



PENNSYLVANIA'S STATE SYSTEM *of* HIGHER EDUCATION
OFFICE OF THE CHANCELLOR

Public Hearing on Reduced-Credit Baccalaureate Degrees
Senate Education Committee
Tuesday, October 20, 2026

Three-Year Degree Programs
Advancing Affordability, Student Success, and Workforce Development
Dr. Chris Fiorentino, Chancellor

The universities of Pennsylvania's State System of Higher Education ("PASSHE") have a longstanding mission to provide Pennsylvanians with access to high-quality, affordable, and career-relevant higher education. As public institutions, the State System's universities are uniquely positioned to respond to the commonwealth's educational, workforce, and economic development needs while maintaining a commitment to academic excellence and student success. Consistent with that mission and pursuant to universities' requests, the Board of Governors is exploring whether to enable universities to carefully design and offer a limited number of three-year degree programs that preserve academic rigor while reducing both the cost and the time required to earn a degree.

At a time when Pennsylvania employers continue to seek a highly educated workforce, and many students face significant financial barriers to degree completion, innovative academic models deserve thoughtful consideration. As increasingly demonstrated at universities in a growing number of states, three-year degree programs offer a compelling approach to expanding educational opportunity, increasing affordability, and accelerating entry into the workforce without compromising the quality of the educational experience.

Advancing Affordability and Student Success

Affordability remains one of the greatest challenges facing students pursuing postsecondary education. The State System is statutorily charged with providing "high-quality education at the lowest possible cost to students," and reducing unnecessary time and expense associated with degree completion directly advances that mandate. A properly designed three-year degree could reduce the total cost of earning a degree by as much as 25 percent by eliminating a year of tuition, fees, housing, and other educational expenses. Students would also benefit from entering the workforce or pursuing graduate education one year earlier, potentially generating an additional year of earnings.

The potential benefits are particularly significant for students who face financial, family, or work-related barriers to degree completion. Many students today balance employment, caregiving responsibilities, and other obligations while pursuing higher education. For these students, the primary obstacle is often not academic ability but the financial and opportunity costs of spending four or more years completing a degree. By providing an alternative pathway that reduces both cost and time to completion, three-year programs could help expand access and improve educational attainment for students who might otherwise struggle to earn a degree.

Supporting Pennsylvania's Workforce Needs

Pennsylvania's economic future depends on developing and retaining a talented workforce equipped with the knowledge and skills employers need across the commonwealth. State

System universities play a critical role in preparing graduates for careers in business, healthcare, education, technology, communications, public service, and numerous other fields.

Three-year degree programs can accelerate the entry of qualified graduates into high-demand occupations while maintaining the core educational outcomes expected of four-year degree recipients. If institutions can demonstrate that students achieve the same baccalaureate-level learning outcomes through a redesigned, more efficient curriculum, then students, employers, and communities stand to benefit from a faster pathway to workforce participation and professional advancement.

Such programs may also help address workforce shortages by accelerating the production of qualified graduates in selected disciplines where employer demand is strong and educational requirements can be met through innovative curricular design. This approach aligns with ongoing efforts across higher education to improve educational efficiency while maintaining quality and responsiveness to labor market needs.

Preserving Academic Quality and Integrity

Three-year degree programs will not lower academic standards. Rather, attention is focused on student learning outcomes, degree competencies, and demonstrated achievement rather than solely on seat time or a prescribed number of credit hours. The central question is not how many credits a degree requires, but whether graduates possess the knowledge, skills, and competencies expected of bachelor's degree holders.

Importantly, neither federal regulations nor the standards of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education—the institutional accreditor for State System universities—require that a bachelor's degree consist of at least 120 credits. Instead, quality is evaluated through learning outcomes assessment, program review, accreditation standards, and continuous monitoring of educational effectiveness.

If PASSHE universities choose to pursue three-year degree programs, the proposals would undergo rigorous review and approval processes at both the university and System levels. Institutions would be required to demonstrate that students achieve the same level of learning, maintain eligibility for graduate and professional study, satisfy accreditation expectations, and meet workforce expectations. In addition, substantive change approval from Middle States Commission on Higher Education would be required before implementation.

Building on Existing Evidence and Practice

The concept of completing baccalaureate-level learning in fewer than 120 undergraduate credits is not entirely new. State System universities already participate in a variety of accelerated and articulated pathways that allow students to begin graduate or professional education after completing approximately 90 to 100 undergraduate credits, with subsequent coursework satisfying remaining degree requirements. These programs have successfully prepared students for advanced study and professional practice while demonstrating that academic outcomes can be achieved through alternative educational structures.

Similarly, competency-based education models and reduced-credit degree programs have been implemented at institutions across the country, illustrating that quality assurance can be maintained through outcome-based assessment rather than reliance on a fixed credit-hour threshold alone.

Conclusion

PASSHE will continue to explore whether three-year degrees could offer some students another option in a limited number of carefully selected programs. While the traditional four-year path will remain the right choice for most, for some students in some programs, a three-year option may fit their lives better. It could be the difference between going to college or not.

PASSHE is taking a thoughtful, planful approach to this topic. People have a lot of questions about this work, and rightly so. In fact, the State Board of Higher Education is doing a deep dive and gathering data from around the country, which will help inform the system's decision-making.

The State System's interest in three-year degree programs reflects its broader commitment to innovation, affordability, student success, and workforce development. Universities that explore carefully selected and rigorously reviewed three-year degree pathways would create opportunities to reduce student costs, accelerate degree completion, and strengthen Pennsylvania's workforce while maintaining the high academic standards expected of a bachelor's degree.

For students, the potential outcome is a high-quality credential earned at significantly lower cost. For employers, it could mean earlier access to educated and skilled graduates. For the commonwealth, it represents an opportunity to expand educational attainment and workforce participation while advancing the State System's statutory mission of providing affordable, high-quality public higher education.

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About PASSHE

Pennsylvania's State System of Higher Education is the public university system of the commonwealth with a mission to provide a high-quality education at the lowest possible cost to students. The State System annually confers more than 20,000 degrees and has more than 800,000 living alumni, most of whom live in Pennsylvania. The State System universities are Cheyney, Commonwealth (Bloomsburg, Lock Haven and Mansfield), East Stroudsburg, Indiana, Kutztown, Millersville, PennWest (California, Clarion and Edinboro), Shippensburg, Slippery Rock, and West Chester.