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**Momentum builds behind a way to lower the cost of college: A degree in three years**

By The Hechinger Report, adapted by Newsela staff

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In August, high school senior Grant Austin Robert Simms will start his freshman year of college at NewU. It's a new nonprofit university in Washington, D.C., that costs $16,500 a year, locked in for a student's entire education. That's less than many other colleges and universities.

In 2021, the average cost of a private college was around $38,000, according to U.S. News and World Report. The average cost of a public college for out-of-state students was around $22,000. For in-state students, it was about $10,000.

Despite being bombarded with marketing materials for established colleges, Simms chose NewU because of its relatively low fees and shorter study program. NewU offers bachelor's degrees in three years, instead of the usual four. A bachelor's degree is a qualification awarded by a college or university.

No one talks to high school students about how much college costs, Simms said, but it was a big part of his decision.

**The Idea "Just Died On The Vine"**

"Consumers are definitely ready for something different" NewU President Stratsi Kulinski said. The startup school is not the only college or university coming to that conclusion. Several others across the United States are adding three-year degrees as tuition becomes too expensive for many students and families.

Todd Pfannestiel is the head of Utica College in New York. He remembers seeing articles in the student newspaper debating the merits of three-year degrees back in the 1970s. The topic returned to public attention about 10 years ago when lawmakers in some states ordered public universities to develop some new ways to lower the cost of tuition.

But it mostly didn't take. Some schools tried three-year degrees and then dropped them, such as the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, where there just wasn't enough student interest.

For the most part, schools didn't want to speed things up, and students did not want to sacrifice their college experience for a tougher academic schedule. The three-year degree "just died on the vine," said Robert Zemsky. He is the head of the Institute for Research on Higher Education at the University of Pennsylvania and a longtime advocate of three-year degrees.

**Momentum Seems To Be Returning**

"I think it is very real this time," Utica's Pfannestiel said. His college is one of 13 that has agreed to offer three-year degrees in some majors as part of a program called "College in 3." These include Indiana University of Pennsylvania, New England College in New Hampshire and Portland State University in Oregon. Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania, the University of North Texas, the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, and the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh are also on the list.

Other colleges and universities are launching three-year degrees in 2022. They are often combined with a master's degree, which is an advanced degree following an undergraduate qualification. This way, students can graduate with bachelor's and master's degrees in the four years it traditionally takes to earn only a bachelor's.

More students want to get their degree and start working, said the University of Montana's Brian Reed. His university offers three-year bachelor's degrees in three years in majors including psychology, marketing and accounting. How long earning a degree will take "is part of the return-on-investment calculus they're making," Reed said. With debt weighing heavily on people's minds, every year of university study is a huge ask.

Other universities see three-year degrees as a way to attract students in a competitive market. Many young people are being lured away by faster-paced training programs or questioning the need to go to college at all. More than one-third of Americans without degrees don't believe that further studies would help them to find a job, according to the Strada Center for Education Consumer Insights. It is a group that studies pathways between education and employment.

**Getting A Head Start**

Meanwhile, more high school students are getting a head start on their college credits. College credits represent the number of completed classes required to earn a degree. Advanced Placement or dual-enrollment courses allow high school students to take college-level classes that count for both high school and college credit.

The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center studies enrollment trends. It says 12 percent of full-time private university and college students are already finishing four-year degrees within three years. For public colleges and universities, which are less expensive, that figure is 10 percent.

"I know exactly what I want to do when I graduate. So graduating early will just save me a ton of money," said 20-year-old Leah Easton. She will finish her degree at Utica in December after 3 1/2 years.

"Any time you can save, why not go for that option?" added Louie Zanca, 19, who will earn his bachelor's degree at Wentworth in three years.

**Squeezing Four Years Of Learning Into Three**

The biggest challenge is fitting the requirements of a four-year degree into three years. The average degree requires students to complete 120 "credit hours," a figure based on the literal number of hours students spend in the classroom. This is different from college credits, which are based on the total number of completed courses.

The 120-credit hour rule was created to standardize higher education nationwide. Most three-year degree programs simply try to squeeze 120 credits into three years — it's the model at Wentworth and the University of Montana. This means students have to take extra courses each semester and often more in the summers.

"There are days when I will go without sleeping," said 27-year-old Alyssa Russette, who is trying to finish a bachelor's degree in three years at Montana while also working and raising a 4-year-old son. "Caffeine is a big motivator."

**Something Even More Radical**

Instead of cramming more content into fewer hours, NewU is trying a different approach. It has lengthened its semesters from 15 to 18 weeks so that students earn four instead of three credits per course. Kulinski said students will take fewer courses, but they will cover more content per course.

At the University of Pennsylvania, Zemsky and his coworkers are proposing something even more radical. They have proposed that students be allowed to graduate with 90 credits instead of that traditional 120. However, this approach will require approval from regulators, accreditors and graduate school admissions offices.

Pfannestiel agrees that 120 credits is not a magic number. "It served its purpose, but that was a long time ago," he said. At Utica, they are looking at a "90-credit program that still includes all the requirements," with testing to prove that students have met learning goals.

"We have a very wise consumer out there," Pfannestiel said. The public knows that time is money, and they are "waking up and putting that pressure on institutions to mind this."

**Questions:**

* **Using evidence from the text, explain what the author wants you to learn about lowering the cost of a college degree.**
* **How do you know this article presents accurate information? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.**
* **Do you find the author’s arguments convincing? Explain your answer.**