student. Our priority is helping you achieve that balance between affordability and future value.

WHAT THIS MEANS

We didn't take on this work because shortening a degree is inherently good. We took it on because students deserve more high-quality pathways that reflect different needs, goals, and circumstances. Student time matters, debt matters, and the ability for students to move into a career or a next chapter in a timeframe that works for them matters. A three-year degree should not be a lesser degree — done well, it is a deliberately redesigned bachelor's degree that delivers the learning and economic outcomes students should expect while requiring less time and fewer credits to achieve them.

This report is our best attempt to articulate what we know at this moment in time, what we still don't know, and what we believe should guide the development of high-quality three-year bachelor's programs.

Respectfully,

The National Task Force on Three-Year Degree Pathways

Executive Summary

Arnold Ventures (AV), Strada Education Foundation (Strada), and the College-in-3 Exchange (Cin3) launched the National Task Force on Three-Year Degree Pathways (Task Force) in early 2026 to develop a broadly-informed set of considerations for institutions, states, policymakers, and other stakeholders considering or implementing three-year degrees.

In the past several years, the three-year degree movement has expanded rapidly, with at least 119 programs publicly announced as of May 2026 (RAND study) and many more expected to follow. Given that most of these programs do not yet have graduates, evidence on student outcomes remains limited. This presented the Task Force — a cross-section of leaders from postsecondary education institutions and systems, states, employers, intermediaries and accreditors, and research organizations — with a dual task: identifying the core practices that experts agree are critical for high-quality three-year degrees while also acknowledging the questions that cannot yet be answered with evidence.

The three-year degree construct is new enough that the field has not settled on a single term, with institutions, states, and accreditors using different naming conventions. The Task Force therefore began by clarifying the type of pathway under consideration and ultimately focused on bachelor's degrees awarded in fewer than 120 credits, and most commonly around 90 credits. This distinction matters: the Task Force is focused on redesigning the credit requirements of the bachelor's degree, not simply accelerating completion of a traditional 120–credit program.

GRAPHIC A: THE TYPOLOGY OF ACCELERATED PATHWAYS

There are different and distinct models that allow students to complete a bachelor's degree in about three years. Each reaches that outcome through a different mechanism.

	Three-Year Bachelor's Degree	Accelerated Traditional Bachelor's Degree
Expected time	Three years	Three years
Credit load	(about) 90 credits	120+ credits
How credits are earned	The bachelor's degree is redesigned to achieve expected learning outcomes in fewer than 120 credits, and may incorporate updated pedagogies, technology, employer engagement strategies, or other approaches to support student success.	Programs are designed so students can earn 120 credits in 3 years, by using prior learning assessment, a year-round academic calendar, or competency-based assessments.



Because these degrees reduce credits, not just time, the Task Force's position is that three-year degrees must be grounded in careful analysis — and where necessary, redesign — of the curriculum. The goal is not simply a shorter pathway, but a more intentionally designed bachelor's degree that delivers strong learning and economic outcomes with fewer required credits.

Nationally, three-year degrees are part of an ongoing conversation about return on investment for students, workforce preparedness, and alignment with high-demand careers. The promise of this model is that students may be able to earn a high-quality bachelor's degree with fewer required credits, enter the workforce sooner, and begin realizing the economic return on their education more quickly. At the same time, the Task Force recognizes the risk that poorly designed programs could remove too much from traditional degree pathways, weakening learning and ultimately harming the students and institutions these types of degrees are intended to serve. The Task Force therefore approached this work two ways:

- First, the Task Force is clear that, while members believe in the premise and potential of three-year degrees and believe they should be awarded as bachelor's degrees, the evidence does not yet confirm whether they produce comparable outcomes to four-year degrees. Answering that question will require graduates, time and rigorous evaluation.
- Second, the Task Force believes that high-quality three-year bachelor's degrees must be designed around student success, economic outcomes, and intellectual and personal development. Most 120+ credit degree programs cannot be successfully redesigned by tinkering around the edges. Faculty therefore play a central role in reimagining what a complete, high-quality course of study looks like by discipline, engaging industry to ensure workforce alignment, and considering evolving teaching and learning practices that best engage different types of learners.

  The Task Force agreed that even if the *goal* of three-year bachelor's degrees is to reduce the time to degree, the *design* should be centered on longer-term student success outcomes, including career readiness, workforce entry, earnings, and financial stability and opportunities for continued learning and personal development.

Not everyone agrees that this innovation is a good one. The American Association of University Professors and the American Federation of Teachers have raised concerns that three-year bachelor's degrees could sacrifice the depth of learning, critical thinking, and sustained faculty engagement associated with a bachelor's degree, and have argued that affordability concerns are better addressed through expanded need-based aid.

The Task Force takes these concerns seriously. While it was not focused on financial aid specifically, it recognizes that perceptions of college cost are a significant driver of college choice and degree selection for families, and need-based aid has long been considered one response to affordability concerns. The three-year degree movement addresses the significant investment of both time and money and is part of a broader effort to improve return on investment for students. The Task Force believes fewer credits do not automatically mean insufficient learning to achieve desired student success outcomes and that there is room for efforts that fundamentally reconsider how to maximize the value of students' time and money.

These criticisms require that we sharpen what "high-quality" must mean for a three-year degree to be a genuine bachelor's degree, not simply a shorter one. This report is, in part, an attempt to answer that question by offering a framework for high-quality practice and making explicit the decisions that stakeholders should consider as they design and implement three-year degree pathways.



Through listening sessions with external experts and stakeholders, facilitated working discussions, engagement with students, asynchronous dialogue, and a two-day in-person convening, the Task Force identified four core tenets for high-quality three-year bachelor's degree pathways. Each tenet is accompanied by specific considerations and recommendations.

1 Three-year degrees should focus on student success and outcomes.

Focusing on three-year bachelor's degree student outcomes allows us to clarify what students should gain from the bachelor's degree, and then effectively measure whether those outcomes are achieved. Student experiences and outcomes should not be compromised for any awarded bachelor's degree — this includes both three- and four-year pathways.

2 Three-year degrees should seek to maximize value for students.

Higher education should always strive to help students gain as much value as possible from their degrees. Those designing three-year degree offerings are not exempt from this imperative. Employers should be engaged to shape workforce alignment and connections, faculty need to drive curricular redesign, and institutions must demonstrate value in these degrees and then refuse to apologize for improving learning experiences in a shorter time frame.

3 Three-year degrees should feature robust assessment and evaluation.

The Task Force is clear-eyed about the many issues we do not yet know related to three-year degrees. As with any innovation, this one is rapidly expanding without evidence of outcomes: the field must strive to integrate high-impact practice in three-year degree design and implementation, and use robust assessment and evaluation to determine whether outcomes are being achieved and which improvements are necessary.

4 Three-year degrees are bachelor's degrees.

Regardless of the number of credits required, three-year degrees that meet or exceed the learning outcomes of bachelor's degrees are bachelor's degrees. As a result, the Task Force believes that authorizing and regulatory bodies should not require naming modifiers for three-year bachelor's degrees. In addition, general education requirements should not be sacrificed, though the Task Force recognizes that they may need to be redesigned in many cases, to accommodate the shortened degree.

The Value Proposition

The rapid growth of three-year bachelor's degrees reflects a potentially significant value proposition for students, employers, institutions, and taxpayers. Students may be able to earn a high-quality bachelor's degree with fewer required credits, lower educational costs, and a faster path into the workforce. Employers may gain access to skilled workers sooner. Institutions facing demographic shifts and enrollment declines may be able to attract students they have not historically served, while offering more flexible and intentionally designed pathways to existing students. Policymakers may also see an opportunity to improve the value and efficiency of public investments in higher education.

For the Task Force, the clearest value proposition is time to value: shortening the period between a student's entry into higher education and the point at which that education begins generating economic return and opening additional educational and career opportunities.

Time to value is not the same as time to degree. A student can already complete a traditional 120–credit bachelor's degree in three years by taking heavier course loads or enrolling during the summer. A reduced-credit bachelor's degree instead asks whether the learning and outcomes expected of a high-quality bachelor's degree can be achieved with fewer required credits. The calendar may vary, but the more fundamental question is whether the credential itself can be redesigned.

Reducing time to value therefore requires more than simply shortening a degree. It means redesigning the bachelor's degree so that students can achieve strong learning and economic outcomes with fewer required credits. If successful, this model can reduce the time and resources students invest before beginning to realize the return on their education — without lowering the expectations associated with a high-quality bachelor's degree.



Task Force Charge

The concept of earning a bachelor's degree through a pathway that differs from the traditional 120–credit hour, classroom-based model is not new. Over the past several decades, various models have emerged that compress or individualize time to degree, including credit-by-examination, competency-based education, dual enrollment, and prior-learning assessment. Three-year bachelor's degrees are another development in this broader evolution, with enough distinct characteristics to warrant focused consideration.

The relatively short history of three-year degree pathways is captured in a recently released RAND study, which documents the rapid growth of three-year bachelor's degree programs across the country. As of May 2026, RAND identified 119 programs either currently offered or in planning stages. The continued growth of the College-in-3 Exchange, with 90 institutional members, similarly reflects institutional interest in this pathway. Interest in three-year bachelor's degrees is growing amid a broader shift in higher education policy toward greater focus on value and outcomes. At the federal level, new earnings-based accountability requirements — often referred to as "Do No Harm" — will restrict access to federal student loans for programs whose graduates do not earn more than a typical high school graduate. States are simultaneously navigating constrained budgets, changing workforce needs, and enrollment and demographic pressures that are forcing harder choices about how public resources are invested in higher education. These dynamics are increasing scrutiny of both the outcomes institutions produce and the time, cost, and credits required to produce them.

Against this backdrop, three-year bachelor's degrees offer the potential to reduce the time and cost required to earn a bachelor's degree, help students enter the workforce sooner, and improve return on investment for students. At the same time, because most programs are still new, there is not yet sufficient evidence to determine whether they produce outcomes comparable to traditional bachelor's degree pathways.

In this context, the Task Force charge was fourfold.

1. Validate the continued consideration of high-quality three-year bachelor's degree programs by institutions, states, and other stakeholders by underscoring their potential to improve return on investment for students.
2. Develop a broadly informed set of considerations for institutions, states, policymakers, and other stakeholders designing and implementing three-year bachelor's degree programs.
3. Clarify what is known — and what remains unknown — about three-year bachelor's degrees, and identify the research questions the field should prioritize.
4. Center faculty, students, and employers in any consideration around three-year degree pathways: faculty because they play a central role in the curricular redesign required for high-quality offerings; students because these pathways should ultimately improve the value they receive from higher education; and employers because their perspectives can help ensure programs prepare graduates for workforce needs and successful transitions into employment.

Task Force Approach

Task Force members were selected for their knowledge of and direct engagement with three-year degrees, as well as their ability to bring varied perspectives to the work. Over the course of six months, they convened in five virtual working sessions and one two-day in-person session in Washington, DC. Members also participated in two listening sessions with field experts: one with Professor Robert Zemsky, co-founder of the College-in-3 Exchange and widely seen as the pioneer of three-year degrees, and another with more than 50 institutional members of the College-in-3 Exchange. They also contributed to forthcoming Strada research on employer perceptions of three-year degrees, including an early look at initial insights.

The Task Force was intentional about reaching consensus and offering timely guidance to the field. Members understood that three-year degrees are rapidly evolving and felt urgency to provide a perspective that strengthens current implementation while also serving as a foundation for future offerings and research.

The Task Force began by identifying and prioritizing the major issues facing the field related to three-year degrees, then used subsequent meetings to explore those issues in greater depth. Members also spoke directly with students to better understand their perceptions and experiences with three-year degrees, shared relevant materials, and continued discussions between meetings as needed. This process helped the Task Force refine its thinking as three-year bachelor's degrees continue to evolve and expand.

This work was facilitated and captured by Dr. Jeanne Contardo, of Frontrunner Collaborations. Co-convener leads were instrumental in designing and contributing to this project: Jessica Taketa of Arnold Ventures, Stephen Payne of Strada Education Foundation, and Madeleine Green of the College-in-3 Exchange.

Early Insights on Employer Perceptions of Three-year Degrees

In collaboration with the Task Force, Strada has been conducting research with employers to better understand how they view reduced-credit bachelor's degrees. The research included a survey of hiring managers and those responsible for leading the recruitment of entry-level job applicants.[1] Members of the Task Force had the opportunity to provide early input to the research, and to see employer responses as they developed their recommendations.

Early Insights from the Research:

1. Employers value the signal that a bachelor's degree provides about the strength of an applicant's commitment, ability to follow-through on a goal, reliability, and work ethic. These qualities are valuable to employers and remain salient regardless of the importance a recruiter places on the number of credits a student earns.

2. Combining work-based learning opportunities with a reduced-credit bachelor's degree increases employer perceptions of the value of the credential. This echoes previous Strada and University of Wisconsin-Madison research that found students who participate in work-based learning tend to have stronger labor market outcomes than their peers and points to an important consideration when designing new programs.[2]

3. Employers see reducing the time-to-degree as a valuable asset when planning their employee and recruiting pipeline, and they are eager to partner with colleges and universities launching these programs. As institutions develop reduced-credit bachelor's degrees, they should consider how to build strong employer partnerships, including leveraging a shorter timeline from enrollment to workforce.

1. 654 hiring managers and recruiters working at employers with 250+ employees were surveyed
2. https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11162-026-09888-4

Three-Year Degree Core Tenets and Recommendations

The Task Force's exploration was rigorous and intentional. While members occasionally disagreed on the relative weight of certain items, they reached broad consensus on four core tenets that are vital to the development of high-quality three-year degrees.

The purpose of these tenets is not to serve as a checklist or a rubric. State, institutional, and policy contexts differ, so a one-size-fits-all approach is not appropriate. Instead, the Task Force sees these tenets as core guideposts for stakeholders designing and implementing high-quality three-year degree offerings.

1 Three-year degrees should focus on student success and outcomes.

Implementing high-quality three-year degrees requires a shift from focusing on inputs — such as enrollment, credits earned, and tuition paid — to designing around the outcomes students should achieve. These outcomes include learning, completion, labor market outcomes, and the ability to pursue future education and career opportunities. With this shift comes the opportunity to test key assumptions about three-year degrees, including whether they reduce attrition, shift enrollment from traditional four-year pathways to three-year programs, or attract students who otherwise might not participate in higher education. As access to higher education has widened, so too has growing awareness that different students may need varying structures to succeed. In this context, a three-year bachelor's degree may serve a body of students not currently succeeding in higher education. For the Task Force, focusing on student outcomes helps clarify what students should gain from a bachelor's degree and provides a basis for assessing whether those expectations are being met, regardless of the number of credits required.

2 Three-year degrees should seek to maximize value for students.

A three-year bachelor's degree must retain those elements that are aligned with students' desired success outcomes — both short and long-term. Maximizing value means paying careful attention to those components that are core to a bachelor's degree as well as anticipating future demands that students may face in their professional lives. State regulatory and accrediting bodies will have important input on defining value, and regional contexts and employer demand may also play a role. As pathways allow, experiential learning — either work-aligned or life-skills aligned — may be integrated to increase value, and assessing that value over time will be important.

INTENTIONAL DESIGN

Thoughtful design can help ensure three-year bachelor's degrees deliver more value to students, not less. The promise of the model is that students can earn a high-quality credential in less time and at a lower cost, without sacrificing the learning, skills, and opportunities that give the credential value in the labor market and support intellectual and personal growth. Institutions can engage faculty in new ways, attract new learners seeking a shorter and potentially lower-cost path to a bachelor's degree, and build partnerships with employers to better align educational offerings with workforce demand.

Delivering on that promise requires deliberate redesign, not simple subtraction. A three-year degree should not be created by simply cutting a fourth year from an existing program. Instead, institutions should examine which courses, requirements, and experiences are essential to achieving the intended outcomes of the degree and redesign the curriculum accordingly. Whether the program is new or adapted from an existing degree, students should be prepared as well as those in traditional bachelor's programs for success in the labor market, graduate study, and lifelong learning.

Stakeholders designing three-year bachelor's degrees should also consider what experiences may be lost or at risk in this type of model, and determine which additional opportunities should be built into or offered alongside the degree. In some cases, students may choose to add experiences such as minors, certificates, study abroad, or an additional year of immersive learning through a "3+1"[3] model. These options can provide flexibility for students whose educational or career goals evolve, without suggesting that a fourth year is necessary for the three-year bachelor's degree itself to be complete. Aligning programs with career opportunities generates value not only for students, but also for employers, key industries, and regional economies.

WORK-BASED LEARNING

Work-based learning (WBL) refers to structured opportunities that connect academic learning with real-world work experiences, helping students apply what they learn while gaining exposure to careers and workplaces. WBL can include internships, co-ops, apprenticeships, practicums, employer-connected projects, job shadows, mentorship, and other forms of career exposure. The appropriate model will vary by program and student population.

WBL is a promising strategy for strengthening the value of three-year bachelor's degrees for students and employers. When designed well, it may help students build relevant skills, better understand career pathways, and make stronger connections to employment. More broadly, aligning programs with career opportunities can generate value not only for students, but also for employers, key industries, and regional economies. The Task Force believes WBL opportunities should be intentionally considered as part of program design rather than treated solely as an add-on, with a range of structured opportunities helping students build exposure to occupations and industries at different points in the degree.

The Task Force's early exploration of employer perceptions showed a clear preference for graduates with internships or other WBL experiences, including practicums, co-ops, apprenticeships, problem-based learning in collaboration with employers or community groups, and project-based simulations. Integrating these opportunities into three-year bachelor's degree programs may strengthen employer confidence in the degree, help students apply their learning in real-world settings, and support preparation for successful transitions into employment.

The Task Force recommends that three-year bachelor's degree programs incorporate high-quality WBL opportunities that help students build relevant skills, gain applied experience, and strengthen preparation for and connections to employment.

3. "3+1" models include high-impact 4th-year immersive experiences as well as bachelor/masters integrations

3 Three-year degrees should feature robust assessment and evaluation.

The Task Force is clear-eyed about how much remains unknown about three-year degrees. Key questions include student outcomes such as debt, completion, earnings, graduate school enrollment, learning; student characteristics; how state context influences adoption and outcomes, design, implications for financial aid; and how emerging technologies such as AI may shape variably paced learning and alternative degree structures. Because the evidence base is still developing, the Task Force believes that three-year bachelor's degree design, implementation, and refinement should be accompanied by rigorous assessment and evaluation. Institutions, systems, states, and researchers each have an important role to play in building the evidence needed to understand what is working, for whom, and under what conditions. To help advance this work, the Task Force identified opportunities across three major groups of stakeholders.

INSTITUTION LEADERS

First, institutions should develop a clear plan to track and assess student learning, completion, debt, employment, earnings, graduate school enrollment, and other relevant outcomes for students in three-year degree programs. Where possible, outcomes should be compared with students in traditional bachelor's degree programs and used to inform continuous improvement and program decisionmaking.

STATE AND SYSTEM LEADERS

Second, systems and state policymakers should ensure that institutions have the data and reporting structures needed to monitor three-year degree outcomes at the institutional, system, and state levels. Data should be disaggregated to understand who enrolls, who succeeds, and whether outcomes vary across student populations, programs, and institutions. These data should support ongoing oversight, comparison, and improvement of three-year degree programs.

RESEARCHERS

Third, researchers and other field partners should build shared research and evaluation infrastructure — including common definitions, evaluation frameworks, employer perception studies, and implementation resources — to identify what is working, for whom, and under what conditions. This work should help the field distinguish promising models from those that do not deliver the intended outcomes and to inform future policy and program design.



4 Three-year degrees are bachelor's degrees.

Several degree innovations have emerged that help students earn different types of degrees, with learning demonstrated in a variety of ways. As the Task Force considered this reality, members clarified that their focus was degrees of less than 120 credits and that these bachelor's degrees require certain considerations and characteristics.

NAMING

What is a three-year degree? After significant discussion, Task Force members overwhelmingly agreed that their focus is the three-year bachelor's degree offered in under 120 credits, not to be confused with either an accelerated 120–credit bachelor's degree (where 120 credits are taken on an accelerated schedule over less time) or an associate's degree that is over 60 credits and takes students longer than two years to complete.

Because many students and employers may not know how many credits are in a college degree, institutions and regulatory bodies have an important role in ensuring that three-year degree offerings meet the quality and outcomes expected of a bachelor's degree. While some states and accreditors may require modifiers such as "accelerated" or "applied" with three-year bachelor's degrees, the Task Force believes these programs, if meeting or exceeding the learning outcomes of 120+-credit programs, should fundamentally be recognized as bachelor's degrees, regardless of the number of credits required, and that authorizing and regulatory bodies should not require naming modifiers at all.

GENERAL EDUCATION

The Task Force grappled with the role of general education and strongly agreed that a bachelor's degree should provide both educational breadth and depth. High-quality general education programs provide students valuable opportunities to develop durable skills, while also exploring intellectual breadth. The Task Force believes these broader learning outcomes should be preserved in three-year bachelor's degrees, while allowing institutions flexibility in how they are delivered within fewer credits.

PROGRAM CONSIDERATION

Institutions must assess which programs are well suited for a three-year format, with a focus on greater student success, degree value, and workforce outcomes. Some bachelor's degrees may not be appropriate to be delivered in a shortened format because of current licensing and accreditation requirements, state regulations, campus realities, or because the learning and outcomes expected of the program cannot be achieved in fewer than 120 credits. In other cases, faculty may be able to more readily adjust curriculum for new degrees they are adding to the catalog, versus adjusting existing degrees.

The Task Force does not advocate for one-size-fits-all adoption of three-year bachelor's degrees. Instead, the Task Force recommends that institutions analyze academic programs to determine which are well-suited for three-year bachelor's degrees. This will allow them to consider the most effective design for new programs, and to assess whether a fundamental redesign is needed for existing programs, to support greater student success, degree value, and workforce outcomes.

What Comes Next?



Postsecondary education is changing faster than ever, and colleges and universities are being asked to manage multiple priorities at once: maintain quality while innovating, treat students as customers while also attending to their long-term success, protect core academic structures while becoming more efficient, and prepare students for a workforce, civic life, and a body of knowledge that keeps shifting under their feet.

Complex realities deserve complex solutions. Three-year degrees offer one potential pathway in a landscape of innovation within higher education. In its exploration, the Task Force was attentive to the balance between shoring up strong guardrails for early implementation, while recognizing that this is a time for thoughtful innovation and variation.

In the spirit of collaboration and utmost transparency, there are several questions that still merit deep exploration, including:

- What are the success outcomes of students who complete three-year degrees, including actual time to degree, graduation, entrance to graduate school and/or workforce entry, and earnings in the first several years after completion? There are innumerable sub-questions nested under this category, some of which the Task Force identified in the following Appendix. At its core, the field needs to know how these programs stack up against traditional four-year bachelor's degrees and on their own merit.
- How is credit mobility accounted for in the three-year degree paradigm? As this pathway grows in popularity, the Task Force expects students will transfer into, and out of, three-year degree programs. How will their credits be treated, both within their institution and if they transfer to another institution?
- Are three-year degree programs particularly suited for certain groups of students? Different types of programs appeal to students, and those with some college no degree or adult students may find a shorter program especially appealing. How does the role of student agency and self-determination fit into program selection? While some argue that these programs help students enter the workforce sooner, will younger students be developmentally ready for the world of work? Are others ready to see younger people in those roles (e.g., K-12 students with younger teachers)?
- What impact might AI have on variably paced learning that could redefine accelerated degree structures? Students' ready access to knowledge, synthesis, and content in the form of AI represents a disruptive innovation that will lead to effects we cannot completely anticipate. AI is rapidly integrating into the operations and academics of higher education; the field is seeing a growing body of specific research and thinking related to AI in higher education, and would benefit from specific examination of whether AI will change accelerated degree structures specifically.

The Task Force advocates a big tent approach for three-year degrees, one in which many stakeholders are invited to play a role and advance those components that are most important to them. Intentional narrative-building work will help validate high-quality, three-year degree pathways. Institutions continue to need real-life examples of high-quality programs and guidance on how to implement them. State legislators will need support as they write policy on this topic, and will need experts to help prioritize the issues at hand. Students and families will need information, both as they apply to, and as they progress through, their degrees. Academic advisers will need to help students weigh the merits of a 90–credit versus 120–credit bachelor's degree, and career coaches will need to mobilize earlier for those on a compressed track. And everyone needs evidence, particularly the data that will be useful for policy and program decision-makers.

The core tenets in this report are guideposts, not a checklist. This nation's landscape is too varied for a single template, and as three-year degrees move from innovation to everyday business, high-quality variation should be expected, not corrected.



Appendix A: Research Questions for the Field

Task Force experts were intentional in identifying where evidence on three-year bachelor's degrees remains limited and which questions are most important for the field to answer. They developed an initial set of research priorities to guide future study and evaluation.

- What are the student outcomes (debt, completion, earnings, graduate school enrollment) of students that complete these 90–credit degree programs? [ideally short, medium, longer-term outcomes]
- How can programs be designed to provide high-quality student outcomes?
- Why are institutions choosing to launch these programs? For instance, are they tied to certain fields that are in demand in a given region? Are they seen as enrollment drivers? Something else?
- What are the characteristics of students who are participating in programs?
- Are there different outcomes associated with different student populations? What are equity-related issues/ concerns?
- How can institutions effectively support students to complete these programs in three years?
- How does the state context influence adoption, design, and outcomes of programs?
- What are the implications for institutions (e.g., institutional and departmental finances, faculty employment, governance, other program offerings) of adopting and offering these programs? And what are the spillover implications for other or non-offering institutions?
- How do institutions engage faculty in adoption, design, and implementation?
- How do these programs address workforce needs and shortages?
- How do three-year programs interact with transfer and dual-enrollment? How do they impact persistence and completion?
- How does the availability and design of these programs shape students' enrollment choices?
- What are the implications for macro-picture of higher education? (e.g., the landscape of higher education and the way the "system" currently works?)
- What are implications for general or liberal arts education and related outcomes/learning?
- What are the differences in program design (i.e., general education, electives, etc.). Does the design potentially cut impact outcomes?
- What are the conditions that need to be in place for institutions to offer three-year degree pathways, and are there limits to the scalability of the innovation?
- What are implications for federal, state, and institutional financial aid (e.g., Pell eligibility, financial aid budgets) and affordability more generally?

- Some argue that these programs help students enter the workforce sooner — but — what are the implications for students (e.g., student development, maturity), employers, workforce, retirement, society and those impacted by employers (e.g., K12 students with younger teachers)?
- Do these impact the timing of graduate schools (i.e., since students might be younger, they might want to stay within schools, or vice-versa) and credentialization/credential inflation in the marketplace?
- What are the interaction effects with other innovations in higher education, such as Work-Integrated and Work-Based Learning, micro-credentials, and competency-based education?
- Increase in national attainment (i.e., are these degrees bringing new students into higher education or drawing from already existing populations)?

Some of these research gaps are more difficult to fill than others. In the next 1–2 years, we expect that the field will see research on the descriptive characteristics of students, institutions types, fields of study, program design, and early academic outcomes.

