STICKER SHOCK

Colleges Offer a Degree in 3

A shorter graduation track means less tuition, but how many students can handle it?

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An occasional series exploring college costs.

Derek Berndt spent part of last summer flipping through admissions brochures while manning the snack bar at the pool near his home in central Massachusetts. Eager to get on to his career, Mr. Berndt was particularly attracted to the three-year-degree program in business administration at Southern New Hampshire University. But he worried that he would be rushed through college, a rite of passage for many young Americans.

"I wanted to get that full experience," he says.

Mr. Berndt and his parents talked to the program's director, herself an alumna, who described the program's specialized curriculum, which promises no overloads or summer requirements, and they were impressed. But simple dollars and sense clinched it. By eliminating a year of tuition — about $25,000 at Southern New Hampshire — Mr. Berndt could get a private-college education, something he had hoped for but thought was out of reach. He otherwise might have gone to Salem State College, where most students commute to class.

In today's tough economy, students and parents alike are looking for ways to save on college tuition. With sticker prices well into the tens of thousands per year at any private liberal-arts institution, the prospect of shaving a year off the typical four-year journey is an added attraction at a number of colleges, like Franklin & Marshall, Hartwick, and Manchester Colleges, and Southern New Hampshire. If you're willing to work hard for three years, you'll be out a year ahead in the work force with 25 percent less debt — or so the reasoning goes.

But at most institutions, the three-year degree and its benefits are available to only a sliver of the total student population — in most cases only the very best and most driven students. That makes the three-year degree an unlikely solution for the overall problem of rising college costs. And some educators question whether students should barrel through college at an accelerated clip, even if they can.

Weighing the Options

The notion of the three-year degree has been discussed in higher education for decades. An essay in The
Chronicle last fall by the late George Keller, who was chairman of the department of higher-education studies at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education, laid out some common arguments for three-year degrees: Many high-school students are ahead in taking Advance Placement courses, and they aspire to get on to graduate school — indeed, some students already finish their degrees in three years without a formal program. And, Mr. Keller argued, American society no longer follows an agrarian calendar, so colleges could accelerate their schedule by going year-round.

The idea has its critics, too. "People are saying to us very plainly that we haven't been able to squeeze the value out of four years that's acceptable," says George D. Kuh, director of the Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University at Bloomington. "How are we going to do that in three?"

While college is about learning new material, he says, it's also about development — time to think critically, grow socially, and participate in effective learning experiences, like study abroad and internships. All of those are hard to integrate into a three-year degree, Mr. Kuh says.

Some students graduate in three years on their own, but they are exceptional. To push more students through college in three years is risky, says Mr. Kuh. "It may be short-shrifting them."

With the run-up in tuition in recent years, combined with a crippling recession that threatens many colleges and many more families, some think the three-year degree is an idea whose time has come. In Rhode Island, the House of Representatives recently passed a bill that pushes the University of Rhode Island and Rhode Island College to streamline curricula to allow students to graduate within three years. Joseph M. McNamara, a Democratic representative who sponsored the bill, said that he hoped not only to make bachelor's degrees more accessible, but also to make Rhode Island colleges more attractive to high-performing students.

"Many students do not want to spend four years on a bachelor's degree," says Mr. McNamara, who got his own undergraduate degree in three and a half years, long ago. "They are motivated to get out into the work force and to make way for younger siblings."

But most of the buzz about three-year degrees seems to be coming from small private colleges, which struggle with the public perception that they are expensive.

John A. Fry, president of Franklin & Marshall College, sees the cost of college coming to a breaking point. At the same time, he says he has talked with many students who are frustrated with the traditional college calendar.

"We can gnash our teeth all we want, but it is going to be harder and harder to draw students who can make the investment or want to make the investment" in a private-college degree, he says. "We have to innovate."

Last year he asked administrators to study the possibility of offering a degree in three years, and this fall, the college will admit the first students eligible for the program. Unlike three-year programs at other colleges, Franklin & Marshall's will accept students only after a successful first semester, which is a better indication of college success than SAT scores or high-school grades. Those students, who can come from any major, will take a heavier course load to finish in three years, and they will get special advising to help them plan and manage their schedule. Alan S. Caniglia, vice provost for planning and institutional research, sees the program as appealing to high-achieving students who anticipate a long graduate-school commitment and are eager to get on with it.
The savings may also be appealing. Administrators at Franklin & Marshall estimate that a student could cut the cost of a college degree by 19 percent, or around $40,000 for a student paying full fare. Mr. Fry believes an accelerated program is one of the only ways to make a Franklin & Marshall education cheaper. "I don't know how to take 18 to 19 percent out of costs here, particularly as it relates to the academic program," he says.

But the impact of those savings is limited: The program is open to only about 10 to 20 students, out of each class of about 575. Mr. Fry says the program may grow if it is successful, but administrators have not analyzed how pushing more students through in three years would affect the quality of education at Franklin & Marshall — or the college's bottom line.

Focused on Careers

Manchester College, in Indiana, is also offering students the chance to zoom through a bachelor's degree, in part by taking two summers of four online courses. David F. McFadden, executive vice president at Manchester, says the college created the program, called Fast Forward, as a recruitment tool. "So many of our students are career-focused," he says. "The old ways of doing business don't fit the needs of every student anymore."

Manchester markets Fast Forward as a way to get ahead and save money. To prospective students, Mr. McFadden might mention the "$50,000 swing": $25,000 less for tuition and at least that much more for heading out into the work force a year early.

Students who sign up for Fast Forward — 14 this year, 23 next — don't have room to wander. "They need to have a very clear sense of what they want to do," Mr. McFadden says. "It's impossible to spend a year in the program and then change majors." Also, he says, they must make sacrifices, like potential summer income, internships, and time off for fun. Opportunities like study abroad are possible but tricky for Fast Forward students. "They simply have to plan ahead," Mr. McFadden says.

Abby Schwendeman found that such sacrifices were not worth making. An aspiring special-needs teacher, she started the three-year program at Manchester last year but decided in April to move into the regular curriculum.

Initially, she was excited about Fast Forward. "I figured since I already knew what I wanted to do and I was eager to go out in the field, the three-year degree sounded great." But so did a few sociology courses, along with psychology and Spanish.

"I had no room for electives," says Ms. Schwendeman, who would have had to overload her semesters with courses. "I kind of wanted to slow down and enjoy the college experience."

Retention Advantages

Three-year degrees may pose challenges, along with savings, for the students who pursue them. But for colleges that start three-year programs, they can provide definite advantages in marketing the school to high-achieving students and in hanging on to those students once they arrive.

Southern New Hampshire University's 12-year-old program, offered only in business administration, stands as an example. Ashley Liadis, assistant dean and director of the program, who is also an alumna, goes out selling the program to students and their parents. Parents, she says, usually jump first.
"They're the ones saying, 'Hey, Johnny, have you looked at this?'" Students, on the other hand, envision weekends locked in the library. Ms. Liadis tries to reassure them. "It's not a compressed or re-engineered program," she says smoothly, like she's repeated the line many times over. "No summers, no nights, no weekends, no overloading, no interim semesters."

Ms. Liadis helps to pick the 30 high-achieving students who enroll in the program. A recent survey of the university's three-year students indicated that 90 percent of them may have gone somewhere else if the university had not offered the accelerated degree.

Once those students arrive, the benefits for the college continue: The program has around a 90-percent retention rate from the first year to the second, while 71 percent is the national average. Seventy-eight percent of students graduate in three years, and about 37 percent of students who finish the three-year bachelor's stay for their master's degree.

Mike Rizzi is one of the students who is staying. He has had this plan since talking to Ms. Liadis at a college fair at his public high school in New Jersey.

"You go to college for four years typically," Mr. Rizzi says, "so why not go for four years and come out with a higher degree?"

But he's also staying for another reason. He liked campus life too much, he says: "I couldn't leave."