A Degree in Three

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Washington

OVER the next few weeks more than half a million students will graduate from American colleges, the vast majority with at least four years of campus life behind them. Indeed, the assumption that it takes four years to get an undergraduate education — or three to get a law degree, or four to get a medical degree — lies at the center of the American university system.

That assumption needs to change. The college experience may be idyllic, but it’s also wasteful and expensive, both for students and institutions. There is simply no reason undergraduate degrees can’t be finished in three years, and many reasons they should be.

Switching from four to three years would be simple; it would mostly be a matter of altering calendars and adding a few more faculty members and staff. Some institutions have already shortened programs for graduate degrees: Northwestern Law School has pioneered a two-year degree, while Texas Tech University offers a three-year medical degree. But the idea has yet to percolate down into undergraduate programs, though the advantages would be even more pronounced.

Colleges should consider making the switch, too. Three-year curriculums, which might involve two full summers of study with short breaks between terms, would increase the number of students who can be accommodated during a four-year period, and reduce institutional costs per student. While there would be costs for the additional teachers and staff, those would be offset by an increase in tuition revenue.

Meanwhile, institutions that go quiet in the summer, incurring the unnecessary expense of running nearly empty buildings, would be able to use their facilities year-round.

Finishing in three years could be a challenge for students who need summer jobs to pay tuition. But three years wouldn’t be the rule, just the norm: like today, students could take an extra year or two if needed. And while it might be more expensive in the short term, getting out the door after just three years would allow young people to enter the workplace that much faster.

Other students might balk over losing the opportunity to have summer internships. On the contrary, the internship experience would be improved. No longer would the bulk of students be forced to take them at the same time during the summer; instead, they could be more evenly distributed throughout the year, allowing more students to participate. And faculty members would have the same opportunities to take time off during periods when research and scholarly facilities are not as crowded.

Savings aren’t the only reason for shortening the time it takes to get a degree. It would also force curriculum innovation, as departments look for ways to pack the same information into a shorter time period. Multi-disciplinary courses would blossom: French history and literature might be integrated into a single course, bringing together two departments that are usually kept apart.
America is blessed with a post-secondary educational system second to none. But we’re victims of our own success — demand is outstripping capacity, even as costs soar. Cutting the undergraduate experience to three years would allow our colleges to be as efficient as they are effective.

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