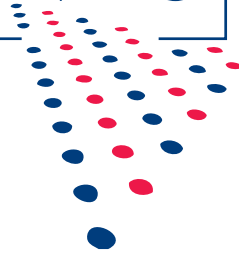


# PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES



a higher education presidential thought leadership series

2011/2012 Series: **Strategies to Address the Rising Cost of Higher Education**

chapter

## **6:** Three-Year Baccalaureate Degrees Contain Costs and Accelerate Positive Outcomes *One Institution's Experience*

# Three-Year Baccalaureate Degrees Contain Costs and Accelerate Positive Outcomes

## One Institution's Experience

Dr. Vinton Thompson: President of Metropolitan College of New York

Colleges and universities are under unprecedented pressure to operate more efficiently and effectively. State-supported institutions have lost substantial state support. Most of these cutbacks are likely to be permanent. Independent institutions face increasing resistance to tuition increases and diminished philanthropic support. For the first time in living memory, tuition costs net of institutional aid are dropping at private, non-profit colleges. Philanthropy is unlikely to take up the slack.

Given these trends, institutions of higher education have no choice but to make substantial improvement in efficiency and cost containment. Several commentators, most notably Senator Lamar Alexander (R.–Tennessee), have suggested that broader implementation of three-year baccalaureate degrees could make a major contribution to reducing the costs and increasing efficiency in American higher education. For students, time-shortened degrees permit quicker realization of the considerable job market advantages that accrue to college graduates and may also save on room, board, and time away from employment. For colleges and universities, these degrees open the door to more efficient year-round use of staff and facilities.

Here I summarize the experience of Metropolitan College of New York, which has offered three-year baccalaureate degrees since 1974. While the details reflect our unique history and circumstances, our successful approach to three-year degrees offers valuable lessons for other institutions contemplating this route to cost savings and efficiency. Most importantly, with the right ingredients, three-year degrees can enhance educational outcomes and save students and institutions money and time.



Our Summer term enrollment averages about 80 percent of our Fall term enrollment, a summer utilization rate most schools would envy.”

Metropolitan College embarked on its three-year degree program as part of a deeper effort to reconceptualize college education. The College was founded in 1964 as the Women's Talent Corps, a paraprofessional training program to bring economically disadvantaged women into the labor force. Under the leadership of visionary president Audrey Cohen and a core of dedicated educational reformers, it evolved in the early 1970s into a co-ed associate degree-granting program in Human Services. From the start, most of our undergraduate students have been working adults from urban backgrounds. Many have experienced poverty, and all are highly motivated to receive an education, master professional skills, and move along in life as quickly as possible.

Audrey Cohen and her colleagues quickly realized that traditional educational models did not serve this student body well and experimented from the beginning with year-round education and non-traditional integration of the classroom with workplace professional practice. In 1972, with funding from the Office of Economic Opportunity, they took the radical measure of closing the College to new enrollment for a year and a half while the faculty and staff created an innovative baccalaureate degree in Human Services. This degree, implemented in 1974, was designed from the beginning to be completed in two years and eight months of year-round study. It was one of America's first—if not the first—contemporary, standard-option “three-year degree,” intended as the normal route to graduation for a majority of the student body.

Our 1974 three-year degree model continues to serve as the basis for our undergraduate programs, which now include Business, American Urban Studies, and Health Care Systems Management, as well as Human Services. The basic components of the model include:

- Year-round study, with three full, 15-week semesters per year
- Recruitment and study by cohorts, with entering cohorts recruited for each program three times per year
- **Fixed, lockstep curricula**—Each student in each program takes a prescribed set of courses each semester.

Programs are divided into eight semesters, defined by an area of professional mastery or focus. Student cohorts take a common, fixed set of courses each semester, forming de facto learning communities. These courses are integrated around the semester focus and are usually linked to a supervised field experience or practicum, often at the student's workplace. Each student earns 15 credits per term, or a total of 120 credits for a baccalaureate degree. Semesters start in September, January, and May. Students may start a program in any term and complete a degree in two years and eight months. A typical Metropolitan College student completes this program while working full-time and shouldering significant family responsibilities. This is facilitated by the highly structured, supervised field experiences, which carry academic credit and permit students to integrate workplace activities with classroom study.

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Existing or proposed three-year degree programs have been faulted on several counts. Critics note that, in some proposals, credit hours and instructional time are reduced. They also have expressed concern that students lose the opportunity for intellectual exploration, and programs that overflow into the summer term may compromise the ability of students to work or participate in internships. Critics question the utility of accelerated programs for ordinary, as opposed to exceptionally well-prepared, students. They note that most three-year degree programs are limited to a few majors, and the number of participating students is usually small. Finally, given low national four-year graduation rates, they suggest that we should concentrate on getting students through college in four years, never mind three.

The Metropolitan College three-year degrees are full 120-credit baccalaureate programs done in standard time by making full use of the Summer term and operating the College flat out 52 weeks per year. Our students, all commuters, keep their jobs or internships while they pursue accelerated degrees, opening this opportunity to all students, not just those of exceptional academic ability or benign family finances. Our prescribed curriculum gives committed adult students clear direction and permits study and interaction in cohort learning communities that strengthen over time. Our accelerated-degree students are all in the same boat—not isolated in a sea of students pursuing a more conventional calendar of study—and the camaraderie they develop is an important catalyst of their success.

This system has worked well for more than 35 years, producing thousands of graduates. It allows Metropolitan College to make economical, year-round use of facilities—our Summer term enrollment averages about 80 percent of our Fall term enrollment, a summer utilization rate most schools would envy. It also facilitates realization of the full value of our staff, who work year-round with no slack periods. Finally, it gives our small institution (1,193 headcount in Fall 2010) a significant advantage in a very large and competitive metropolitan market. In the right context, three-year degrees sell well.

Running a three-year degree program does pose challenges. Recruiting and providing student services for three full semesters per year is hard on staff. Short breaks between terms leave little down time. It is also hard on students. There is a boot-camp atmosphere in the early semesters, and not all students prove up to the rigors of full-time study combined with full-time work. Like comparable urban institutions, we struggle with high first-year attrition. Our strategic plan calls for relieving some of the calendar stress for faculty, staff, and students by moving to 14-week semesters, a change that will require incorporation of a substantial distance-learning component in each program, each semester.

Once over the first-year hump, our student retention rates are high. Past this initial threshold, the unrelenting pace of our accelerated degrees promotes rather than impedes successful progress to graduation. I believe this is directly attributable to the intensity of the programs and the fact that students see early light at the end of the graduation tunnel. Also, as a practical matter, life's exigencies have less time to intervene and derail schooling. Conventionally, adult part-time students take seven to ten years to complete a bachelor's degree, offering a big target for life-disrupting events.

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Year-round students do face special financial challenges. They have to fund three semesters per year—a major hurdle, even at our relatively restrained tuition rate (about \$8,000 per semester). The federal government’s brief experiment with year-round Pell grants was a great boon for our students. Its abrupt termination in July 2011 will do them harm. It is ironic that the Department of Education is actively promoting higher levels of degree attainment while eliminating an important support for that goal. That notwithstanding, the ability of our students to combine full-time work and study continues to give them a significant edge as they struggle to finance their educations.

The combination of circumstances that makes three-year degrees work for us—focused, lockstep programs; adult students; location in the center of a large metropolitan area; integration of work and study—is special to Metropolitan College. Nevertheless, many institutions share commonalities that should make parts of our experience transferable. Three-year degrees aren’t a panacea. But, done well, they can increase efficiency, improve educational outcomes, and increase the number of American baccalaureate graduates.



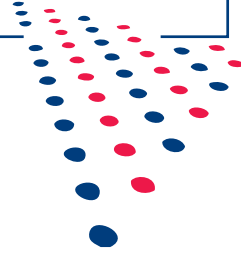
**Dr. Vinton Thompson** became President of Metropolitan College of New York in May 2008. He earned his Bachelor’s degree in Biology from Harvard University in 1969 and a Ph.D. in Evolutionary Biology from the University of Chicago in 1974. He began his academic career as an adjunct instructor in Natural Science at Roosevelt University in Chicago, where he later served as Professor of Biology, Biology Department Chair, Director of the School of Science and Mathematics, Associate Provost, and Provost. While in Chicago, he also served as the system Director of Institutional Research at the City Colleges of Chicago. In 2004, he became Provost and Vice

President for Academic Affairs at Kean University in New Jersey, where he served until assuming the presidency at Metropolitan College in 2008.

Dr. Thompson has published widely on topics related to population genetics, ecology, and evolution. He is a recognized expert on the biology of spittlebugs, insects of the Superfamily Cercopoidea, and holds a Research Associate appointment at the American Museum of Natural History in Manhattan. He serves on the board of the Yes We Must Coalition, a group of smaller independent colleges and universities that serve large numbers of economically disadvantaged students effectively.

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