



**Three-Year Degree Programs and Factors for Success**  
**A Study of Three-Year Undergraduate Degree in the United States and Europe**

**BY**

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## **DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate the completion of my dissertation to my mother, Cathleen Heinz, and grandmother, Lottie Lindgren. My mother taught me the meaning of persistence and to push through the most difficult of times, and during the 8 years it took to complete this degree, there were certainly plenty. And my grandmother taught me that education is something you will never look back on and regret, and who thought she would never live to see me finish first grade.

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# ABSTRACT

The time it takes a student to complete a bachelor's degree in college is ever-changing. The four-year timeframe to finish a degree in the United States has become a dream many will not accomplish for various reasons. Looking to the past, we have seen bachelor's degrees go from a three-year timeframe to a four-year timeframe, college costs have increased drastically, and students are paying for the impact that time and cost have had on them for years after graduation.

This research resulted in a case study that showcases the work of a sample U.S. universities efforts in developing and delivering three-year undergraduate business degrees, student performance, and alumni perceptions after graduation. It presents the results of a survey that was conducted, proving that the reduction in cost is the main driver for students to enroll and persist to graduation. Experiential learning opportunities woven throughout the curriculum was also a unique programmatic attribute that alumni found to be appealing while being a student and after graduation. The research also looks at a dataset of this same population and analyzes trends found based on their performance and attributes of their college experience. The main finding was that the high school GPA was the most correlated with success in a three-year undergraduate degree. These results lead to propositions that can be used in future program design for universities looking to develop three-year undergraduate degrees.

The qualitative aspect of this research lies in the European interviews around three-year undergraduate degrees. A series of interviews were conducted with higher education professionals in Europe to understand their perceptions of the degrees, their effectiveness, and how students manage to complete them. The interviews resulted in a discussion around the increased need for master's degrees, the length of time individual majors should take a student to

complete, and the mental length concerns over students graduating in three years. The findings again will be developed into propositions that will allow for an international perspective when developing three-year degrees in the future. Further research will be recommended based on the limitations of this study and other areas that presented themselves during the course of the investigation.

**Keywords:** Bologna Process, Graduation Rate, Student Success, Three-Year Degree, Tuition

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**Structure of the Dissertation:**

This dissertation is structured in the following manner:

Chapter 1 is an introduction to the topic, the research questions, and how this can advance the literature in three-year undergraduate degree programs. The introduction reviews the history of three-year degree programs in the United States, as well as the history of the Bologna Process and its effect on length of completion to degree.

Chapter 2 reviews the literature around the research completed that relates to areas such as three-year degree programs, time to completion, and effects of the Bologna Process. Specifically, there are research studies that looked at three-year undergraduate degrees in the United States, with the goal of showcasing the gaps in available research. There is also substantial literature on the perceived successes and failures of the Bologna Process in relation to the length of degrees and the changes since implementing the commitment.

Chapter 3 reviews the methods the researcher will complete in order to fill the gaps in the literature and answer the research questions. This chapter will introduce the justification of selecting the methods that were used to collect research, why certain populations were targeted for information, and how they connect to and answer the research questions.

Chapter 4 will review the results of the research completed and described in chapter 3. This will include a case study on a private, non-profit university and their experience with three-year undergraduate degrees and results of the interviews completed with faculty and administrators from European Universities. Each interview question is analyzed against the major themes identified from the transcription.

Chapter 5 reviews the conclusions drawn from the research and how these fill the gap in literature related to three-year degrees in the United States and Europe. There is also discussion

on future research and how this can benefit colleges and universities, as well as gaps that existed in the research presented.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction-**

The United States and European higher education systems, at different points in history, have been labeled as broken. The cost of higher education continues to rise, leaving crippling debt in the United States, while in Europe they struggle with a shift in the paradigm of time in one's education and what students are losing in the process.

Graduation rates in the United States currently stand at 60.4 percent over the course of six years for institutions that offer four-year bachelor's degrees, with only 41 percent of students graduating in four years (College Graduation Statistics, 2021). Defined by IPEDS (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System), graduation rate is measured by the percentage of full-time, first-time students in an entering cohort who complete their degree within 150 percent of the expected time (Barrett, 2012). This suggests a concerning trend regarding the completion rate over a six-year time period.

Research completed by the Higher Education Research Institution at the University of California Los Angeles, indicated when surveying students entering college for the first time, less than seven percent thought that it would take them longer than four years to complete their degree. This research done in 2011 also indicated that at the time, only 34.5 percent of students were graduating in four years (Runyan, 2011), highlighting the sharp contrast in what students perceive their college education will look like from a time perspective, and how many variables should be taken into account which can get in the way of students completing their degree.

While there are many reasons why students are not successful at completing their degree in four years, there is an argument to be made that if universities provide a more structured pathway to

degree completion, they can complete their degree in less time. Thus, in this research, we look at the idea of three-year degree programs being an option that would combat the problem of timely degree completion and look to Europe's Bologna Process, which outlined three-year programs as an option for universities to consider, as a large-scale implementation that the United States could consider.

Three-year baccalaureate degrees are not a new concept when looking at the American higher education system. Prior to the Civil War, three-year bachelor's degrees were developed and offered by Harvard and Yale, with Johns Hopkins, the University of Chicago, and Clark University offering programs of similar design by the end of the 1800's and early 1900's.

Three-year degree programs are a cyclical trend in higher education, gaining attention as the call for higher education to address economic change. Articles dating back to the 1970's call for action by colleges to look at offering their four-year degree programs in the span of three years, with many leading the charge, but ultimately closing them, citing they were only a marketing and admission tool to attract students (Lerstrom, 1994). In 2006, the Commission for the Future of Higher Education called for a greater accountability on colleges and the needs to graduate students faster (Attwell & Lavin, 2007).

Allen (1973) provides the most comprehensive historical account of three-year degrees in the United States prior to the 1970's. By connecting trends in social and cultural constructs, advances in technology and communication, as well as political influences, the standard of offering three-year degrees transitioning to four was widespread throughout the United States (Allen, 1973). Allen points to several factors that lead to the fall of three-year degree programs, including the rise of the immigration to the United States as a turning point in higher education,

where so many different cultures, previous education, and preferences were now part of a system initially designed for domestic students.

The expansion and interest in elective offerings were labeled as the reasons universities began to shift to four-year degree programs, with Harvard being the leader of this shift, until the Lowell Presidency of the college, from 1908 to 1913. President Lowell was critical of the elective system and wanted more requirements within their degrees, allowing students to specialize in certain areas, calling for a complete mastery in their studies before being allowed to graduate with an undergraduate degree (Allen, 1973). In the last two years of the prior administration at Harvard, President Eliot led the charge in four-year program development, having 36 percent and 32 percent of their students pursuing their degree in three years, respectively.

As the years went on, branching out from traditional studies became the goal of higher education in the United States. Labeled the “knowledge explosion” at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it satisfied the growing desire that higher education should be more universal and appeal to the masses (Allen, 1973). The rise of graduate programs also contributed to the change in offering three-year degree programs to four-year degrees. Johns Hopkins was initially built as a university of graduate program offerings and modeled itself as German universities of the time. This led to an increase in German influence in the American higher education system and alignment with lengths of degree completion. At approximately the same timeframe (turn of the century), the President of Johns Hopkins made the argument that students should not be held to the aggressive timeline of graduating in three-years, and no unwarranted attention or discredit should come to any student who was graduating in a longer timeframe.

Leading up to Allen’s research in the 1970’s on three-year degree programs, the 1960’s saw a social movement where bureaucracy was challenged, and the structure and rigidity of the college

degree was protested. The cyclical trend continued from what was witnessed at the beginning of the century, where students wanted more electives, freedom to design their own programs, relevance, and human development integrated into their curriculum. The stage was once again set for colleges and universities in the United States to begin looking at change in higher education, with Allen developing a list of 30 institutions that were offering three year degrees, 19 developing or considering them, and 13 considered to have de facto three-year programs (reported in media or other sources, but when contacted, representatives contradicted the claim), (Allen, 1973).

In 2014, The Progressive Policy Institute (PPI) challenged institutions of higher learning to combat the growing debt, college costs, and declining earnings for graduates, by transitioning their programs to three-year degree programs that cost 25 percent less than their four years' of tuition. In a 2018 report by the PPI on the United States' efforts regarding three-year degree programs, they gave higher education a failing grade. By that point, 32 colleges and universities had implemented three-year degree programs and most of them were just a condensed, accelerated version of their four-year degree. This makes three-year degree programs in that design only attainable by the highly motivated, of which the take-up rate from eligible students is anywhere from 2-19 percent (Weinstein Jr., Which colleges offer three-year bachelor's and why aren't they working?, 2018).

Meanwhile in Europe, higher education has seen sweeping reform over the last 20 years because of the Bologna Process. During the 1980's through the early 2000's, Europe saw drastic change across the continent in the form of the fall of the Soviet Union. As a result, Eastern Europe entered a state of repair, the European Union was formed, and the Euro became the currency for

most of the continent. This provided the stage upon which education was put under a spotlight and areas for change became obvious.

Named for the city in which the oldest university in Europe is located, as well as the location of the signing, the Bologna Process was meant to align Europe, for those who chose to enter its consortium and its higher education practices, their standards and processes, and compete with the rest of the world. Described as a harmonization, rather than a standardization, it sought to ensure that students were at the forefront of quality assurance and degree recognition, no matter where they studied (Adelman, 2008). Declared in 1999, it was set up to create the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), where ministers of countries affirm their intention to:

- (1) Adopt a system of easily readable and comparable degrees,
- (2) Implement a system based essentially on two main cycles,
- (3) Establish a system of credits,
- (4) Support the mobility of students, teachers and researchers,
- (5) Promote European cooperation in quality assurance,
- (6) Promote the European dimension in higher education (in terms of curricular development and inter-institutional cooperation). (EURYDICE, 2009)

The European Higher Education Area, in addition to the items above, was also meant as a marketing tactic to challenge what were considered the pinnacles of higher education in the world, in terms of quality at the time: the United States and Great Britain (Zgaga, 2006). The European Higher Education Area has reported, as of the writing of this dissertation, that 47 member nations have signed the Bologna Declaration, with over 4,000 educational institutions part of this consortium, adapting to this framework, in various stages along the process (Mngo, 2021). In 1999, upon the original signing of the Declaration, 29 countries committed to the



Bologna Process, and had until 2010 to implement the items listed above. However, subsequent experience by university staff and faculty, resistance, new provisions, and turning what Adelman (2008) calls “ancient higher education systems” on their heads, the timetable was set back by over a decade.

When opting into this continent-wide available consortium, a country would commit their universities to these six items by developing easily readable and comparable degrees, allowing for a more mobile and consistent experience for students by utilizing the then formed European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). This attempt at creating an infrastructure that would promote students’ mobility across borders, as well as looking to address the overarching problems across higher education in Europe (such as lagging behind United States’ institutions), promoted Europe as an appealing destination for education seeking students outside the continent, and adapted to market demands of students (Szolar, 2011).

The implementation of the ECTS also put the awarding of credit on the number of hours a student spends working on a particular class, rather than the pre-Bologna and current United States’ process which involves faculty contact hours and estimated number of hours outside of the classroom. It has caused faculty to reform their curricula in Europe, had them rethink their assignments, and determine what is necessary, compared to what is optional. By doing so, faculty have learned to reflect what they expect of their students and have, as a result, turned their attention from teaching to learning (Adelman, 2008).

These cycles mentioned previously include the first cycle: a bachelor’s degree equivalent that would not exceed three years to completion, and the second cycle: master’s and doctoral level degrees (European Commission , 2020). Several sources and authors separate out the master’s and doctoral studies into two separate cycles, depending on the year published, making the third

cycle that of doctoral programs. One of the unintended effects of the Bologna Process that has been observed in research studies has been the “social dimension” that has come out of this increase in accessibility. Mentioned by Adelman (2008), the social dimension is seen as how a student can see themselves connecting to a route to higher education, with the three majors’ attributes being: the growth of short-cycle degrees within the first cycle, the growth and treatment of part-time students, and procedures for recognizing prior learning in formal and non-formal settings. In particular, the growth of short-cycle degrees within the first cycle is important when looking at the trends of three-year programs in both Europe and the United States.

The Bologna Process is a series of meetings held bi-annually, which establishes standards and practices, including quality among participating countries related to higher education. As part of the framework, universities now have standardized and structured curricula that can be delivered in three years. This standardization process that leads to the enlargement of scale by the European System of Higher Education and allowed them to cut costs (European Higher Education Area and Bologna Process, 2021). In countries like Germany, the timeframe to complete an undergraduate degree was five years, but not fixed at that completion date, leading to what became an increase of students lingering in their free education system for longer than five years. At that time, dropout rates in Germany averaged from 50% to over 75% at some universities (Labi, In Europe, Skeptics of New 3-Year Degrees Abound, 2009).

As a result of signing the Bologna Process in 1999, four of the original countries to commit to adopting the framework saw significant increases in their higher education enrollments. From 1999 to 2005, enrollments grew in the following countries:

-Great Britain (232,540 to 318,399)

-Germany (178,195 to 259,797)

-France (130,952 to 236,518)

-Finland (4,847 to 8,442)

Petersons (2017) reported U.S admission numbers have been directly linked from the signing of the Bologna Process to the increase in Europeans staying on the continent, due to the reduced time students are spending in their undergraduate degree at three years (Petersons, 2017). This increase in enrollments in Europe, both from within Europe and abroad, is expected to continue its growth. During the Trump presidency, the complications of getting a visa were enhanced and Europe became a far more welcoming option (Mngo, 2021). As of the 2015 European Commission report, a third of the countries belonging to the European Higher Education Area have implemented the Bologna framework, while the remaining countries (with the exception of Switzerland, Germany, Austria, and Spain) have more than 70% of their students enrolled in a three-cycle program (Mngo, 2021).

Mgno (2021) sums up his analysis on the effects the Bologna Process has had on the United States as a missed opportunity to learn from. Those countries that have agreed to adopt the Bologna Process have put themselves in a position where they are losing enrollments, both from European students and elsewhere, to a framework that has created less time in school, a more organized, major focused degree, and kept accessibility at the forefront, due to low cost of attendance.

In this dissertation, the literature review will outline three key topics in detail and how they relate to one another. First, a review of the literature around time in college leading up to completion, the causes, and the tuition impacts on students in both Europe and the United States. Both the United States and Europe have stark differences in both their tuition structure and how long students complete their degrees, but literature is also analyzed showcasing the similarities

between them. Second, literature around three-year degree programs in the United States being a cyclical trend of conversation and how some universities have fared with three-year degree programs. And third, a look at the effects of the Bologna Process at the country and university level and how three-year degree programs have affected higher education in Europe.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

To better understand the research done in the past regarding this trend of degree completion, and the results of three-year degree programs as an option, the literature review is organized in the following manner:

2.1: Completion Time and Tuition Effects on Students: A compilation of the research for the United States and Europe on how long degrees take to achieve, as well as the financial costs associated with them, in the short and long term.

2.2: Three-Year Programs in the United States: A historical overview of the college degree in the United States and cyclical nature of Three-Year degrees. Existing research on these degrees is presented as a foundation for this research.

2.3: The Bologna Process: A review of the research around the cause and effects of the Bologna Process, to include praise and criticism. Encompassed in the available research on the impact of three-year degrees because of the adoption of the Bologna Process in certain countries.

### **2.1 Completion Time and Tuition Effects on Students**

#### **2.1.1: Time to Completion in Europe**

Garibaldi, Giavazzi, Ichino, and Rettore (2012) in their analysis of college tuition and time to degree completion, argue and prove that tuition and speed of graduation are interrelated, but suggest that institutions themselves do not pay attention to this or try to solve this problem. While their research has mostly focused on Italy, they acknowledge this is a global problem,

especially with Europe now seeing tuition fees being introduced across the continent. Their research was limited to students who graduated between 1992-1999 at a private economics-focused university in Italy, however, this does have some relevant points to this day.

First, they highlight that while these students completed degrees in roughly five years, Italy has since transitioned many of its programs to be offered in three years. They also noticed that after doing an empirical analysis, students were more likely to speed up their degree completion if they knew there was a chance of their tuition rising. In the 1990's, at private institutions in Italy, tuition fees were based on family income and evaluated yearly by the university. In addition, they found that an increase in speed did not significantly affect student's academic performance, and that an increase in tuition fees by 1,000 euro increased the graduation rate by 5.2 percent (Garibaldi, Giavazzi, Ichino, & Rettore, 2012). The authors also make the case that, even though private universities in Italy are partially subsidized by the government, Europe must do more to incentivize students to get to graduation earlier.

While Europe has put a focus on its free, or near free, education system and restructuring many of its offerings to three-year degree programs, it is not without problems. Finland currently struggles with capacity problems where, though taxpayer funded, not all can get into university. France is also in a position where it struggles, despite having small annual fees. French universities are also overcrowded and as a result, 50 percent of students drop out or fail after their first year. In Germany, overcrowding led to tuition fees being introduced in their public university system in 2006, but was quickly reversed by 2014. Since then, enrollment has risen 22 percent and cost to taxpayers increased by 37 percent. Spending, however, decreased by 10 percent per student (Amselem, 2019).

Regarding time to completion, Switzerland has been highlighted in literature for its apprenticeship model that has had positive effects where other countries have struggled. Students in Switzerland typically graduate between the ages of 18 and 20 by participating in professional and vocational education programs that allow students to earn credit. Thus, graduating early, entering the workforce early, and having 60 percent of all funding for the Swiss higher education system subsidized by the private sector (Amselem, 2019). This is a highlight in the literature, as very few researchers analyze solutions at the programmatic or academic offering level.

Brunello and Winter-Ebmer (2003) provided some of the most intensive original literature on European students and factors of time to complete their degrees. The authors researched ten European countries to look at whether labor market variables (unemployment, wage levels, employee protection, and funding) had an impact time to degree completion. Their findings were that there was a positive correlation between colleges within a country, and then from country to country, on the variables that led to European students spending more time in their studies. The main results were that employment protection was increasing time for students in college because of the lower unemployment rate. They also found that the perception of higher quality of a university will keep students in their degrees longer, while countries that have a larger wage gap see students completing their degrees sooner (Brunello & Winter-Ebmer, 2003). Opportunity costs are highlighted as the main reason behind these variables and their correlation to shortening or lengthening a student's time in their degree.

Messer and Wolter (2007) built on this research by conducting an empirical analysis on what factors specifically in Switzerland correlate to time in college. Using a linear regression model, they were able to prove that by using certain factors, one can determine how long a student will remain at their university. Factors such as unemployment rate, interest rates, changes in wages

and economic growth can all be tied directly to how long a student will remain in school. They acknowledge that their research is the first demonstration of degree completion time being modelled in a human capital framework, as well as adding to the literature around students being influenced by economic conditions on their decision to go to college, and their behaviors once there, around time in degree (Messer & Wolter, 2007).

#### 2.1.2: Cost of Education Post-Bologna Process Adoption

One factor between the United States and Europe which provides a clear dividing line is tuition and its effects on its students. Europeans have traditionally enjoyed low to non-existent tuition, due to the higher taxes Europeans have endured compared to the United States. The United States has seen tuition increase by more than 500% from 1985-2021, seeing a significant decrease in the number of graduates in four-year degree programs. What was once the dominant global market in producing college degrees in 1990, has been reduced to 12<sup>th</sup> in graduation rates as of 2018 (Mngo, 2021).

With the Bologna Process mandate of reducing the time it takes to earn an undergraduate degree and scale the process, governments have cut spending to higher education. For example, in the Netherlands, the government now spends 40 percent less per student on higher education than they did in the 1980's, leading critics of the Bologna Process to cite this reduction in time as a means of decreasing their spending on education (Labi, In Europe, Skeptics of New 3-Year Degrees Abound, 2009).

In Germany, as previously mentioned, tuition was abolished in their state universities in the 1960's, with students only paying a small enrollment fee of less than 100 euro. Between 2003 and 2005, legislation was introduced by several states banning tuition fees nationwide, however this was overruled and determined it was up to states how they would handle tuition fees. Thus,

several states began to introduce tuition fees in their state universities, and an empirical analysis concluded that student enrollments decreased by 2% in favor of state universities that have no tuition fees (Dwenger, Storck, & Wrohlich, 2009). The authors do not directly address the Bologna Process as the reason for the introduction of tuition fees, but previous literature around German tuition fees directly points to that cause.

Beginning in 2009, German students began a series of protests in the states where tuition fees were growing to 500 euro a semester (Morgan , 2009). This also led to a competition in the German higher education system that was non-existent prior to the Bologna Process (Hairston, 2013). Even with the introduction of state-based tuition fees, Germany remains one of the top global destinations for a science-based education, and still has a competitive advantage over the United States and Great Britain in terms of tuition (Mngo, 2021).

France is also well known for its low cost of attendance for its public universities, being the equivalent of \$200 in tuition (Mngo, 2021). However, these fees were implemented shortly after the adoption of the Bologna Process and protested heavily as proposals came forward to take away free education in public universities in the country (Labi, Across Western Europe, Students Protest Plans to Increase Tution , 2003). Even as of 2009, students in France continued to protest the cutting of budgets at universities and proposals in the government to raise fees, at one point shutting down many universities for a time due to the strikes (Labi, As Cuts Hit European Higher Education Harc, Students and Professors Take to the Streets, 2010).

This issue of introducing tuition fees is not limited to specific countries in Europe, as policy influencers in the continent are also calling for introductions, or introduced, tuition fees. The European Commission for Education, in discussions with the United States about more collaboration, called for an increase in tuition to decrease the burden on government's funding of



their population's education. The European Commission reports that the introduction of tuition fees has not created inequities in who can attend college versus those who cannot, claiming that there are good grant and loan systems in place to handle those who cannot afford their education up front (McMurtrie, 2009). They point to the fact that universities adopting the Bologna Process will get into the workforce faster than they could before and repay those grants and loans off sooner.

### 2.1.3: The United States

Labeled by Raikes, Berling, and Davis (2012) as “the impossible dream”, completing college in four years remains out of reach for much of the United States population.

Primarily looking at financial and institutional factors, Raikes, Berling, and Davis (2012) highlight that the historical composition of financial aid has changed since the 1980's, with as of 2006 loans being the majority form of aid. Institutional aid has also had to increase, adding to the argument that college has become too expensive, but acknowledging that discounting has had to increase, and it is not distributed equally (Raikes, Berling, & Davis, 2012). Their multiple regression analysis found that the most significant variable in contributing to students graduating in four years was the level of institutional aid given by the university. The authors also found that universities with high cost of attendance and low aid, also proved to have higher graduation rates, though they attribute this to the university being unlikely to have the funds to be able to support their students better than an average institution. And finally, faculty to student ratio was also linked to higher four-year graduation rates where the lower the ratio, the higher the rate.

Dwyer, McCloud, and Hodson (2012) analyzed the United States normalizing of credit and debt as one of the biggest financial missteps in the country. As college costs began to rise in the 1990's, the source of funding for an education went from mostly scholarship and federal loans to

legislation being passed allowing private loans to be taken out for education. Much like home ownership, educational debt became seen as a necessity to support long-term goals. The more educational loans became available, the larger enrollments became as a result of more people willing to take on debt, knowing that it would mean career advancement. However, though enrollments increased, persistence and completion rates dropped (Dwyer, McCloud, & Hodson, 2012). Their research focused on finding at what point debt contributes to a lower graduation rate among students, and the finding was that \$9,882 was the inflection point at which graduate rate begins to drop.

Runyan (2006) added to the research in the United States concerning time to completion of a college bachelor's degree, by looking at individual and institutional variables in a causal-comparative study at the University of Central Missouri. The author makes the point that while it may make sense to believe that colleges and universities want to keep their students for more tuition, it prevents them from bringing in more students if there is a capacity on campus, and more resources need to be devoted to those to get them through their degree. Using the dependent variables of time to degree (both in number of semesters enrolled and number of semesters elapsed since entering college), graduation efficiency index (a method developed by the University of Washington to determine the minimum number of hours required for a degree and the number of hours earned, dropped, repeated, and transferred), and the alternative graduation efficiency index. The formulas were as follows:

Graduation Efficiency Index:

Minimum Required Credits for the Degree-Transfer credits/Sum of Enrollment Census Day  
Credits X 100 = GEI

Alternative Graduation Efficiency Index:

Minimum Required Credits for the Degree/Sum of Enrollment Census Day Credits + Transfer credits x 100 = Alternative GEI

The independent variables for this were student demographics, such as age, race, ethnicity; College preparedness variables such as SAT/ACT scores, high school GPA; Student enrollment pattern variables, such as number of institutions attended previously, credit hours earned, semesters attended; Student financial variables, such as Expected Family Contribution, FAFSA being on file, Pell grants, and scholarships/discounts; and degree sought and the credits associated with that degree. Using all these variables and running a multivariable regression, 21 variables were considered statistically significant, with the strongest correlation being transfer credits, age at graduation, age at entering the university, summer semesters enrolled, hours attempted and earned (Runyan, 2011).

Johnson (2016) looked at the relationship between high-impact practices and time to degree completion, with high-impact practices being defined by the American Association of Colleges and Universities as freshmen seminars, common curricula, learning communities, group work, undergraduate research, study abroad, service learning, internships, and senior capstones.

Johnson looked at 244 institutions that enrolled 10,000 undergraduate students or more, and had indicated they offer at least one of the high-impact practices outlined by the AAC&U. No statistically significant relationship was found, however, between these high impact practices and graduation rates at the four- or six-year milestone (Johnson, 2016).

Anselem (2019) released a report outlining the state of the American higher education system and the effects free or reduced tuition would have within the country. Highlighting capacity issues, as exist in Finland with their tuition free system, a tuition free model would increase taxes but not address any issues regarding access and equity in the United States. Moreover, as of

2019, the number of college level jobs in the United States had already outpaced the number of students with bachelor's degrees. They also make the argument that, with more than a third of students leaving college without a degree, the higher education system is not ready for an influx of students without radical change to the system of supporting students through to graduation. Rather, Anselem calls for expedited education pathways to get students out into the workforce more quickly.

## 2.2 Three Year Programs in the United States

The argument surrounding three-year degree programs often begins with the question of there being a need for colleges and universities to get their graduates on a faster track to graduation to accomplish two items: 1) Get into the workforce faster and 2) Reduce the debt the students take on during their education (Poliakoff, 2020). Carol Frey in *U.S. News & World Report* ascertains that families are looking for bargain bachelor's degrees, including degrees that can be completed in three years. Americans have relaxed the expectation that college should be completed in four years, instead now many colleges measure successful completion over the course of six years (Frey, 2009). This should focus on private universities which are notoriously expensive.

Internally to an institution, one of the questions that is being considered is what can be removed from the degree to accomplish these goals? Poliakoff makes the case that there should be an institution-wide cut to the vast menu of requirements, electives, and options. An argument is made that foundational knowledge can be condensed and universities have suffered from curricular bloat that must be reimagined, thus arguing that a college degree need only be 90 credits. A call by the author argues that the accrediting bodies in the United States must retreat from this idea of mandating a 120-credit undergraduate degree to help the students. By reducing the bloat and focusing on skills employers demand, such as expository writing, literature,

mathematics, natural science, economics, and history or government, this opens more of the degree for students to choose a meaningful and intentional major and eliminates what is considered the fluff of curricula (Poliakoff, 2020).

### 2.2.1 An Historical Perspective

Allen (1973) in his research, provides the framework for a good amount of research in recent years on three-year degree programs in the United States. In his dissertation, he reviews the history of higher education up until that point, and how, since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in academics, government officials, and workforce partners have called for a change in higher education. He takes advantage of what he calls a move towards a greater latitude and wider choices for students, and calls three-year degree programs the answer to the pressures on higher education to change with the times. This came at a time when new institutions were being established in the United States, mostly in the form of vocational schools (and referring to themselves as colleges) which were threatening a large population of students who would enroll in these and not in undergraduate degree programs. His mostly qualitative research serves multiple purposes: first he provides the most detailed historical account of three-year degree programs in the United States up until that time, and trends in higher education moving from the 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Second, he provides the most complete list of three-year degree programs in the United States up until the 1970s by contacting the colleges and universities. And third, his research provided an analysis, through surveys and interviews, of the reasons for and against the implementation of three-year degree programs in the United States.

In his research, Allen finds that the cyclical trend happening again in higher education, with a sixty-year gap, is the same regarding the reasons for and against three-year programs. The

reasons he identified against three-year programs were the importance of tradition, the maturity of the student (denying them a year of maturity before sending them out into the workforce), the knowledge explosion, diluting the degree, student skepticism, the threat syndrome, secondary vs. college level work, degrees by compression, and the acceptability of the degree. The most cited by his subjects were the maturity factor and the diluting of the degree (Allen, 1973). He is quick to reject any claim from his subjects that a simply compressed three-year degree answers the call for three-year degree options to be more readily available for students. The idea behind his research is that three-year degree programs should be made widely available to all, not a select few of highly motivated students; access to it is important.

As for the advocates for three-year degrees in the United States, the main argument of these subjects is to point out that this is not meant to replace the four-year degree option, but to complement it and gives those students who want to obtain one the option to do so. Much of the discussion in the responses revolve around the maturity piece, and that it is not higher education's responsibility to keep students around for four years or more to achieve maturity, rather to give students the credits they need and move on. They argue in their responses that students in three-year programs can be more mature as they have a more structured direction.

The role of high school, secondary education, was also the focus of much of the literature Allen proposes in his dissertation. Opponents of three-year degrees amongst his subjects were adamant that high school and college level experiences were separate, with high school education not being worthy of college level credit. Proponents of three-year degrees, however, have research-based evidence that high school, during the 1960's, became advanced and students were taking first level college curriculum into their senior level courses. Related to the high school experience, the only mention of financial consideration on the student's part is the idea that if

credit can be given at the high school, that lessens the amount of credits needing to be taken at the college level, thus, reducing time and cost for the student (Allen, 1973).

Allen (1973) categorized all three-year degree program offerings into four categories: compression model, the early admission model, the credit-by-examination model, and the restructuring model. When combined with Poliakoff's (2020) goals that universities should get their students into the workforce faster and reduce student debt, we can begin to formulate that student motivation, for the purposes of this research, should focus on students looking to accelerate their degree while reducing the cost of their education.

### 2.2.2 Modern Examples

Several models were identified that reduced their curriculum. Shepard College reduced the total credits of the degree to 102, while Ripon College reduced to 112 credits, but must all be completed at Ripon (Lerstrom, 1994). For the purposes of this research, colleges that reduce the number of credits to their program will not be utilized, only programs whereby a degree is awarded in 120 credit hours or any international equivalent.

Many universities have implemented three-year degree programs and offered insight into their research and findings. The University of Utah offered a Biomedical Engineering undergraduate degree that can be obtained in three years, with the added advantage of getting a master's degree during the fourth year. Named the Accelerated Dual-Degree program (ADD), the pilot program began with highly motivated and qualified students that had AP credits that were applied to the student's degree audit. (Christensen & Horsch, 2004). To accelerate their degree outside of AP credits, the students are required to take summer courses for general education, and a menu of preselected research topics are provided to the students to select in their second year. By the publish date of the research, they had analyzed four incoming cohorts into the ADD program.

To give an idea into the students recruited for this program, the average high school GPA is over 3.9, and on average, the students are bringing in five or more AP college courses that count towards their degree. Their results were mixed, as at the time of publishing data, they did not recruit more than five students into a cohort, and in their first and second cohorts, were only able to get two students through to the end of their B.S. requirements.

Luther College in the 1990's explored the opportunity to invest in the development of three-year degree program, ultimately deciding that, based on their research, the investment was not worth the return. Based on their model, they still mandated all 128 credits be taken at Luther College and taken in an accelerated fashion. They found that this would cost the students 80.05% of the cost of the full four-year tuition, losing almost 20% of revenue they would normally generate from each student. (Lerstrom, 1994). Luther College also found that if 10% of their students graduated in three years out of their 2,256-student body, admissions would need to recruit an additional 44 students a year to remain at a consistent enrollment. Ultimately, Luther College chose not to launch a three-year degree model, citing the changes that would be needed to existing programs, and decided language to the catalog would be added to clarify that, through credit overloads, a student could achieve graduating in three years (Lerstrom, 1994).

Studies have shown that if colleges and universities in the United States charge 25 percent less for their tuition by having students graduate in three years, they will, on average, save students \$8,893 from public universities, and \$30,094 from private institutions (Weinstein Jr. , Give Our Kids a Break: How Three-Year Degrees Can Cut the Cost of College, 2014).

In recent literature around three-year degree programs, healthcare is at the forefront of the discussion and the need for time-shortened degrees. Due to a shortage of nurses, reaching 800,000 by 2020 and 900,000 by 2030 (and healthcare workers in general), there has been a



nation-wide call for accelerated pathways to be developed to get students into the workforce faster. As universities with nursing programs began to offer three-year degrees to achieve goals of students entering the workforce, low retention rates plagued the programs. Taulbee in 2017 conducted a qualitative, multiple-case study approach to see why students persisted and overcame the difficult curriculum. By sampling students at a university in the Midwest, questions asked as part of the study included:

1. How do students of a three-year baccalaureate nursing program describe the challenges they faced during the first two years of the program?
2. How do graduates of a three-year baccalaureate nursing program describe the factors that motivate them to persist to graduation?
3. How do graduates of a three-year baccalaureate nursing program describe the support they received, from the nursing school faculty and staff members, to encourage or discourage their efforts in the program?
4. How do nursing school faculty members describe the support they offer to undergraduate nursing students in a three-year baccalaureate program?

In the interviews, a naturalistic perspective guided the conversation as it would allow for new perspectives to be revealed by the participants that the researcher might not have considered, as well as allowing the viewpoint to be created by the participant and not the researcher (Houser, Nursing research: Reading, using, and creating evidence, 2018). The multiple-case study approach was used as each participant was used as a single case and allowed for an in-depth view of the different perspectives and an exploration of the phenomenon (Taulbee, 2017). Each question was broken down by the major themes that emerged. Results of the survey show that students and faculty have a difficult time with the condensed curriculum. Supporting students

through the accelerated curriculum proved difficult as well, given the life commitments students have alongside their studies. The results showed that student relationships with faculty and support from their family proved to be most valuable when measuring factors that lead to success in these three-year nursing degree programs (Taulbee, 2017).

### 2.2.3 A Response to Time and Cost of a Degree

According to Allen (1973), in the United States there are four categories by which universities have designed their three-year program options, which Bradley, Painchaud, and Seidman (2009) agree are still appropriate, given the lack of innovations in higher education systems (Seidman, Painchaud, & Bradley, 2011). The four categories are: compression model, the early admission model, the credit-by-examination model, and the restructuring model (Allen, 1973).

Seidman, Painchaud, and Bradley analyze the effects on students, learning outcomes, and assessments in their book entitled *Saving Higher Education: The Integrated, Competency-Based Three-Year Bachelor's Degree Program*. The program was limited to one major, Business Administration, and was aligned with the restructuring model Allen outlines in his research. They outlined program-level competencies as the foundation for the work that was done at the time, and that led to a redesign of the learning experiences and assessments that would need to be done to achieve them. Once the restructuring took place, the goal was courses could be more aligned with modules, allowing students to move through the competencies at a faster rate (Seidman, Painchaud, & Bradley, 2011). It began as designing what the program-level competencies were for a traditional four-year Business Administration degree, mapping where the competencies are addressed in the existing curriculum, identifying redundancies, (but taking care to not assume redundancy is confused for reinforcement). The authors acknowledge that this

process is essential, but the work requires heavy re-examination of a degree, faculty buy-in, and navigating a system that has been designed for four-year degrees.

Aside from the curriculum redesign work, the degree reconstitution as a three-year model in this instance came from the ground up, as many other universities in the United States have done.

This is in direct contradiction with the work of degree reassessment in Europe, where it is mostly top-down. The three-year model was designed to achieve the same academic performance as a four-year degree, save studies and their families money, and get students into the workforce or into master's degrees a year earlier. The model developed was restructured into six semesters and resulted in no additional tuition fees beyond the three years, resulting in a 25 percent savings for students. Direct entry into the workforce a year earlier gives graduates the opportunity to earn instead of spend (Seidman, Painchaud, & Bradley, 2011). From an institution's financial perspective, the program was redesigned to deliver 30 credits of coursework as experiential learning, reducing the cost of the delivery for those credits to the university.

As for the research done on this program and its effectiveness, through a survey of students, Seidman, Painchaud, and Bradley reported that over 80 percent of students who did enroll in this three-year degree program would have enrolled elsewhere, had this program not presented itself. The authors report after analyzing the financial implications, this added over \$2 million in a new tuition revenue stream the university did not have prior in the 2010-2011 academic year, with an additional \$500,000 including room and board (Seidman, Painchaud, & Bradley, 2011).

From an academic perspective, the Educational Testing Service (abbreviated ETS) was used by the university to measure student's achievement in areas of business that includes accounting, economics, management, quantitative business analysis, finance, marketing, legal and social environment, and international issues. The scores of the three-year degree program were then

compared against national averages, with the equal variance assumption for the two sets being tested. The assumption was rejected at  $p\text{-value} < 0.01$ . Then a two-sample Welch t-test assuming unequal variances was tested and showed no significant difference between the test scores of these three-year students and the national scores. (Seidman, Painchaud, & Bradley, 2011).

At the time of the research in 2011, retention was analyzed to determine if these students were remaining in this three-year degree program. Using 2008 numbers, the average retention rate for four-year degree students was 70.5 percent, while the three-year degree program was 80.6 percent, and over the course of the history of the program, up until that point, was 86.45 percent. (Seidman, Painchaud, & Bradley, 2011). For graduation rates, the three-year degree program stood at 78.5 percent, above the national average for a four-year graduation rate at 39.2 percent. Five- and six-year graduation rates reported at the time were 50.4 percent and 52.1 percent, respectively (Seidman, Painchaud, & Bradley, 2011).

### 2.3 – The Bologna Process

The literature behind the Bologna Process and its effectiveness balances between criticism regarding its reduction in time in education but praise for its work to create a standardized approach to education in Europe. This standardized approach to higher education resulted in an increase in enrollments in the European Union that signed the Bologna Process, but also increased enrollments in Europe from international markets. Mngo (2021) reports that the United States in the 2016/2017 enrollment year, saw a 3.3 percent drop in enrollments to Europe from Asia, Latin America, and Africa, highlighting that the model's degree structures, frameworks, and quality have led to significant growth in Bologna Process countries (Mngo, 2021). With acknowledgement that these goals were welcome and, in theory, would lead to a transformation of the higher education area of Europe, in realization, authors such as

Rauhvargers (2006) emphasize that curriculum and degree structure alignment amongst degrees of the same name across borders will likely never succeed, with admissions requirements lacking consistency, as well. (Rauhvargers, 2006).

### 2.3.1 Criticism of the Bologna Process

The Bologna Process has been criticized for cutting out important aspects of a student's education, mainly in areas of natural sciences and engineering, where faculty believe they need more time to deliver the required curriculum. Published studies by German healthcare professionals point to the adoption of the Bologna Process for increased psychological stress on students, due to the shortened timeframe of degree completion, and the pressure of selecting a degree and rushing into it (Labi, In Europe, Skeptics of New 3-Year Degrees Abound, 2009).

Using Germany as an example, extensive literature has been developed for that country, specifically due to the impact of adopting the Bologna Process and, as a result, decreasing the length of degree completion from five years to three at many universities. Germany has been notoriously slow at adopting the goals of the Bologna Process, due to the shock it was anticipated to make to their higher education system. Much like the United States, Germany is divided into states, and they leave matters of higher education policy to the states themselves to determine. Moving forward with the states in agreement has led to a general resistance in the country to the Bologna Process implementation, hence why Germany is used in many instances of country-wide disruptions because of the reform (Marquand, 2018).

Using a fixed effects panel, model looking German students in 2015, Horstschaer and Sprietsma determined that there were no significant impacts of enrollment or drop-out rates for most degree programs (Horstschaer & Sprietsma, 2015). Heublein et al. (2009) adds to that narrative by using a descriptive analysis finding the duration until drop-out of students in Germany is lower

in degrees that have adapted to the Bologna Process over what is called the old degree system (Lerche, 2016).

In Germany in 2004, only 19 percent of their programs had changed to reform to the standards of the Bologna Process. By 2011, that number had grown to 85.3 percent, as the number of degree programs that were reduced by a five-year anticipated completion duration down to three. That shock to the higher education system was analyzed by Lerche (2011) by using survey data from Gottingen University, with students being observed by those who completed in a six-semester reformed model, and those who took at least nine semesters to graduate in the previous model. While there are many factors used to analyze the student population, such as family income, zip codes, distance to the University, etc., the focus is on what the author refers to as failure events; an event that causes a student to stop studying, such as graduation or dropping out of the university. The results were that students were three times more likely to graduate on time in a program aligned with the Bologna Process standards, than those in a pre-reformed model. Part of the reason behind is the heavier structure that comes with the three-year model and specific time frames in which examinations must be taken, rather than the older model which had a higher degree of freedom for taking classes and examinations (Lerche, 2016).

An additional factor that proved to positively correlate to students having a higher probability of graduating post-Bologna Process, is that tuition fees were introduced as a result in that reform, whereas prior to the reform there were no tuition fees. The author acknowledges that this was done specifically at one university, and a more robust view of Germany's education environment should be done to complement this case study.

Opponents to the Bologna Process, despite this research, have reported on some students perpetuating the idea of the model of higher education in Germany prior to the reform. Labi

(2009) reports that students were still looking to enroll in universities which offered their undergraduate degree in five years, thinking that the reduction in time has shortchanged them from part of their education, with its most extreme opponents believing it was a means for governments to reduce funding for public higher education and introduce or increase tuition fees.

### 2.3.2 Studies on Effectiveness

In Italy, students after high school mostly choose to enroll in university or go into the labor market, but the value of a college degree means higher social status. One important note in the Italian higher education system is the legal value of a college degree, as well as the social status it allows individuals to achieve (Cappellari & Lucifora, 2009). The degree system was broken into “long” and “short” programs, with the longer programs being bachelor’s degrees that take four to five years to complete, and short being two-year associate degrees. The Italian system was criticized for low enrollment, high drop-out rates, excessive length of programs and selectivity.

In Denmark, adopting the Bologna Process was implemented at the beginning of the 2014 academic year. After three years, the average time in the degree had decreased by 4.3 months, as students were taking 11.6 months longer on average to complete a degree in a prescribed timeframe (Sarauw & Madsen, 2020). By 2017, the average time in the degree had decreased by 6.7 months.

The impact of the adoption of the Bologna process was analyzed in terms of time spent on courses in Italy. Bratti, et al. (2006, 2010), focused on student behavior and performance before and after the reform. Their hypothesis was that the fast increase in higher education enrollments in Italy was a direct result of the perception that the Bologna Process reduced the standards. They found that students were spending less time on high intensity courses in their program prior

to the reform. The end results were that the probability of students failing courses decreased because of the adoption of the Bologna process, but average grades stayed the same. Therefore, it was concluded that the reform had led to a decrease in workload and lower drop-out rates.

Cappellari and Lucifora (2009) also found that university participation increased because of the reform, especially those with higher than average high school performance, but lower socio-economic benefit. They used two sets of survey data, one prior to the Italian reform to the Bologna Process, and one after. They found that this increase was mostly due to the change in affordability because of the reform, resulting in those with a lower socio-economic status enrolling in college (Cappellari & Lucifora, 2009). Bosio and Leonardi (2011) found inconsistent results in their results of the Bologna Process reform, reporting that there was a positive impact of the reform in being employed after graduation, but overall wage premiums fell as a result. (Bosio & Leonardi, 2011).

In Portugal, Universities were given the option to implement programs that aligned with the Bologna Process goals in 2005-2006, or postpone for up to two years. Cardolo, et al. (2008) and Portela, et al. (2009) found that students were more interested in degree programs that had already adjusted to the requirements of the Bologna Process and these became highly sought after.

### 2.3.3 United States Degrees and Europe's Bologna Process Degrees

In their analysis of U.S bachelor's degrees to European equivalents, Assefa and Sedgwick compared a business B.A. program at the Kelly School of Business in Indiana, consisting of 120 credits delivered over four years, and the *laurea* program (equivalent of a bachelor's degree) from the Bacconi University in Italy. The degree from the United States had 62 credit hours outside of the major (general education and free electives) and the remaining 50 was major



focused. The European degree analyzed sees the entire curriculum focused on major related disciplines including business, mathematics, computer science, and foreign languages (Assefa & Sedgwick, 2008). In comparing the two programs' outcomes, they found remarkable similarities, while being structurally different, with outcomes focusing on broad business knowledge and concepts, decision making tools, and managing in complex and changing environments. In the analysis, they looked at both programs to assess how each would prepare a student for a graduate program in the United States. The relevant factors included are the level, structure, scope, and intent of the program (in terms of requirements for admission to the undergraduate program), content and structure, and the function of the credential in the home country's higher education system. At the end of the analysis, the authors found that the Italian *laurea* program was functionally equivalent to the United States' bachelor's degree, pointing to the outcomes and courses, rather than the number of years in the actual degree. (Assefa & Sedgwick, 2008).

Greenwood (2009) acknowledges in his work around the Bologna Process and its similarities in the Spellings Commission, that little secondary research has been done on the Bologna Process and what it means to the United States. Most of the research which does exist was done by Adelman in 2008 after almost a decade of analyzing the effects of the Bologna Process and what the United States can learn from it. (Greenwood, 2009). In the United States, while there is a national Department of Education, their primary responsibilities, and authority, involve funds for federal financial aid, and ensuring civil rights and equal opportunity laws are enforced. The primary authority in higher education, particularly at the public level, is the state government. With the developments of the Bologna Process going on in Europe, President George W. Bush's Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings, created the Spellings Commission, looking at what the future of higher education can and should be in the United States.

The Commission was comprised of 19 members, including corporate representatives, government officials, and some current and former university presidents, and was considered the highest profile involvement the Department of Education has made in higher education since its enforcement of equal opportunity decades prior (Greenwood, 2009). The report from the Spellings Commission was controversial to those in the higher education field, as it was directly linking the United States' loss of the world's largest market share of international students and decreased quality of programs to Europe via the Bologna Process. The Commission calls for a focus on globalization, considering skills the job market highlights as important, but also that the United States must develop new performance benchmarks for its students, as well as ensuring a way to lower the cost of attending colleges and universities. They encourage this through recommending new programs, more college credit be delivered in high schools, and an increased use of technology (Spellings, 2006).

Senator Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.), former Secretary of Education, was highly critical of the Spellings Commission, and has been one of the highest profile advocates of three-year degree programs in the United States. Commenting that colleges and universities need less regulation from the government, not more, and need to have higher education itself drive what assessment and accountability looks like for their field (Lederman, 2007). Greenwood, in his analysis, concludes that the United States and Europe, via the Bologna Process and the findings in the Spellings Commission, want the same outcome. A focus on quantitative accountability and the creation of a large-scale framework that universities should follow is very similar, but the execution is much different. Europe has created a consortium governments can agree to, but leaves freedom on how to deliver the intent of the Bologna Process and becoming a part of the European Higher Education Area.

In reviewing some of the first literature looking at the Bologna Process and what the United States can learn from it, Adelman (2008) makes the argument that while the United States gets bogged down with processes, Europe has put their focus entirely on time in degree, standardized learning outcomes, and student workload. His research looked at the Bologna Process and made the following recommendation for United States for implementation:

- Developing detailed and public degree qualification frameworks for state higher education systems and, for all institutions, in students' major fields,
- Revising the reference points and terms of our credit system,
- Introducing a new class of intermediate credentials,
- Expanding dual admission "alliances" between community colleges and four-year institutions,
- Developing and expanding "bridge" access programs between stages of higher education,
- Refining the definition and treatment of part-time students, and
- Developing a distinctive version of a diploma supplement that summarizes individual student achievement.

While Adelman (2008) does not directly add to the literature regarding three-year degree programs in his research, many of these points he proclaims should be of interest to the United States point to others research regarding three-year degree programs. He acknowledges that the United States at first began to question three-year undergraduate degrees from Bologna Process institutions when students were applying for graduate school. Historically, however, the United States has never had issue with accepting undergraduate degrees from Great Britain, which had been delivered in three-year formats long before the Bologna Declaration. His point in that most

European students entering college have had the equivalent of a first year of United States college experience, however in their final year of secondary school (Adelman, 2008).

Another influence from the Bologna Process that will affect the United States is the exit point for students in Europe out of higher education is becoming the master's degree. Given how universities have shortened their undergraduate degree and bridging them with easier pathways into master's degree, they move into the second cycle of the Bologna Process without issue. As a result, Europeans are presenting themselves to the global labor market with master's degrees, leaving the United States behind (Adelman, 2008).

He also asserts that the ECTS system, built on the awarding of credits via number of hours a student spends on the class itself and its assignments, takes the control away from administration on the awarding of credits. The United States' system of awarding credits by faculty contact hours is labeled as a metric for funding and resource allocation within the university, rather than a means to control demand and time for students. Every course is measured the same in the United States, and the undertaking would be massive if faculty were to be asked to redesign curriculum based on time the student spends, on average, Europeans in their courses.

### **Chapter 3: Research Methodology**

The findings in the literature review point to the problem of student completion time, and the financial cost that comes with it, that exists in both the United States and Europe. However, by using Europe and the Bologna Process as an example, we can see some of the benefits of the structure that is available to universities, should they choose to utilize it. As a result, we see how three-year degree programs have had an impact on a large scale in Europe, and where there are opportunities for the United States to learn from them. Upon further review of the United States, we see the cyclical nature of three-year degree programs, some of the research that has been

done on them in the past and how, while there are opportunities, they could present a remedy to the problem of time to degree completion. Therefore, the following methodology and framework for this research is proposed to showcase how the history of three-year degree programs in Europe can serve as an opportunity to learn, and when applied in the United States market, can present an area for advancement of the three-year degree conversation. This research will follow a descriptive case-study approach, where a sample U.S. university will be used to analyze the effectiveness of the student experience in three-year degree programs. This will then be used to understand the market demands for three-year degree programs and how they might align in future research related to viability of exploring these options for universities. This will add to the literature regarding three-year degree programs, as there is currently little research regarding why students enroll, what variables contribute to them persisting through the program, and how that compares to a student in a four-year degree program.

As a result of this work, the following research questions have been developed:

1. Explore factors that can be attributed to student success in a three-year degree program in the United States.
2. Identify attributes of the European Higher Education system that could inform future three-year degree programmatic design in the United States.
3. Explore factors that can be attributed to students choosing to enroll in a three-year degree program over a 4-year degree.

For research question numbers one and three, a traditional, private, four-year non-profit school, which offers three-year degree programs, was analyzed using existing data obtained from the university's analytics department and approved by the Institutional Review Board, as well as through a survey of alumni of these programs. Question two will be addressed using interviews

with faculty and administrators at institutions targeted in Europe, due to their history of college education being delivered in three years and recent history undergoing dramatic changes in other aspects to adhere to part of the Bologna Process.

### 3.1 Framework

To better understand the role of three-year degrees in the United States, a sample university must be selected to perform a deep dive in student perceptions and outcomes on this option that is considered rare in the United States. The private, four-year, non-profit university (henceforth referred to as “sample U.S. university”) which has been selected provides a unique example to examine, as it now has over 20 years of experience in enrolling students in three-year programs, and with much success in graduating students within the intended timeframe. The research then was focused on the student outcomes of retention and graduation rates, as well as assessment outcomes compared to the average four-year college graduates nationwide. This leaves an important gap in understanding the full student life cycle and all variables the student encounters during their degree completion and how a three-year program influences them.

Using case study methodology, this university can be analyzed through both quantitative and qualitative methods, described below, to help understand the experience of students graduating in three years, compared to those who do not. By combining qualitative and quantitative methodology, the researcher will be able to understand a complete picture of all inputs that go into the student life cycle. Yin describes case study methodology as “a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when boundaries are between a phenomenon and context are not clear and the researcher has little control over the phenomenon and context” (Yin, 2002). Since this research is focusing on understanding the phenomenon of three-year undergraduate degrees and seeking to understand their unique attributes and what leads students

to them and ultimately be successful or not, case study methodology would allow this to be investigated with a particular example; the example being the sample U.S. university and providing context of its history, unique program elements, and how both a survey of alumni and analysis of data when this population was part of the student body, can lead to answering RQ1 and RQ3. Yin further describes the case study approach as having five unique components: the study's questions, its propositions, its unit(s) of analysis, the logic linking the data to the propositions, and the criteria for interpreting the findings (Yin, 2002). This work will use the research questions to drive the propositions formed from the case study and interviews conducted with higher education professionals in Europe to highlight some factors that will add to the literature on three-year undergraduate degrees.

Case study methodology was used to analyze three-year degree programs by Taulbee (2017) when looking at the factors influencing students' decisions to remain in their nursing program. Taulbee also used a series of interview questions that can be adapted for this population of students.

The mixture of qualitative and quantitative research, utilizing case studies and surveys, was conducted by Horn (2019) when looking at universities hosting incubator programs, and the knowledge networks associated with them. This included two case studies, as well as a series of surveys given to administrators and companies involved in the incubators, in order to gather data. This research will serve as a foundation for the structure of this dissertation, as it includes the mixture of case study methodology and inputs from surveys, to conclude with recommendations for universities in the future into how to handle incubators, transfer knowledge to them and help them grow, as well as future research opportunities as a result (Horn, 2019).

To best organize the research questions and how the researcher plans to answer them, the grid below was developed to best match the specifics of the data gathered and the question they are geared to answer:

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Corresponding Data</b>	<b>Corresponding Survey/Interview Question</b>
RQ1: Explore factors that can be attributed to student success in a three-year degree program in the United States.	Three-Year Degree Program Dataset	Alumni Survey Questions #5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13
RQ2: Identify attributes of the European Higher Education system that could inform future three-year degree programmatic design in the United States.	N/A	European University Interview Questions #1-7
RQ3: Explore factors that can be attributed to students choosing to enroll in a three-year degree program over a four-year degree.	Three-Year & Four-Year Degree Program Dataset	Alumni Survey Questions # 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 12, 14, 15

### 3.2 Data and Surveys

Research Questions One and Three will rely on the data collected from the sample U.S. university and the survey produced that targets alumni of the three-year degree programs. The data requested from the Data Analytics team at the sample U.S. university is as follows:

- All business students
- Identifier for Three-Year vs. Four-Year Program
- Data:
  - Enrollments by major by year since 2010
  - Major
  - Retention/persistence
    - By GPA
  - Transfer information
    - Left three-year degree for four-year degree program
  - Graduation Rate
  - Average GPA
    - By semester



- Number of athletes
- Involvement in clubs
- Involvement in internships
- Commuter vs. resident student
- Number of international students
- High school GPA
  - Number of students that took AP and/or honors courses in high school (indicators of success before entering college)
- Scholarship received
- Average debt at graduation
- Persistence into master's degree programs
- Number of withdrawals
- Number of leaves of absence taken

While this is an exhaustive list of factors that can be analyzed for the three-year degree programs, some findings can be used for future research opportunities.

The survey for alumni of the three-year degree programs at the sample U.S. university was designed to solicit information that we cannot gather from the data the university is providing.

The alumni survey consisted of the following questions:

1. What year did you graduate?
  - a. Drop down with all years until 2018
2. What program did you graduate from?
  - a. Three-Year Honors Program Option
  - b. Degree in Three Option
  - c. Unsure
3. What major did you graduate with? (only for those who selected Degree in Three in question two)
  - a. List all Degree in Three Majors
4. Did you graduate with the degree you initially started when enrolling at the sample U.S. university? (only for those who selected Degree in Three in question two)
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
5. Did you pursue a graduate degree immediately following completion of your undergraduate degree?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
6. Would you have attended another institution if you did not enroll in a three-year degree program?
  - a. Yes

- b. No
- 7. Please rate how the following individuals influenced your decision to graduate from a three-year degree program? (Reponses recorded on a scale)
  - a. Self-driven
  - b. Parent/Guardian
  - c. Friend
  - d. Sibling
  - e. Admissions Counselor
  - f. High School Teacher
  - g. Guidance Counselor
  - h. Faculty Member
  - i. Staff Member
  - j. Other: \_\_\_\_\_
- 8. Do you believe that graduating in three years was appealing to hiring managers as you were applying for jobs?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Unsure
- 9. What do you personally believe to be the strengths of your experience graduating in three years? (Reponses recorded on a scale)
  - a. Cost savings
  - b. Ability to go directly into a graduate degree after completion
  - c. Cohort environment
  - d. Closer relationships with faculty
  - e. More experiential learning opportunities
  - f. Getting into the workforce one year earlier than peers
  - g. Other: \_\_\_\_\_
- 10. What do you believe to be weaknesses of your experience graduating in three years? (Reponses recorded on a scale)
  - a. Heavier workload
  - b. One less year in college
  - c. Less time to participate in extra-curricular activities
  - d. Pressure of falling behind in course sequencing
  - e. Fewer opportunities to travel abroad for an extended period
  - f. Moving through the curriculum too quickly
  - g. Other: \_\_\_\_\_
- 11. Do you feel you were able to have a traditional college experience because of being enrolled in a three-year degree program? (i.e., participated in athletics, clubs and organizations, attended campus events, worked on campus)
  - a. Yes
  - b. No

12. Do you think you would have graduated with a higher GPA had you not graduated in a three-year degree program?
- Yes
  - No
  - Unsure
13. What factors would you identify as causing you to persist to graduate in three-years? (Responses recorded on a scale)
- Cost savings
  - Ability to go directly into a graduate degree after completion
  - Relationship with fellow students
  - Relationship with a staff/faculty member
  - Getting into the workforce one year earlier than peers
  - Other: \_\_\_\_\_
14. Why do you believe three-year degree programs are not more available in the United States? (Responses recorded on a scale)
- The tradition of a degree being four years
  - Perception that you cannot complete 120 credits in three years
  - Less chance of transferability of coursework
  - Fewer opportunities to travel abroad for an extended period
  - Moving through the curriculum too quickly
  - Other: \_\_\_\_\_
15. If given the chance, would you participate in a three-year degree program again?
- Yes
  - No
  - Unsure
16. Are there any other comments you would like to add about your experience graduating from a three-year degree program: (Open dialogue box)

This survey can fill the gaps from the data collected by the university through the Data Analytics team and provide the reflection piece on the student's part that the data requested cannot provide.

### 3.3 Case Study

The data requested and the survey were designed to target the same population of students who have completed the three-year degree programs at the sample U.S. university. This university was selected as it has a history of delivering three-year undergraduate degrees, with a sizable number of graduates from those programs. The population that the data comes from, and the survey responses received, will both be from students who graduated from 2010 up to 2018. The

reason for starting in 2010 is that much of the prior research done at this same university prior to that date was completed with graduates pre-2010. The case study will consist of an analysis of the data and survey responses to answer RQ1 and RQ3. The survey will be able to assist in building the narrative around much of the data, as well as the inclusion of a comment field on some of the questions in the survey, allowing the researcher to hear directly from alumni of the program and provide more context to the answers. This case study will have a symbiotic relationship to the research done on three-year degrees and time to completion mentioned in the literature review in Chapter 2. Connections from the European University Administrator/Faculty Interviews will then be drawn back into this case study, as well.

The case study in Chapter 4 regarding these three-year degrees from the sample U.S. university will be arranged to provide an overview of these programs and how they are structured, to best understand the survey responses. The findings will then be reported for the alumni survey and data analysis. In Chapter 5 there will be discussion on the findings, the limitations of this work, and the opportunities for future research.

### 3.4 - European University Administrator/Faculty Interview

To better understand the perceptions of the three-year degree from a European perspective, a qualitative approach was determined to be the best option. The responses to these interview questions will be able to address research Question 2 and were chosen over a survey of students, due to the perceived difficulties in gathering contact information from international universities, language barriers that could exist, among other obstacles. The faculty and administrators identified to participate in the interview will be from existing contacts at universities which deliver their programs in three years.

The plan for these interviews comes from the research done by Taulbee (2017), who used a qualitative, multiple case study approach to look at the retention issues of students completing their nursing degrees in three years. The main purpose of the research was to interview students and faculty to understand the obstacles that needed to be overcome to persist to graduation (Taulbee, 2017). The questions below were modified from the work done during that research when interviewing faculty members. Faculty and administrators were intentionally selected as the target for the interviews, as the researcher knew gathering student data internationally would be difficult to obtain, whereas faculty and administrators were more likely to speak about their experiences related to three-year degrees.

The results of these interviews will allow for an international perspective on three-year undergraduate degrees from a place where these degrees are a part of the higher education conversation. However, it should be noted that these interviews will only highlight some considerations that could be used in future program design, both in the United States and Europe. It will not give a complete picture into the student perspective and, since every country has many different unique factors related to their college experiences, will only provide a surface level overview of three-year programs and how they can be used in the future.

Grounded theory will be used for these interviews, as it will not be a linear process. There is a need to adapt to the responses given by the interviewee and look for themes that are pre-determined but emerge from the interviews. First developed by Glaser and Strauss, Grounded Theory was first used to understand patients and their perceived knowledge of their coming death and, as a result, the constant comparative method was born. This allowed Glaser and Strauss to refine their theories as they progressed through their research and code and develop themes as the work continues (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory allows for an

inductive approach to the data and thus allows the idea of building theory as you progress through your analysis (Birks & Mills, 2015).

The question and pre-/post- brief are as follows:

#### Interview Pre-Brief:

*Thank you for participating in this study on three-year degree program students. Your participation is voluntary, and you can decline to answer any question. You can also withdraw from the study at any time. You completed an informed consent form before we began; do you have any questions about your participation in this study that I have not already answered? The interview will be transcribed, and I will be taking notes during the interview. Feel free to stop me and ask questions or return to a previous question at any time.*

*I am very interested in finding out about the supports provided to three-year degree students and finding out your thoughts about the supports and services needed, so please be detailed in your answers. You can stop the focus group at any time. I will have the focus group interview transcribed and provide you a chance to review it. Do you understand these instructions? Do you have any questions before we begin?*

*Interview Questions for Faculty and Administration (Adapted from the Taulbee Three-Year Nursing Degree Dissertation):*

- 1. Tell me about your experience related to graduating students in three years.*
- 2. What barriers or difficulties have you witnessed with three-year degree program retention?*
- 3. What are your perceptions of what is required for a student to remain on a three-year degree track?*
- 4. Can you give some examples of why students were unsuccessful in graduating in three-years? Please do not give any students' names or other identifying information.*
- 5. Please describe some internal and external barriers to remaining in a three-year degree program.*
- 6. What do you believe a program should do to encourage students to graduate in three years?*
- 7. Do you have any other comments related to three-year degree students and programs?*

#### Interview Post-Brief:

*Thank you very much for your time. As a reminder, I will have this interview transcribed. You will receive an email of the transcript as an opportunity to review it for accuracy and make revisions, as necessary. I will maintain your confidentiality to the greatest extent possible, but I cannot guarantee your confidentiality, especially if you voluntarily share the focus group content with others.*

Six interviews were completed over the course of two months, with either a faculty member or administrator of a European university which deliver bachelor's degree programs. To find candidates for the interviews, using some contacts from the researcher's colleagues, a targeted group was emailed, asking them to participate in the interview over Microsoft Teams. All interviews were transcribed by Microsoft Teams and corrections were made to any errors immediately following the interview. Each interview is anonymized and will be identified by giving each subject a designation A-F. A very brief, and non-identifiable biography will be given for perspective on faculty vs. administration and the country they work in. The transcriptions were then coded manually to identify common themes. The three themes that emerged from the interviews and their definitions are in the figure below:

<b>Codes:</b>	<b>Themes:</b>
Financial Considerations	Barriers
Work Opportunities Gained or Lost	
Government Involvement	
Grades	College Outcomes
Maturity	
Major Selected	
Job Placement	
Socializing and Involvement	Traditional College Experience
Mental Health Concerns	
Faculty and Staff Interactions	

These themes were identified as they had at least two of the interviewees recognized, whether they were in favor of, impartial, or against three-year degree program, that these themes played a factor in the state of the Bologna Process and the state of European higher education. Each

question will be dissected in Chapter 4 with the responses and how these themes emerged through the interview.

The result of this research will add to the literature of three-year undergraduate degrees with an example from the United States, with student feedback, along with the narrative from Europe. By furthering the conversation around this model of delivering undergraduate degree programs, this research can arm university administrators and faculty with information that can help them put forward programs that meet students' interest, while attracting a wider range of students.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

### **4.1 Case Study of the Sample U.S. University**

To best understand the work being done in the United States regarding three-year undergraduate degrees, a university was selected for a case study to analyze the students and their success to answer RQ1 and RQ3. The university is not named in this research but will be referred to as “sample U.S. university” throughout the analysis. The combination of the survey to alumni who graduated in three years from the sample U.S. university, along with the regressions run on the data provided by the university, afford a unique perspective on the story of students, how they performed while at their university, and their thoughts after graduation.

The sample U.S university was selected for having over twenty years of experience delivering three-year undergraduate degrees to business students, specifically. Prior to reviewing the results of the survey and data analysis, the program structure must be described in detail, as it will be important in understanding the findings of the research. The programs were designed using the restructuring method Allen (1973) proposed with the guidelines that it would be an addition to the traditional four-year undergraduate degree. The initial design was the redevelopment of a four-year business administration degree, reconditioned to remove some elective opportunities,



and building in shorter experiential learning opportunities that would allow students to earn credit in less time than a traditional semester.

Students pursued much of their coursework in a cohort environment, whereby students had the opportunity to have integrated credit awarded in the delivery of other courses. For instance, in example course A and B, taken in different semesters, with course C having learning outcomes that were identified as interoperable with course A and B. Therefore, course A and B would be taught in their respective semester and, after having completed them, credit would be awarded for course C. This allowed students to have experienced the content of course C, but never attending a course specifically on that topic. This was one of the design principles of these programs, where students were given an opportunity to have the time to participate in clubs, athletics, jobs, and engage socially on campus.

The original design of the program was labeled an honors program at the sample U.S. university, as it attracted a stronger student from a high school GPA standpoint than the four-year degrees. However, after over a decade of success, these three-year degree options were developed for other business majors and adjusted to accommodate a student not seeking an honors level education. This greatly increased the number of students enrolling in three-year undergraduate degrees.

#### 4.1.1 Alumni Survey from Sample U.S. University Offering Three-Year Undergraduate Degrees

To understand the United States' perceptions and experiences related to three-year undergraduate degrees, the researcher was able to send a survey to alumni of the sample U.S. university. The sample U.S. university is in New England, has a history of offering three-year undergraduate degrees to their business students, but students have the option to attain their degree in four years, as well. The alumni population that was surveyed included those who graduated between

2010-2018, as previous research had been done on these three-year programs prior to 2010. The following sections go through each question with a brief analysis, with discussion following in the research questions section of Chapter 4.

Working with the alumni office at the sample U.S. university, the survey was sent in September 2022 to 303 alumni and was available for them to complete until early October 2022. It was only sent to those alumni who had a personal email available to the alumni office. During that time, 79 responses were collected, a 26% response rate. The 79 responses were broken down by year of graduation in Figure 4.1, where every graduating year had representation. Respondents were promised anonymity and that their responses would only be reported in the aggregate.

Figure 4.1:

*Alumni Year of Graduation*

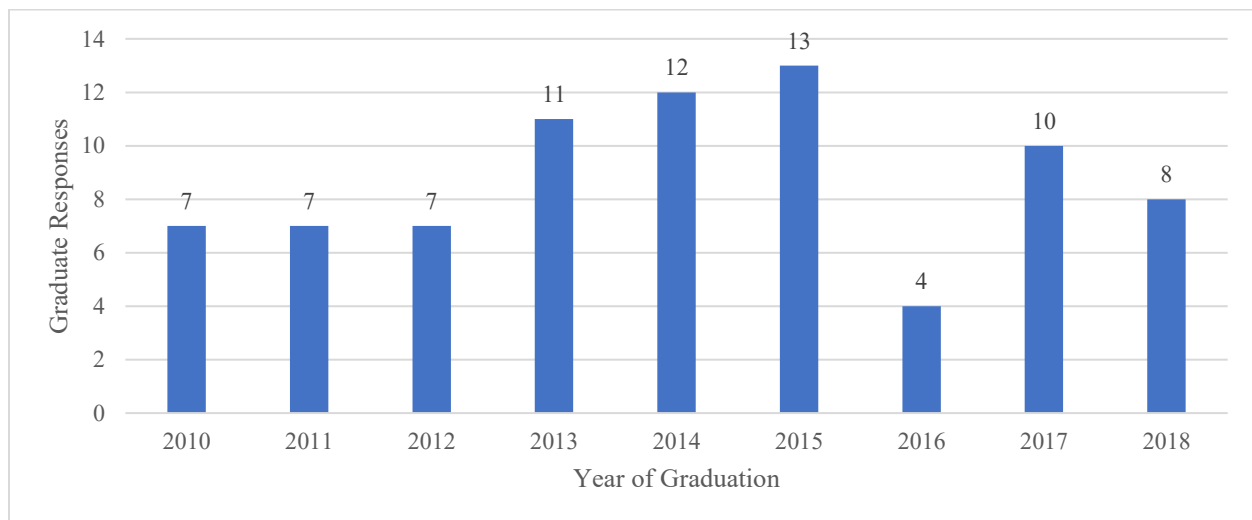


Figure 4.1: Year of graduation for all survey respondents.

Although not used in the analysis of the data, the sample U.S. university provided an honors and non-honors track to their three-year degrees. Overwhelmingly, 68 of the 79 respondents reported they were from the honors track. Figure 4.2 shows the breakdown from the survey.

Figure 4.2:

*Honors vs. Non-Honors Responses*

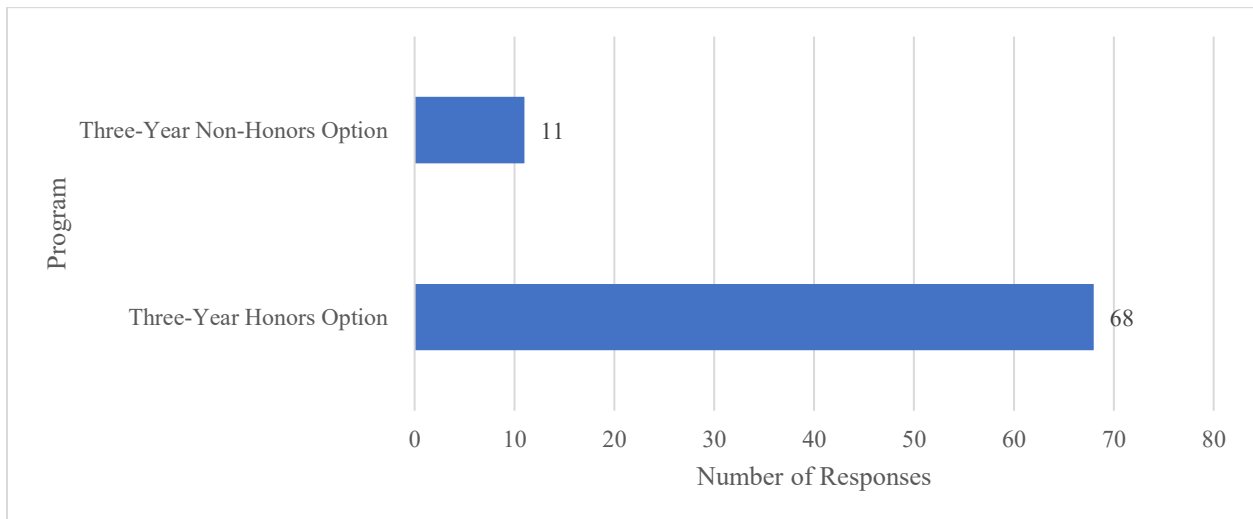


Figure 4.2: Number of survey respondents from the honors vs. non-honors option.

Figure 4.3 shows the majors the students graduated with. Not all 79 respondents declared which major they graduated with, but it was not required they answer this question to proceed.

Figure 4.3:

*Non-Honors Three-Year Program Majors*

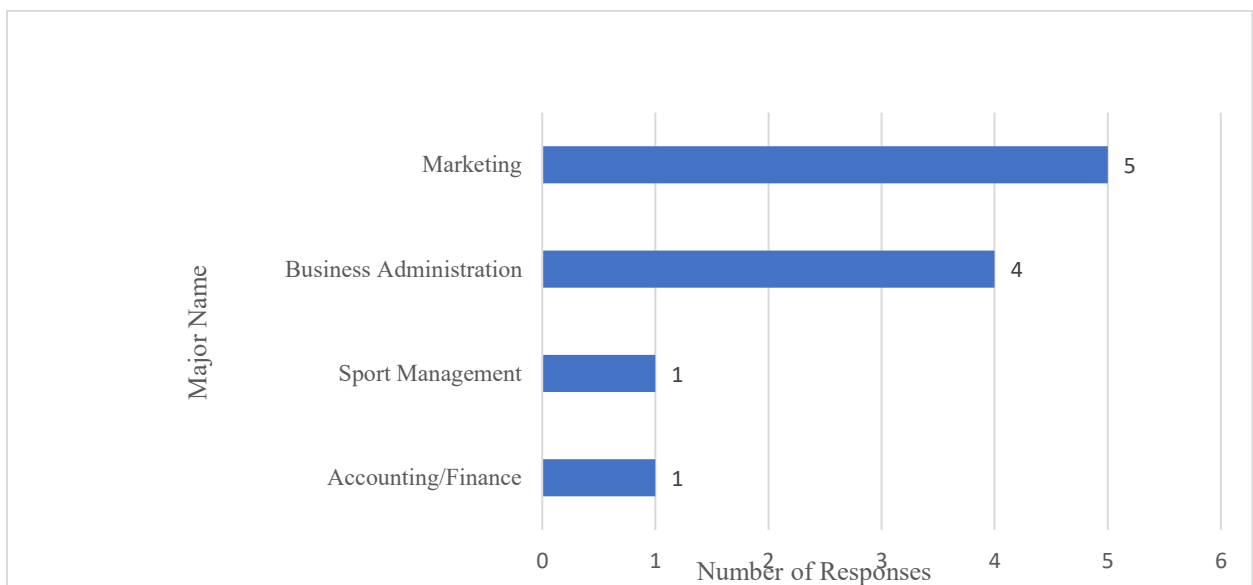


Figure 4.3: Respondents' major

Non-honors students were asked, when prompted, if they remained with the same degree they started with or changed along the way. All 11 non-honors graduates responded to this question. Nine had indicated they remained with the same major, two reported they changed majors at some point in their academic careers. Figure 4.4 shows these results.

Figure 4.4:

*Did you graduate with the same degree you started with?*

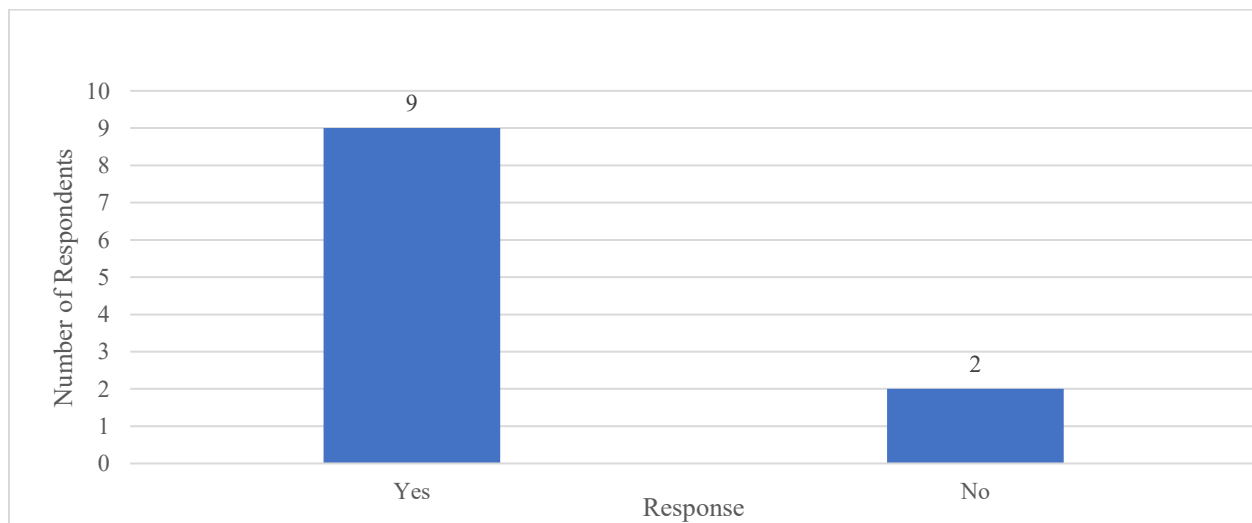


Figure 4.4: Did non-honors three-year degree students change majors during their academic careers?

When asked about their master's degree completion or ambition, Figure 4.5 showcases the results. 46% of respondents reported starting their master's degree within six months of graduating, while 26.58% of respondents reported starting a master's degree more than six months after graduating. The same number of respondents also indicated they have not pursued a master's degree since graduating from a three-year degree.

Figure 4.5:

*Graduate Degree Post Three-Year Undergraduate Degree*

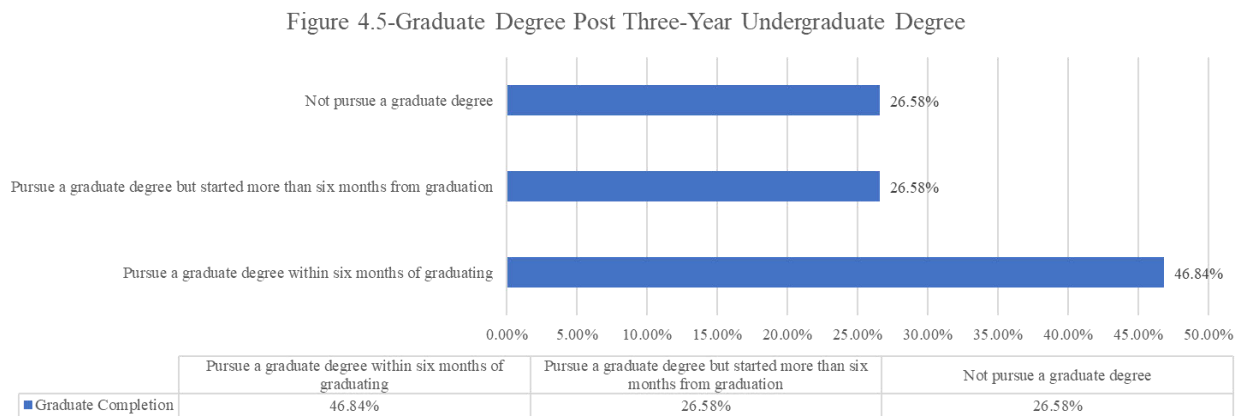


Figure 4.5: Students reporting when and if they got their master's degree after graduating from a three-year undergraduate degree.

In Figure 4.6, when prompted to report whether students would have gone to another institution, had the opportunity to graduate in three years not been available, 64% of respondents indicated they would have gone to another institution. With 10.26% of alumni reporting that they would have stayed at the sample U.S. university, and 25.64% unsure what their decision would have been, had there not been a three-year undergraduate degree option.

Figure 4.6:

*Would you have attended another institution for your degree if not for a three-year program?*

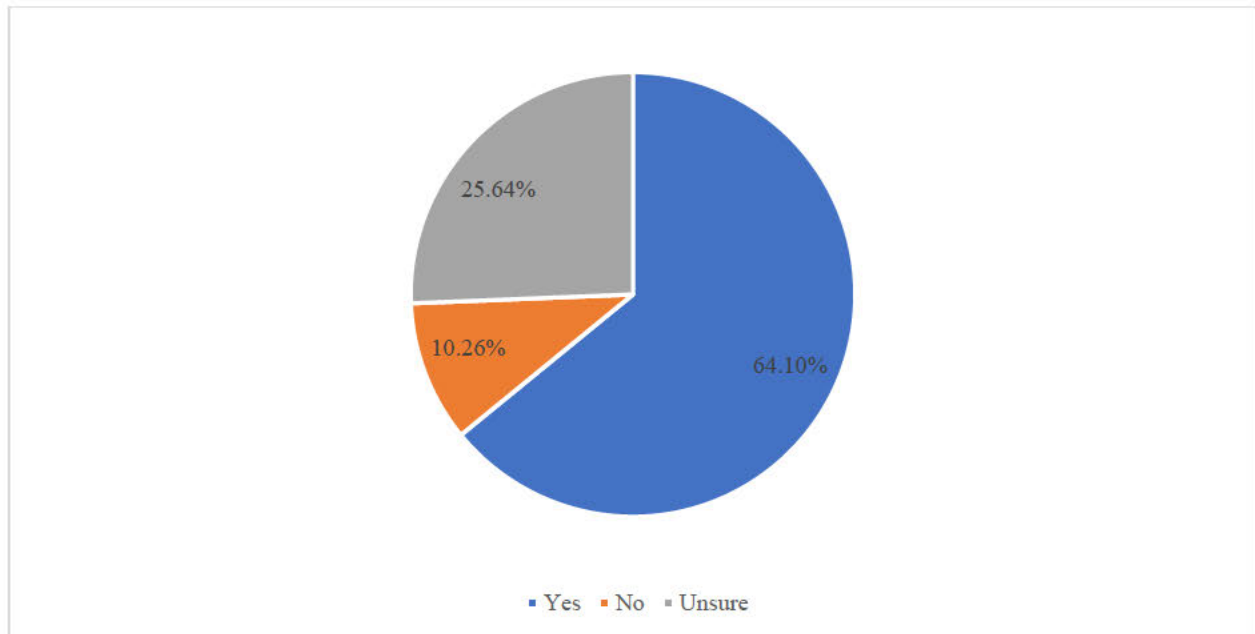


Figure 4.6: Alumni indicating whether they would have attended a different institution if a three-year degree was not available.

External factors for student motivation were a major component of the alumni survey. In Figure 4.7, each respondent was asked to rate how influential certain people were in their decision to pursue a three-year undergraduate degree and persist to completion. The two most prominent answers were the student themselves while enrolled at college, and their parent or guardian, when rated on a scale of 0-5, with zero being not at all, and five being significantly. Staff member, faculty member, guidance counselor, admissions counselor, and friend were rated between 30-60 of the ratings given by the alumni. High school teacher and sibling were the lowest, with only 29 and 23 of the ratings given.

Figure 4.7:

*Decision Influencers*

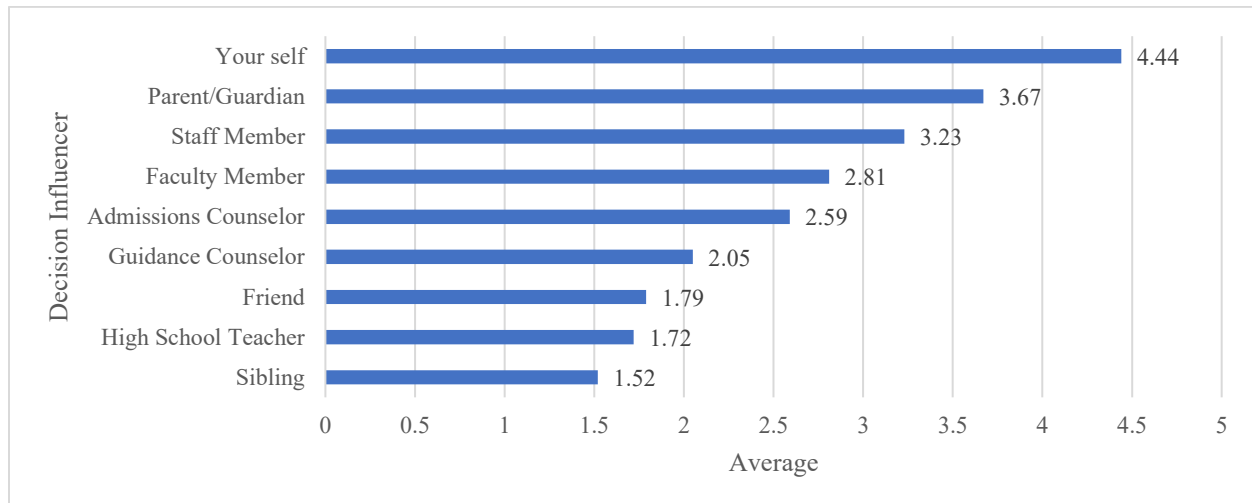


Figure 4.7: Alumni rating which individuals in their lives and academic career influenced their decision to enroll and graduate from a three-year degree.

On another 0-5 rating scale, with zero being not a strength, 5 being a significant strength, alumni were asked to rate the following in Figure 4.8: the characteristics of the three-year undergraduate degrees at the sample U.S. university. Cost savings was rated the highest, as at this university, students were not charged the fourth year of tuition. Cost savings also exist in the living expenses. More experiential learning opportunities and getting into the workforce one year earlier were rated the highest, with the remaining responses close, between an average of 3.24 and 3.93, with receiving a master's degree being rated the lowest with a mean of 2.78.

Figure 4.8:

*Strengths of the Three-Year Undergraduate Student Experience*

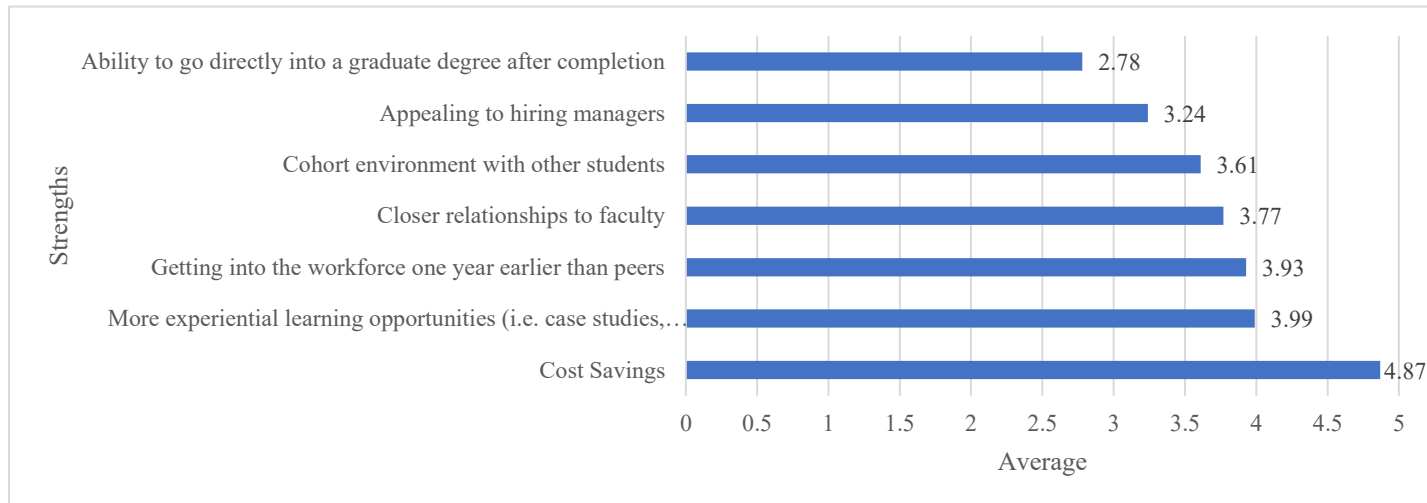


Figure 4.8: Alumni ratings of the strengths of the three-year undergraduate degree at the sample U.S. university.

When asked if there were was anything missing from the rating list from Figure 4.8, there was an open text response option, the results of which are in Figure 4.9 below. Of particular interest for the analysis of the survey results is the mention of connections with like-minded classmates and networking opportunities, particularly with alumni.



Figure 4.9:

*Question 9 Responses: Are there any benefits to graduating in three years, not mentioned in the previous question?*

Figure 4.9:
<b>Q9 - Are there are any benefits to graduating in three years, not mentioned in the previous question?</b>
Connection to program alumni network who have gone through the same experience.
More driven students than the regular class
networking - I am where I am at today by connecting with fellow 3-year honor program alumni
No required in-person courses during Summer
The structure is beneficial. Helps set you up for success and don't need to worry as much about admin tasks such as picking classes.
Faster-paced learning environment for Type A learners
Developing comfortability working in a fast-paced environment
It's a differentiator going forward that you can manage higher workloads and there's a lot of transferable skills.
Networking, NH businesses interested in 3 Year Honors students for internships/jobs
Adaptability
fewer gen eds
It was good for first job, but then it became a check mark after.
Better mentors, better advisors
Some see 4 years as a long commitment for various reasons. One less year if you have a family or work full time is more appealing from a time saving perspective.
Having a unique experience to share with the world
Community amongst the alumni to help with job searches, advice, etc.
I'm not sure if this is still a thing, but in my time within the program we had a weekly "huddle" where all in my cohort would meet with our faculty advisor. As a first-generation college student, I believe having such close and regular connection with my cohort and advisor were key to my retention and ultimate graduation.
I think being a part of the honors program specifically added to the exclusivity and appeal to hiring managers and internship coordinators.

Figure 4.9: Text responses from alumni when asked if there are any strengths of three-year undergraduate degrees not listed in Figure 4.8.

Conversely, alumni were asked to rate the perceived weaknesses of the three-year undergraduate degrees, the ratings being in Figure 4.10. Interestingly, fewer opportunities for study abroad was rated the highest, with less time to participate in extra-curricular activities second, and heavier workload than peers rounding out the top three rated. Pressure of falling behind in your courses was listed as the weakness of least concern. Again, in Figure 4.11, a text option was given to understand if there were any other weaknesses that could not be connected into the listed perceived weaknesses in Figure 4.10. Of particular interest were the responses related to the decreased flexibility in choice given to the students and being limited to a cohort.

Figure 4.10-

*Perceived Weaknesses of Graduating in Three-Years*

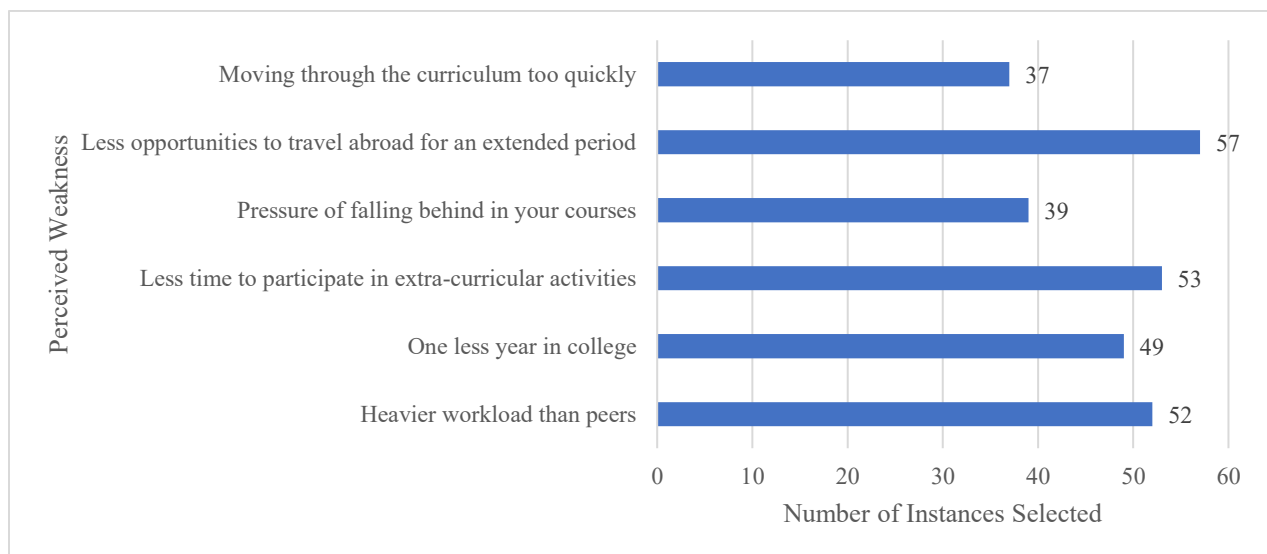


Figure 4.10: Perceived weaknesses and their ratings by alumni.

Figure 4.11:

*Question 11 Responses: Are there any other weaknesses regarding your experience graduating in three years not mentioned in the previous question?*

Figure 4.11:
<b>Q11: Are there any other weaknesses regarding your experience graduating in three years not mentioned in the previous question?</b>
Ability to have classes with others outside of the cohort.
the program wasn't finalized when I started, which meant it kept changing, which made it extremely stressful to plan out my program with my advisor
downside to cohort is making fewer connections with fellow students in the classroom. All other connections are through extra-curriculars and on-campus housing
Only weakness was a lot still felt experimental while I was doing it. Things about the program changed often.
Not as much choice once you get in. You're locking into your major from day 1 where many students can change majors if their interests change.
Did not connect with many other students outside of the program
Less exposure to students from other majors/backgrounds (except for some elective courses for whichever specialization was chosen)
In classes with all the same people, so know fewer people on campus.
Fewer connections with students outside the 3 yr program
Lack of diverse perspectives from non-3 year students outside the cohort. We had a few classes with sections open to 4 year students but most were cohort based.
Lack of flexibility in the curriculum (elective courses, minors,, etc.)
For me I went to the degree and three program with the idea of going right into a plus one graduate program. However, what I did not realize is that all my scholarships would go away which ended up forcing me into the workforce and search for a company that would pay.
Pressure of trying to get a job earlier than expected
No weaknesses
Less time to gain experience before graduation, i.e. internships
Fewer elective opportunities than a traditional degree but I wouldn't rank that highly.

Unless you join outside activities or jobs or live on campus you don't get to meet other students in other programs in the university (unless you took your 1 other election classes with them)
I have found that while I enjoyed having a well-rounded business degree, I would have preferred to select more of my classes to suit my interests within the business world
The need to fit the program requirements within 3 years limited my ability/access to take many elective courses/ explore educational experience outside my major.
Less time with other students of different background and diversity

Figure 4.11: Text responses when alumni were prompted to list any weaknesses of three-year degrees not listed in the previous question.

While there were responses in Figure 4.10 and 4.11 which would indicate there were restrictions in the traditional college experience because of graduating in from a three-year degree, Figure 4.12 was a question related to having that traditional college experience. Of the 79 respondents, 74 indicated they felt they were able to have the traditional college experience, with only three indicating they did not, and one selecting they were unsure.

Figure 4.12 -

*Did you have a Traditional College Experience in a Three-Year Program?*

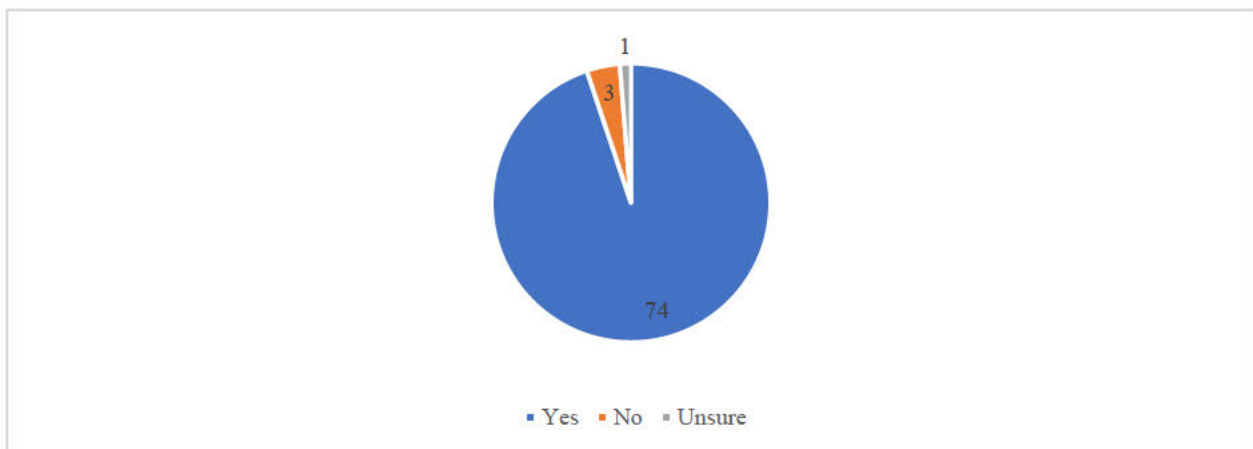


Figure 4.12: Alumni indicating whether they had the traditional college experience.

Figure 4.13 showed alumni indicated what ultimately led to their persistence in the three-year undergraduate degree. Rated on a scale where 0 meant not at all, and 5 meaning it was a significant reason. The highest rated response was cost savings because of not paying tuition, room, and board for the fourth year of their education. Relationships with other students and faculty members were highly rated as well, with a rating of 69 and 66 respectively, and getting into the workforce a year earlier rated at 68. The lowest rated of their choices was once again the graduate degree, with a 52 rating.

Figure 4.13-

*Factors for Persistence in Three-Year Degree Program*

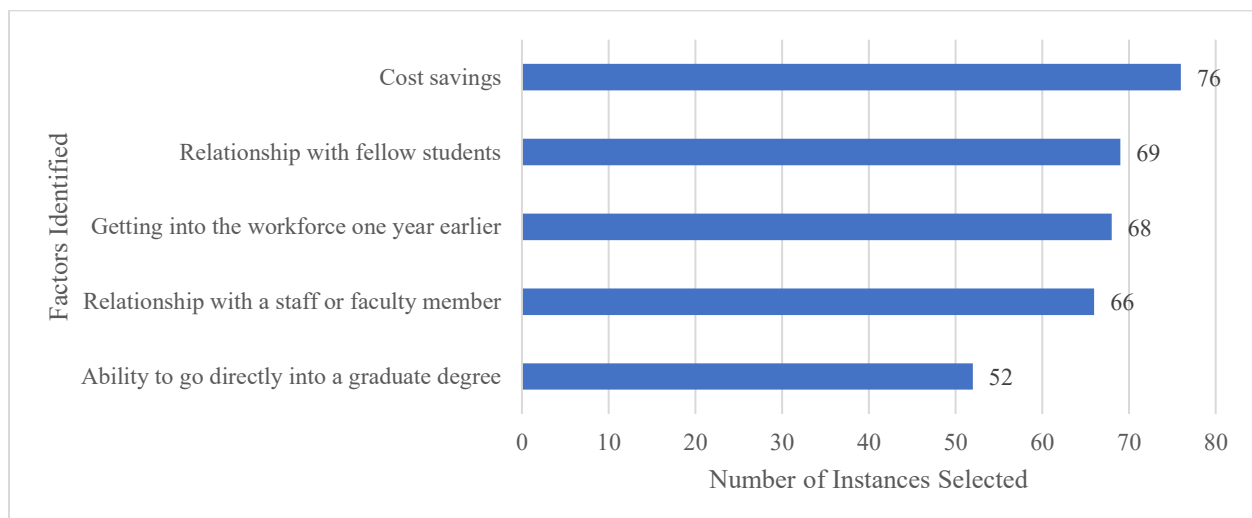


Figure 4.13: What led to alumni's persistence in the three-year undergraduate degree

Alumni were then asked if there were any other reasons they persisted to graduation, not included in the list of options in Figure 4.13. Figure 4.14 shows the text responses to the question of what other reasons existed which were not included. Of note is the fear of failing and desire for personal achievement.

Figure 4.14:

*Question 14 Responses: Are there any other reasons you persisted to graduation in the three-year degree program not listed in the previous question?*

Figure 4.14
<b>Q14: Are there any other reasons you persisted to graduation in the three-year degree program not listed in the previous question?</b>
Program Director
It was challenging and not a boring or segmented approach like more traditional approaches where there are multiple time consuming pre reqs
switching out of the 3 year program didn't easily matchup with 4 year programs meaning I would lose some progress/credit I had received
Integrated and real-time learning, working with fellow students with the same ambition and career goals
Career mentors
I think there are general social pressures not to fail from everyone. Didn't want to be considered a loser (even if that isn't the case).
I was on a basketball scholarship and had considered quitting a couple of times due to the difficulty and pressure of the coach and practices. However the three years were a great motivating factor for me, to stick with it and get my degree. I only consider this to be the biggest benefit for me, going through a tough time while in college. Knowing that you are almost on the finish line is a great motivator to keep going and one I am definitely grateful for.
After a quick year or even a year and a half, you're halfway there already
Unique learning experiences (Integrating Experience, NPD, etc.)
Appealing to future employers
Pressure of failure
Personal achievement
Harder to transfer credits to go somewhere else.
Honestly I don't like to fail. One of my biggest strengths and weaknesses, so leaving was never an option I gave myself
Workload was very manageable

Figure 4.14: Text responses of additional reasons why students persisted to graduating from a three-year degree.

Alumni were then asked why they believe three-year undergraduate degrees are not more available in the United States. In Figure 4.15, the highest rated response to this question is the idea of four-year degrees being the traditional timeframe of receiving a bachelor's degree. That ties into the second highest rated response, which is the perception you cannot complete 120 credits in three years. The sense among alumni who graduated in three years appears to be that

there are standards and practices around degrees needing to be four years, when they were able to get to graduation in one less year. In Figure 4.16, the alumni were asked to provide a text response if they feel there was another reason three-year degrees were not more widely available in the United States. The most frequent response relates to colleges not wanting to lose the revenue they would bring in from a fourth year of having the student enrolled in classes.

Figure 4.15 :

*Why are three-year degrees not more widely available in the United States?*

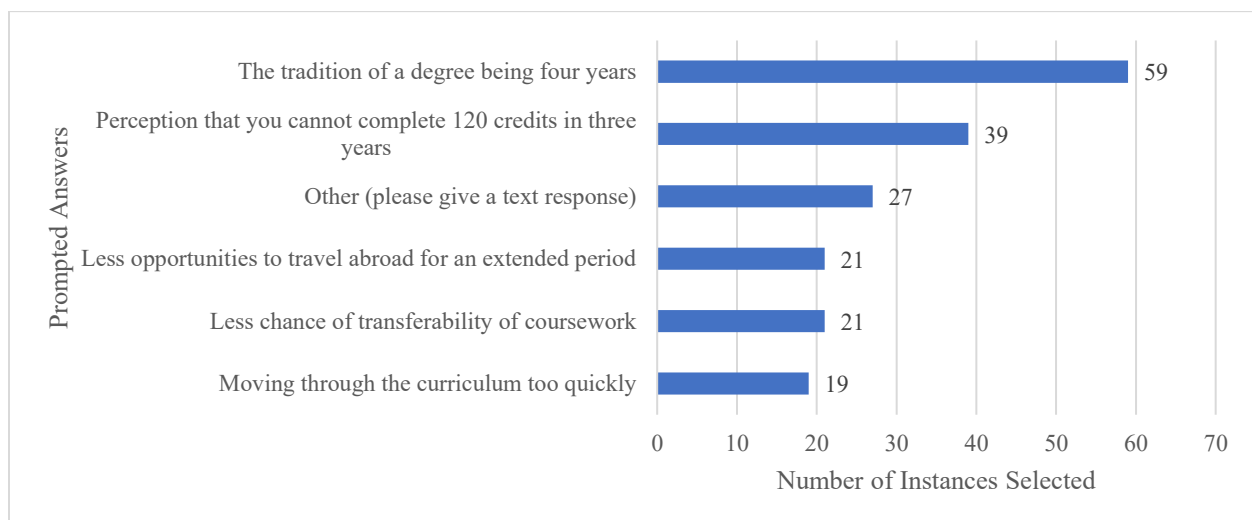


Figure 4.15: Alumni selecting the reasons why they believe three-year undergraduate degrees are not more available in the United States

Figure 4.16:

*Question 16 Responses: Why do you believe three-year degree programs are not more available in the United States?*

Figure 4.16: Text responses "Why do you believe three-year degree programs are not more available in the United States?"
Colleges wanting more money for another year of tuition.
The structure of a 4 year degree doesn't fit into 3 years unless a student is taking extra classes. Schools are not willing to step outside of the standard and rethink education. I also believe schools are driven by dollars and students graduating in 3 years is a loss so schools are not willing to adapt.
Too challenging
tradition and bloat, too many gen eds, getting students through degree quicker means less \$ for schools
Colleges want the money
hard to lock into what you want to do at 18,
Lack of knowledge of how the program could work
So that colleges can make more money by having students enrolled for four years.
Higher admin costs to start and maintain. For example, for some reason the Bradley Program is no more, if it really worked for the school, I'm sure it would still be around.
No incentive for schools to forgo additional year of tuition
Given the selection process for the three-year Honors Program, I believe that not all universities are willing to go through the selection process for the high achieving students. Not all students can go through the intensive pace, given that some may go in undecided as to what they want to study. So in addition to giving all students, despite their strengths, a longer period of time to go through college, the cost is also a factor, with Universities maybe not being willing to let the students go one year earlier.
Colleges lose a year of tuition revenue
Colleges are seeking more money from people and don't want to risk losing a years tuition or room and board
Education is a business, and most institutions aren't willing to give up at a minimum 25% of their revenue and enrollment with downward enrollment trends.
The hands on administration needed to run the programs.
Colleges / Universities make one year less revenue per student that graduates in three years
Management/Organization of these programs require special attention and commitments from schools offering them.
Institutional perceptions around accreditation challenges, faculty who are comfortable teaching/researching independently and may not have the desire to work collaboratively on a 3 year program, some students may want to study for 4 years to get the full experience/build relationships with their peers, other students may perceive they can't succeed in a 3 year format (especially with the next generation working and going to school full time--may feel they cant fit it in), Institutional perception 3 year programs lose revenue.
Colleges don't want to be creative
I personally think colleges don't want the option because it takes from an extra year of profit.
Most colleges would rather for years because that's one more year of paying them a lot of money



Traditional colleges and institutions not open to change/innovate
Inertia, status quo mentality
I imagine many learning institutes want the money that comes from a 4 year program as opposed to a 3 year program.
While the program was still 120 credits, some higher education professionals perceive 3-year programs as less legitimate because students have one less year of school/educational experience than a "typical" college student.
Colleges looking to make more money off of a 4 year program.
Likely the cost for other colleges as we had a dedicated team of teachers for less than 100 students at a time - that is tricky to afford

Figure 4.16: Text responses from alumni regarding any additional reasons they believe three-year undergraduate degrees are not more widely available.

When asked if the alumni would complete a three-year undergraduate degree if given the chance,

Figure 4.17 shows that 68 of the 79 responses would choose to enroll again in this format. 4

alumni indicated they would not, and 5 indicated they were unsure.

Figure 4.17:

*Would you complete a three-year degree again?*

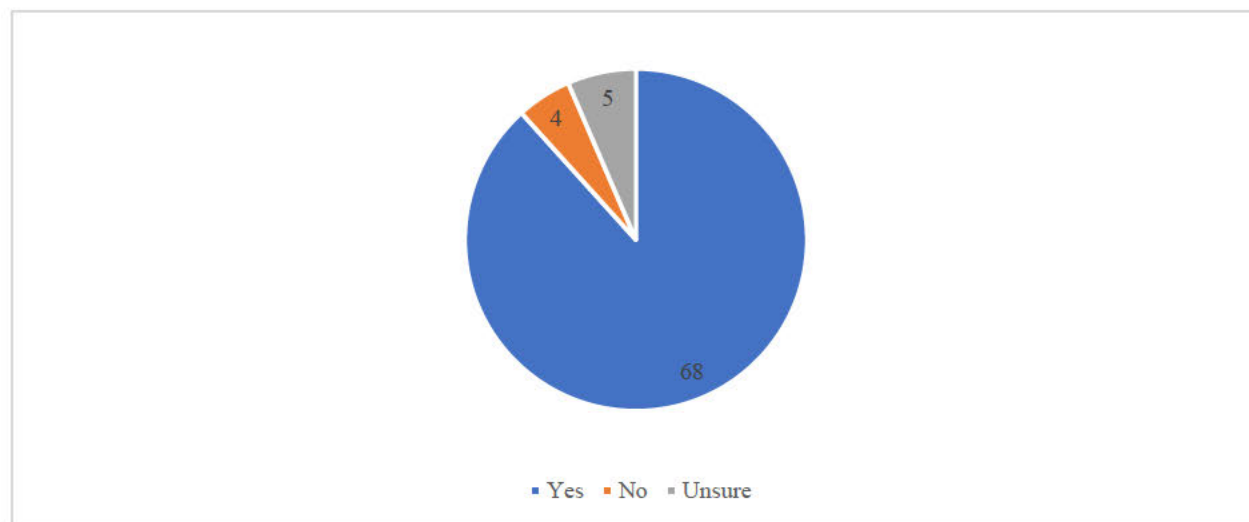


Figure 4.17: Would you complete a three-year degree again?

Finally, Figure 4.18 in the appendix gives the alumni the opportunity to add any additional comments regarding their experience graduating in three years. Of note is the positive attitude

and experience the alumni came away with, reflecting on what they learned, how it translated to their careers, and the relationships made along the way.

In Chapter 5, a discussion of the findings and limitations will follow along with a discussion of the negative aspects of three-year degree programs.

#### 4.1.2 - Result of Data Analysis

Data for this study came from the sample U.S. university, a small, private university in New England with over 20 years' worth of experience offering their degrees in three years.

As this was requested for all enrollments of the sample U.S. university, three-year and four-year, the data needed to be cleaned, dummy variables added, duplicates removed, and some data discarded, due to having no information for certain variables. As a result the sample size was 1142 that was analyzed. Of the data requested, and after analyzing the outputs, the following variables were determined to be the most useful in the analysis:

- Graduation Rate (Did Student Graduate?)
  - Dummy variable assigned where 1 indicates the student graduated and 0 indicating they did not graduate from the sample U.S. university
- Three-Year Graduate
  - Dummy variable assigned where 1 indicates that they graduated in three-years and 0 indicating they took four or more years to graduate
- Cumulative GPA
- High School GPA (HS GPA)
- Internship
- Involvement in Clubs (Involved)
- Number of athletes (Athlete)
- Commuter vs. resident student (Resident)

From previous research completed, this list of variables to analyze provides a picture of the academic performance of the student and an idea of the social achievement of a student during their time at the sample U.S. university, as in the survey that was completed, having the traditional college experience was noted as something that was achieve by most of the alumni from this graduation population. High School GPA was consistently used as a variable in the

regressions, in an analysis looking at honors students, HS GPA was used as a variable in predicting program completion for honors students at Clarion University (Savage, Raehsler, & Fiedor, 2014). For the variables of Internship, Involved, Athlete, and Resident, we look to previous research related to retention and persistence, where involvement on campus was a significant factor in a student completing this degree. Astin (1999) has led the way in this research at looking at what factors have caused a student to remain on campus and get to graduation. The factors he investigated were athletic involvement, social involvement in clubs, honors program involvement, and living on campus. For the purposes of this research, we left out whether a student was in the honors three-year degree option but presents opportunity for future research on the impact of being an honors or non-honors three-year degree student.

For the variables listed above, graduation rate is simply a dummy variable indicating whether the student graduated from the sample U.S. university; it does not differentiate between three-year or four-year graduates. The Three-Year Graduate variable indicates that the student graduated from a three-year degree program, but as mentioned prior, the sample U.S. university has an honors and non-honors track, so this was disregarded in the data as the researcher was only looking into those students who graduated in three years.

Future research opportunities exist by analyzing the honors vs. non-honors options. Cumulative GPA is the GPA a student graduated with at the end of their degree program. Internship indicates if a student participated in an internship for credit during their time at college, as a dummy variable where 1 indicates the student participated in an internship and a 0 if they did not.

Involved indicates that a student participated in an extracurricular activity during their time at the sample U.S. university, whether it be a club, fraternity/sorority, or intramural sport. Again, this is

a dummy variable where a 1 would denote involvement in one of these activities, and a 0 if they were not.

Athlete indicates that a student is actively participating in a formal sport, in this case Division II athletics, where a 1 denotes they are an athlete, and a 0 that they are not. Finally, the Resident variable shows a 1 if the student lived on campus at any point during their academic careers, with a 0 showing they were a commuter their entire time in their degree program.

Table 4.1:

*Descriptive Statistics*

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error
Three Year Graduate	1288	0.12	0.323	2.371	0.068
Did student graduate?	1290	0.77	0.422	-1.278	0.068
Involved	1290	0.57	0.495	-0.292	0.068
Athlete	1290	0.16	0.364	1.884	0.068
Resident	1290	0.65	0.478	-0.617	0.068
Internship	1290	0.07	0.263	3.247	0.068
HS GPA	1144	3.08	0.504	-0.386	0.072
Cumulative GPA	1290	3.13	0.670	-1.329	0.068
Valid N (listwise)	1142				

Table 4.1: Descriptive statistics of all variables used in the analysis of three-year degree students from the sample U.S. university. Variables include Three Year Graduate, Did Student Graduate?, Involved, Athlete, Resident, Internship, HS GPA, and Cumulative GPA. 77% of students in the analysis graduated from the Sample U.S. University, while 12% of them from a three-year degree. Average High School GPA was 3.07, while the Cumulative GPA at graduation was 3.12.

The descriptive statistics show that of the population analyzed, 77% of them graduated, 12% of those being from a three-year option. The average high school GPA of students entering during

this time was 3.07, with a cumulative GPA at graduation of 3.12. 57% of this population were involved in clubs while on campus, while 16% of these students were athletes. Students residing on campus made up 65% of the population analyzed, and 7% had internships.

#### OLS Regression:

Four OLS regressions were run on this data, with the dependent variable being Cumulative GPA.

See Table 4.2 for the correlation matrix for the variables.

Table 4.2:

#### *Correlation Matrix*

	Cumulative GPA	Three Year Graduate	HS GPA	Internship	Resident	Involved	Athlete
Cumulative GPA	1.0000	-0.0101	0.5166	0.1081	-0.0677	0.1428	-0.0137
Three Year Graduate	-0.0101	1.0000	0.0037	0.0112	-0.0252	0.0528	0.0570
HS GPA	0.5166	0.0037	1.0000	0.0413	-0.0295	0.1299	-0.0022
Internship	0.1081	0.0112	0.0413	1.0000	0.0155	0.0724	0.0605
Resident	-0.0677	-0.0252	-0.0295	0.0155	1.0000	0.3346	0.2029
Involved	0.1428	0.0528	0.1299	0.0724	0.3346	1.0000	0.3741
Athlete	-0.0137	0.0570	-0.0022	0.0605	0.2029	0.3741	1.0000

Table 4.2: Correlation matrix, N=1142

The first OLS regression includes all associated variables (see table 4.3 for results). With an adjusted  $R^2$  of .0285, we can see HS GPA, Internship, and Involved were all significant, while Three Year Graduate, Resident, and Athlete were not significant.

Table 4.3:

*OLS Regression with All Variables*

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	1.084	0.109		9.959	0.000
Three Year Graduate	-0.039	0.052	-0.019	-0.749	0.454
HS GPA	0.663	0.034	0.495	19.514	0.000
Internship	0.208	0.063	0.083	3.310	0.001
Resident	-0.126	0.039	-0.086	-3.198	0.001
Involved	0.162	0.039	0.118	4.141	0.000
Athlete	-0.078	0.049	-0.043	-1.599	0.110

Table 4.3: OLS Regression with Cumulative GPA as the dependent variable. HS GPA, Internship, and Involved were significant in the analysis. Three-Year Graduate, Resident, and Athlete were not significant.

A further OLS regression was run to understand the relationships further, with Table 4.4 looking at Three Year Graduate and HS GPA only. The results continued to show HS GPA was significant, while Three Year Graduate continued to not be significant with an adjusted  $R^2$  of 0.266.

Table 4.4:

*OLS Regression with Three-Year Graduate and HS GPA*

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	1.005	0.106		9.463	0.000
Three Year Graduate	-0.025	0.052	-0.012	-0.474	0.635
HS GPA	0.692	0.034	0.517	20.364	0.000**

Table 4.4: OLS regression with cumulative GPA as the dependent variable and Three-Year Graduate and HS GPA as the independent variables. HS GPA was significant at 5% significance level. Three-Year Graduate was not significant.

Conclusions from this analysis will be discussed in Chapter 5, but the results of Three-Year Graduate not being significant raises questions, leading to the next series of analysis around whether it helps students get to graduation.

**Probit and Logit Regression:**

Logit and Probit regressions were used to analyze what factors led the student to graduate, as that is indicated by a dummy variable where 0 means the student did not graduate, and 1 means the student did graduate. Probit and Logit Regression was used in previous research to understand honors program students and what factors led to their completion at Clarion University (Savage, Raehsler, & Fiedor, 2014). Given the number of binominal variables, it was logical to use this process to analyze what factors led to a student graduating.

Table 4.5 shows the first Probit regression, where Three Year Graduate and HS GPA have positive coefficients and are statistically significant, so students who graduated in three years and had higher high school GPA's were more likely to graduate, whereas Internship still has a positive coefficient, yet is not statistically significant in this model.

Table 4.5:

*Probit Regression*

Parameter	B	Std. Error	95% Wald Confidence Interval		Hypothesis Test		
			Lower	Upper	Wald Chi-Square	df	Sig.
(Intercept)	0.0523	0.2510	-0.4396	0.5442	0.0434	1.0000	0.8349
Three Year Graduate	0.2859	0.1361	0.0191	0.5527	4.4100	1.0000	0.0357
HS GPA	0.2137	0.0810	0.0549	0.3726	6.9562	1.0000	0.0084
Internship	0.0803	0.1567	-0.2269	0.3875	0.2625	1.0000	0.6084

Table 4.5: Probit regression with Student graduation as the dependent variable and Three-Year Graduate, HS GPA, and Internship as independent variables. Three-Year Graduate and HS GPA were significant. Internship was not significant.

The logit regression was run and the outputs are show in Table 4.6. Three Year Graduate and HS GPA were statistically significant, while Internship was not. The model explains 1.6% (Nagelkerke  $R^2$ ) of the chances students will graduate, and correctly classified 77% of students.

Table 4.6:

*Logit Regression*

Variable	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
HS GPA	0.367	0.139	6.957	1	0.008	1.443
Internship	0.151	0.275	0.3	1	0.584	1.163
Three Year Graduate	0.497	0.245	4.126	1	0.042	1.644
Constant	0.031	0.428	0.005	1	0.942	1.032

Table 4.6: Logit regression on Student Graduation as the dependent variable and HS GPA, Internship, and Three-



Year Graduate as the independent variables

Discussion of these results and how they relate to answering the research questions overall and other methods of data collection will be in the research questions section of Chapter 5.

#### 4.2: Interview Process and Outcomes:

In the fall and winter of 2022, six higher education administrators and faculty members were interviewed. Using contacts of the researcher, these subjects were sought out by meeting the criteria that they work at a postsecondary institution in a country in Europe where the Bologna Declaration had been signed. The questions prepared for the interview were as follows:

1. What can you tell me about your experience related to graduating students in three years?
2. What barriers or difficulties have you witnessed with three-year degree program retention?
3. What are your perceptions of what is required for a student to remain on a three-year degree track?
4. Can you give some examples of why students were unsuccessful in graduating in three-years? Please do not give any students names or other identifying information.
5. Can you describe any internal and external barriers to remaining in a three-year degree program?
6. What do you believe a program should do to encourage students to graduate in three years?
7. Do you have any other comments related to three-year degree students and programs?

While these questions were adhered to, occasional claims were made that the researcher wanted to investigate and question further, thus a grounded theory approach was used and resulted in a more thorough response from the interviewee. Grounded theory contributed to the inductive

coding that was partially used to analyze the interview transcripts. Grounded theory is an approach/strategy/or method whose purpose is to generate theory from an idea or data, rather than forming your hypothesis first and letting the data inform the conclusion (Khan, 2014).

These interviews were conducted over Microsoft Teams and were transcribed, with edits made to address errors. The interviews were then analyzed using a mix of inductive and deductive coding, as there were certain codes the researcher was looking for in advance (deductive), but also some were identified afterward as the transcripts were reviewed (inductive). The value coding approach was used to develop the codes, as the interviews were structured so that the opinions of three-year degrees were captured, based on the experiences and world views of the interviewee. These codes were then categorized into themes. The following themes emerged from the interviews:

#### Theme 1: Barriers

The researcher is defining any barriers as an external influence on a student's ability to be successful in a three-year undergraduate degree. This includes the following sub-themes, or codes, which were used to identify the theme:

- Financial Considerations
- Work Opportunities Gained or Lost
- Government Involvement

Financial Considerations involved non-tuition related finances, such as living and personal expenses while being in college, as public tuition is often government subsidized in Europe. The discussions with this mostly revolved around the presumption that the longer the student is in college, the less they can work to be able to sustain themselves. Work Opportunities Gained or Lost refers to post-graduation initiatives like finding a job more quickly, enrolling in a master's

degree, and money that can be earned. Government Involvement refers to the influence government has on the length of time a degree would take a student to complete.

## Theme 2: Outcomes

Outcomes refers to the tangible and intangible outputs a student receives post-graduation. The sub-themes or codes associated with this theme are:

- Grades
- Maturity
- Major Selected
- Job Placement

Grades refers to the influence that graduating in three-years will have on their overall academic performance. Maturity refers to the growth personally and professionally the student experiences while enrolled in college. Major selected revolves around the discussion that the length of time in college could be dictated by the area of study the student is participating in and if it requires more or less time than another. Finally, Job Placement refers to the employment a student has access to because of graduating from a three-year undergraduate degree.

## Theme 3: Traditional College Experiences

Traditional College Experiences come from the discussions revolving around whether or not a student still can actively participate or experience the same comforts and activities a student graduating in more than three years can. The sub-themes or codes for this theme are:

- Socializing and Involvement
- Mental Health Concerns
- Faculty and Staff Interactions

Socializing and Involvement refers to a student's ability to still participate in clubs, activities, sports and, in general, have a social experience while enrolled at college and in a three-year undergraduate degree. Mental Health Concerns is in reference to the challenges students face by accelerating their program of study into less time than their peers. Faculty and Staff Interactions refers to the level of involvement a student has with someone at their university who can be a coach/mentor/supporter of their educational endeavors.

### Interview Subjects

#### SUBJECT A

Subject A is sole interview that was conducted from a university in Great Britain. Great Britain, as acknowledged in the Introduction and Literature Review, has a longer history of offering three-year degrees, even prior to the Bologna Process. The university is known for its unique structure where they are offering mostly four-year degrees, but Subject A works for a program they deliver in three years. As a result of this, Subject A leans more in favor of the three-year degrees.

Throughout the course of the interview, Subject A brings up the point that in most cases, the first year of tertiary education (postsecondary education as it is known in the United States) does not award grades that count for their cumulative GPA and that is considered a waste.

While in favor of delivering a degree in three-year, the first year continues to be an area of concern for Subject A. The first year is the opportunity for students to learn to live and care for themselves for the first time in their lives, and by jumping immediately into a second year where grades count towards their final academic performance, then the whiplash of the sudden change in expectations is difficult for students to manage.

Barriers to success were asked of every subject, and given the interview was conducted in 2022, the issue of the Covid-19 pandemic was frequently brought up during the interview. According to Subject A, a third if not half of students entering their college had highlighted mental health challenges because of their time being isolated in their learning and social interactions, Great Britain had more strenuous lockdown procedures than the United States at the time. Subject A was consistent in their opinion that a large degree of the college experience is to ensure that a student learns how to navigate themselves, becoming self-aware, and maturing to enter their profession, in this case, a business profession.

Subject A is a proponent of the university doing an interview prior to admissions for a business degree, let alone one delivered in three-years. Their university offers interviews for their MBA program, and for their three-year undergraduate degree they offer a group process that brings in the students for the day and allow them to experience the degree program, meet their professors, and other students. This allows the university to prescreen any issues based on their experience with delivering degrees, but also allow the information exchange to occur where the student can learn more about what is to be expected of them. This curiosity is highlighted by Subject A as one of the main factors that contributes to students being informed and more successful in three-year degree. After implementing the group process, their admissions numbers have stayed consistent, but have seen an increase in their retention. As mentioned in the analysis of the university in in the United States offering three-year degrees, mandated information sessions and interviews were required.

Subject A touched on all codes within the themes, but focused mainly on the financial considerations, not in terms of tuition as that is usually not an issue in Europe, but in terms of day to day living expenses. This interview focused mostly on the student themselves, and

concern over their financial, mental, and societal status when completing college, and if they are ready for a three-year degree, or college overall, particularly in a post-covid environment.

## SUBJECT B

Subject B works for a university in Spain, where three-year degrees are not commonplace. The university they represent offer four years degrees mostly, and one three-year undergraduate degree. They are currently in the process of amending it with the government to offer in four years. One of the main motivations behind this, Subject B states, is that three-year degrees offer limited opportunities for education post-undergraduate degree. Masters and PhD programs at this university will not accept admission into their program without the four-year undergraduate degree and the associated credits with it. This would lead the researcher to understand that the three-year degrees in Subject B's experience have had less credits associated with achieving graduation requirements.

Subject B consistently brings attention to the major, and how the major the student selects is heavily dependent on whether they believe a three-year undergraduate degree would be appropriate. For example, they point to business degrees as an area that three-year undergraduate degrees can be completed, whereas medicine and engineering are areas they feel would constitute more time in an undergraduate degree.

When reflecting on what the Bologna Process has done for Europe, Subject B agrees it has done a lot of good in terms of the transferability and exchange of students, noting the increase in students taking advantage of the opportunities to go elsewhere within Europe. But they note that before signing the declaration, they had more three-year and five-year undergraduate degrees, but for consistency most degrees in Spain have moved to a four-year format.

The codes that were most prominent during the interview were the discussion around the major and if it would work in a three-year degree format, and the opportunities gained or lost by doing their degree in three-years. They understand the appeal but feel there is something missing out of getting an undergraduate degree in that amount of time. They also make the claim that a master's degree has become so common in Europe at this time, that this is what European students should focus on, and with the three-year degree hindering a student's ability to enroll in a master's degree, that a four or five-year degree should be the goal of an undergraduate student.

#### SUBJECT C

Subject C works as a higher education staff member in Greece, where they have worked with students graduating in three-years in the past, but now work at an institution where mostly four-year degrees are offered. The main code that emerged from this interview is the major selected by the student mattered. A major that requires more theoretical knowledge up front normally allows them to move faster through the curriculum and not hit many stumbling blocks.

Subject C makes the case that the major selected by the student could lend itself more to a three-year option should have a more practical outcome. For example, they mention Information Technology or Engineering could be more applicable to a three-year undergraduate degree as they are more focused degrees with hands on application. This would also suit them well later in their professional lives that they had the motivation to accelerate their degree. Business degrees on the hand, they feel like there are so many areas of business that can be studied, the degree should likely be four years.

During the interview, Subject C made the claim that there is a direct correlation between the Bologna Process and the rise of interest in graduate degrees. By making some degrees quicker to obtain, the market has become more competitive for jobs and has made graduate degrees almost

a requirement now. As a result, three-year degrees are more appealing due to the faster rate at which it can be accomplished.

#### SUBJECT D

Subject D brings a unique perspective of working for a university in Spain but spent most of their career working in the Italian higher education system. As noted prior, Spain only offers four-year degrees as mandated by the government, but Italy is on a three-year degree system. Their research related to three-year degrees and subsequent “+2” Master’s degrees, noticing that employment and salary data were showing similar trends one-year post-graduation.

For universities in Spain, Subject D makes the case that they are slow to change, especially considering they are public and hindered with government involvement. The public in general should be more accepting of three-year degrees, as the concept of lifelong learning means skills are developed well after graduation and master’s degrees can still be attained, so the quicker through the undergraduate degree, the better, in their opinion.

Subject D’s concluding thoughts around the success of the Bologna Process lies in the mobility of students to different universities and countries. Also mentioned was that they are seeing more instances where students are electing to complete their master’s degree elsewhere after their undergraduate degree.

#### Subject E

Subject E works as a higher education professional in Spain and, as with Subject B, three-year undergraduate degrees are unpopular. The conversation immediately goes into the master’s degree discussion and how that has become almost a mandate to enter the working world in Europe. Subject E makes the case that the major and the associated curriculum to be completed in three years would force the student to miss a vital component, such as an internship.



Engineering is an example given where in three years, you would miss a lot of the important curriculum, which generally takes four years in Spain. Fashion Design, however, is pointed out as a four-year degree that could be accomplished in less time.

When asked why students would want to graduate in four years, when they could graduate in three in another country due to the high transferability, the answer was around the loss of experience in areas like the internship and the master's degree. Subject E said it is very rare in their understanding that students could elect to go to a different country to study just so they could get their degree done faster. They say that about 70% of their students chose to complete a master's degree upon completion of their degree, but that is a mistake, in their opinion. Students should get work experience prior to going on for their next degree. But the perception in Europe is that they will not get a job, or as good of a job without the master's degree, or will make less money.

Subject F

Subject F works for a university in Greece, a country where three-year degrees have received a lot of push back and most degrees are offered in a four-year format. They admitted they have worked with students over the years who have accelerated their degree and graduated early as a result. The conversation quickly turned to the mental health of the students who choose to graduate in three years. They are bombarded with a heavy workload and do not have the opportunity to participate in socializing and other college activities.

Subject F, along with most other interviews, admits that the master's degree has become commonplace as an achievement students want immediately after graduating with their undergraduate degree. There was also discussion about what majors could make more sense to be offered as a three-year degree option, citing business, psychology, and communications as

areas which could be attainable for students over that timeframe. They acknowledge that science and medicine should be taken in a four-year degree format. Subject F would welcome any government mandate for three-year degrees, so long as it did not affect the students, their wellbeing and career options as a result. Students should still have the traditional college experience.

#### Analysis:

Looking at the various themes identified, the combined six interviews hit on each theme, but the focus of each subject was vastly different with some themes.

For Barriers, Government Involvement and Work Opportunities Gained or Lost were the main focuses of the subject, with only two of the six mentioning the student's financial considerations. The discussion around master's degrees was the focus of this theme, as the researcher labeled the pursuit of a master's degree an opportunity gained. Five of the six subjects mentioned master's degrees becoming commonplace during the interview and, in many instances, they mention a 2-year degree. Subject D specifically states that Europe should be moving to a complete three-year model if industry and higher education are asking their students to partake in a master's degree. Government Involvement is also a highlight of this theme, as half of the subjects highlighted it as a mandate by their respective governments to not offer three-year degrees, despite being from countries that have signed onto the Bologna Process.

For the College Outcomes theme, discussion around the majors and how some can or should be considered for three-year degree offerings was mentioned by all but Subject D. It is likely Subject D did not discuss this only because they were in favor of three-year degrees overall, while other subjects were skeptical at points during the discussion. Subject B, for example, mentioned the major in six of the seven questions and how some majors could lend themselves

more to three-year degree options than others. Job Placement was the second most highlighted in the College Outcomes theme. Subject A mentions students are looking for employability, and three-year degrees can help to make the student look more appealing on a résumé, but also that it allows the student to get into a master's degree earlier and they can complete that sooner, as well, leading into the discussion around master's degrees becoming more of a requirement now than they have been in the past.

Concerns over students' grades were only mentioned by Subject A as a major concern, but that could be a result of Subject A having more of a faculty role than many of the other subjects, whereby the concern was that students studying in an accelerated manner would not be able to handle the larger workload, thus grades would suffer. Half of the subjects mention maturity as a factor in the discussion, as students use their college experience to learn life lessons that will prepare them for success in their professional and personal lives. The subjects that mentioned maturity did not state that three years was not enough time to reach the level of maturity required of a college student, just that that they were unsure it was enough time to achieve that level.

The third and final theme of Traditional College Experience is comprised of Socializing and Involvement, Mental Health Concerns, and Faculty and Staff Interactions. Mental Health Concerns for the students was the most prominent code in this theme, as the act of accelerating a degree could prove to be overwhelming. However, Subject A acknowledges in their mention of mental health concerns that the Covid-19 pandemic elevated their concerns in this area.

Socializing and Involvement emerged as a concern, as the fear is that students do not have the opportunity to participate in clubs, organizations, and athletics, as they are noted as a significant part of the college experience. In the survey conducted of the students in the United States, this is an area students said was of importance to them. Lastly, Faculty and Staff Interactions was only

brought up by Subject A, but was an important factor to look for, given it was a significant factor in the United States students.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion, Recommendations and Conclusions**

With the reporting of the alumni survey and student data analysis from the sample U.S. university, a series of propositions can be developed that answer the research questions. It is important to note that the negative aspects of these programs will also be addressed.

### **5.1 Research Questions Discussion**

**RQ1:** Explore factors that can be attributed to student success in a three-year degree program in the United States

As evident from the survey and data analysis of students from the sample U.S. University, there are several factors that can be considered which led to the student's success while enrolled in a three-year undergraduate degree. While it is also a factor for enrollment in three-year degrees and helps to answer RQ3 as well, cost savings for students in the United States was a significant factor mentioned at multiple points in the survey of alumni as a reason a student would want to continue through to graduate in three years. Surprisingly, relationships, both with classmates and faculty, were also seen as a significant factor when asking the alumni what they feel led them to success in these programs.

Based on the alumni survey results, experiential learning opportunities woven throughout the student experience was important in a student's success and experience in the three-year degree programs at the sample U.S. university. While this is a unique programmatic design from the sample U.S. university, it was clear from the responses that the creative ways of delivering credit

was appreciated during a student's time and should be considered when looking to further develop programs such as this.

Based on the regressions run, being a graduate of a three-year degree program did not have a significant impact on the cumulative GPA, based on the OLS regressions that were run.

However, it is evident that, when analyzing whether a student graduated (in the Probit regression), being a three-year student was significant in a student's chances of graduating. This was only a significant relationship when high school GPA was in the regression, which would lead to high school GPA being a factor in a student's ability to be successful in a three-year undergraduate degree.

It should be noted there are weaknesses of these programs that should be considered when being used for future program design. The alumni survey pointed to opportunities for traveling abroad as one of the primary weaknesses of the three-year undergraduate degree, as the program is cohort based and the coursework is heavily prescribed, leaving little time study abroad opportunities. The alumni also identified a heavier workload than peers and less time to participate in extra-curricular activities as weaknesses of the programs. While the majority say they were able to have a traditional college experience in Figure 4.12, it is likely they were able to have the experience they wanted but fewer opportunities/less time than a student participating in a four-year degree. It should also be stated that most of the survey respondents noted they were a part of the honors track, which skews the data in favor of a higher performing student.

**RQ2:** Identify attributes of the European Higher Education system that could inform future three-year degree programmatic design in the United States.

Based upon the interviews conducted with higher education professionals in Europe, the higher education system seems to be very siloed from country to country regarding three-year undergraduate degrees. As a result, future research should focus on one country that will allow a more in-depth analysis of program specifics, and the external forces on students from that country. Of the six interviews conducted, two faculty members have worked directly with three-year undergraduate programs in the past, and were mostly in favor of them, albeit with some concerns over students being overwhelmed in the process, (although this concern could be just for college students overall, in a post Covid-19 world). Mental health concerns will continue to grow and must be considered when future programmatic design for any university considering three-year undergraduate degrees.

The government involvement in how long a degree programs can be is more apparent post-interviews, and that is limited in some countries from which those interviewed are able to offer three-year degrees. As government pays the bill for most tuition, there should be incentive for students to get out into the workforce faster from a government's standpoint. Cost is not an issue for most European students at some public universities, as it is in the United States. While the United States students were consistently citing cost as a reason for enrolling and persisting in a three-year undergraduate degree, European students have far less pressure to avoid the higher cost of education.

When looking at the specific majors students are looking to graduate with, there was much discussion amongst the subjects regarding certain opportunities for three-year degrees. When universities consider three-year undergraduate degrees, there should be consideration as to which areas of study lend themselves easily to being offered in three-years. Future research opportunities can exist where a rubric could be developed to determine what should be

considered for three-year or longer time frame delivery. Master's degrees are also one of the continuing factors that could lead to more successful implementation of three-year undergraduate degrees. With most interview subjects mentioning that the master's degree has become an expected part of a student's résumé, universities should be considering how they deliver students the degrees they need to be successful, and in a streamlined fashion. However, this raises further issues concerning the value of the undergraduate degree altogether, regardless of time to completion, when a master's degree is being required more and more by industry.

**RQ3:** Explore factors that can be attributed to students choosing to enroll in a three-year degree program over a 4-year degree

As the United States continues to struggle with the exorbitant cost of education, it is clear from the survey to alumni that self-driven motivations related to cost savings is the top factor. It was the top response from the alumni when asked what the strengths of a structured three-year degree were, as well as the top response when asked what kept them to persist through to graduation. With cost creating more barriers for students as part of a larger discussion in higher education in the United States, it should be at the forefront of universities' priorities to investigate programmatic opportunities to decrease costs for the student.

Another highly rated factor that is related to cost savings is the ability to get into the workforce a year earlier. If a student is concerned about the high cost of education, the ability to get into the workforce a year earlier and earn more money would certainly add to the appeal of graduating in three years. Also, as 46% of respondents to the survey indicated they pursued a master's degree within six months, it would seem this is also a motivating factor in getting through the undergraduate degree faster.

It is important to note that parent- and self-pressure was highly rated as a reason students chose to enroll in a three-year undergraduate degree. While it is not known what pressures precisely students and their parents were considering, given the discussion around cost and the effect it has on families during the college admissions process, a connection could be made between the pressure to enroll and the cost savings.

Experiential learning is also listed as a reason students highlighted the work they did in the three-year degree curriculum. This is curious, as it is one of the points brought up by multiple subjects in the interviews as a concern regarding three-year degrees; that experiential learning would be victim to having less time. The sample U.S. university has integrated it into their curriculum. Perception that a three-year degree reduces certain attributes of the degree must be investigated further by higher educational institutions and professionals.

## 5.2 Limitations

Ideally, this research would have been conducted with students at European universities, however getting names and contact information easily from universities was unattainable. With more time and resources, likely a relationship with another university could have been cultivated and the opportunity would have presented itself. The interviews served to help understand the general feeling regarding three-year undergraduate degrees in Europe but acknowledge that there are more ways the researcher can further the understanding of the three-year degrees in Europe. The sample U.S. university has a long reputation for offering three-year undergraduate degrees, but these degrees are all business degrees. It is likely that if the university offered other three-year degrees outside of business, the regressions could have had different results. In addition, the data provided by the sample U.S. university created more limitations in the analysis than initially intended. Much of the data could only be interpreted in such a way that it could not be analyzed



against other variables that were to be included. It should also be noted that, with 79 responses from alumni spread over an eight-year timeframe, even with the encouraging results, any future research regarding program design should consider the small sample population and the unique aspects of the program.

The survey was, for the most part, completed by alumni who participated in the honors track of the three-year undergraduate degree, which skews the data and responses to that curriculum and experience, rather than the entire three-year undergraduate degree population. While the survey was released to all three-year undergraduate degree alumni on file with the sample U.S.

university, it is worth future investigation as to why honors alumni responded more than non-honors alumni.

### 5.3 Recommendations and Future Research

Three-year undergraduate degrees provide an opportunity for students in both the United States and Europe, but not the same opportunity. In the United States, cost is the overarching issue in higher education, and that is the main driver for the students and alumni of the sample U.S. university to enroll and persist through three-year degrees. In Europe, based on the interviews conducted, time is the main opportunity for those students. If the master's degree has become the degree you need to achieve, then a quicker opportunity to finish your undergraduate degree should be appealing to students. A future opportunity for research exists with the master's degree in Europe and how a three-year undergraduate degree can complement that impetus for a higher degree. This could be a future case for universities to package a three-year undergraduate degree with a graduate degree and see potential enrollment increases.

From the United States' perspective, the alumni from the survey indicated their belief that three-year degrees are not common is a result of tradition, perception, and revenue. However, this

research can be useful to college administrators, as well. From the survey responses, 64% of respondents said they would have gone to another institution altogether if the three-year degree was not available at the sample U.S. university. While keeping these students for three years instead of four, the sample U.S. university likely enrolled more students as a result in that timeframe than it would have without three-year degree options, though this is not possible to formally postulate.

Future research opportunities that would be appealing to the researcher is to look at the business impacts to a university should they offer three-year degrees in areas of admissions, revenue, and opportunities for master's degrees as an additional degree.

#### 5.4 Conclusions

Through this research, we can begin telling the story of three-year undergraduate degrees and how various constituents feel towards them. From the United States perspective, a historical overview of the transition from three-year to four-year degrees was provided, as well as how this has been a cyclical journey of these programs coming into question every few decades. Past research was presented on three-year undergraduate degrees, which highlighted retention issues related to nursing degree programs delivered in three years (Taulbee, 2017), as well as research that made the argument that three-year degrees do not need to produce better student outcomes, but proving student outcomes are as good as four-year degree students is a success (Seidman, Painchaud, & Bradley, 2011).

Although initially concerning that being a three-year student at the sample U.S. university was not significant in most regressions run, it must be stated that the idea of a three-year undergraduate degree is not meant to increase the performance of a student, it is meant to provide an alternative pathway for the student, and if the analysis looks the same as it would for

a four-year student, then having the same output showcases the programs can be effective for student outcomes.

The survey delivered to alumni at the sample U.S. university adds to the literature regarding three-year degrees, as it provides the most up to date and direct feedback from students who successfully navigated the path of achieving their degree in that amount of time. From the survey results, we can see the financial considerations at the top of the list of responses from the alumni. Saving a year of tuition costs is very appealing when the cost of tuition continues to rise, and gives students the ability to get into the workforce a year earlier to begin earning a salary. We can also ascertain from the responses that students are more likely to investigate a university they might not have considered otherwise.

From the interviews with higher education professionals in Europe, we learned that the feeling regarding three-year degrees carries from country to country, and government involvement in the length of degree is important. The sentiment that all students need to complete a master's degree is also of importance and should be further investigated, as this presents additional opportunities to look at countries which offer three-year degrees and the impact of a master's degree, and those that offer four-year degrees.

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Appendix:

Alumni Survey Questions-

17. What year did you graduate?
  - a. Drop down with all years until 2018
18. What program did you graduate from?
  - a. Three-Year Honors Program Option
  - b. Degree in Three Option
  - c. Unsure
19. What major did you graduate with? (only for those that selected Degree in Three in question 2)
  - a. List all Degree in Three Majors
20. Did you graduate with the degree you initially started when enrolling at the sample U.S. university? (only for those that selected Degree in Three in question 2)
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
21. Did you pursue a graduate degree immediately following completion of your undergraduate degree?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
22. Would you have attended another institution if you did not enroll in a three-year degree program?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
23. Please rate how the following individuals influenced your decision to graduate from a three-year degree program? (Responses recorded on a scale)
  - a. Self-driven
  - b. Parent/Guardian
  - c. Friend
  - d. Sibling
  - e. SNHU Admissions Counselor
  - f. High School Teacher
  - g. Guidance Counselor
  - h. Faculty Member
  - i. Staff Member
  - j. Other: \_\_\_\_\_
24. Do you believe that graduating in three-years was appealing to hiring managers as you were applying for jobs?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Unsure
25. What do you personally believe to be the strengths of your experience graduating in three years? (Responses recorded on a scale)
  - a. Cost savings
  - b. Ability to go directly into a graduate degree after completion
  - c. Cohort environment
  - d. Closer relationships with faculty



- e. More experiential learning opportunities
  - f. Getting into the workforce one year earlier than peers
  - g. Other: \_\_\_\_\_
26. What do you believe to be weaknesses of your experience graduating in three years? (Reponses recorded on a scale)
- a. Heavier workload
  - b. One less year in college
  - c. Less time to participate in extra-curricular activities
  - d. Pressure of falling behind in course sequencing
  - e. Less opportunities to travel abroad for an extended period
  - f. Moving through the curriculum too quickly
  - g. Other: \_\_\_\_\_
27. Do you feel like you were able to have a traditional college experience because of being enrolled in a three-year degree program? (i.e. participated in athletics, clubs and organizations, attend campus events, work on campus)
- a. Yes
  - b. No
28. Do you think you would have graduated with a higher GPA had you not graduated in a three-year degree program?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Unsure
29. What factors would you identify as causing you to persist to graduate in three-years? (Reponses recorded on a scale)
- a. Cost-savings
  - b. Ability to go directly into a graduate degree after completion.
  - c. Relationship with fellow students
  - d. Relationship with a staff/faculty member
  - e. Getting into the workforce one year earlier than peers
  - f. Other: \_\_\_\_\_
30. Why do you believe three-year degree programs are not more available in the United States? (Reponses recorded on a scale)
- a. The tradition of a degree being four years
  - b. Perception that you cannot complete 120 credits in three years
  - c. Less chance of transferability of coursework
  - d. Less opportunities to travel abroad for an extended period
  - e. Moving through the curriculum too quickly
  - f. Other: \_\_\_\_\_
31. If given the chance, would you participate in a three-year degree program again?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Unsure
32. Are there any other comments you would like to add about your experience graduating from a three-year degree program: (Open dialogue box)

## Interview Pre and Post Brief:

### Interview Pre-Brief:

Thank you for participating in this study on three-year degree program students. Your participation is voluntary, and you can decline to answer any question. You can also withdraw from the study at any time. You completed an informed consent form before we began; do you have any questions about your participation in this study that I have not already answered? The interview will be transcribed, and I will be taking notes during the interview. Feel free to stop me and ask questions or return to a previous question at any time.

I am very interested in finding out about the supports provided to three-year degree students and finding out your thoughts about the supports and services needed, so please be detailed in your answers. You can stop the focus group at any time. I will have the focus group interview transcribed and provide you a chance to review it. Do you understand these instructions? Do you have any questions before we begin?

Interview Questions for Faculty and Administration (Adapted from the Taulbee Three-Year Nursing Degree Dissertation):

8. Tell me about your experience related to graduating students in three years?
9. What barriers or difficulties have you witnessed with three-year degree program retention?
10. What are your perceptions of what is required for a student to remain on a three-year degree track?
11. Can you give some examples of why students were unsuccessful in graduating in three-years?  
Please do not give any students names or other identifying information.
12. Please describe some internal and external barriers to remaining in a three-year degree program.
13. What do you believe a program should do to encourage students to graduate in three-years?
14. Do you have any other comments related to three-year degree students and programs?

### Interview De-Brief:

Thank you very much for your time. As a reminder, I will have this interview transcribed. You will receive and email of the transcript for an opportunity to review it for accuracy and make revisions, as necessary. I will maintain your confidentiality to the greatest extent possible, but I cannot guarantee your confidentiality especially if you voluntarily share the focus group content with others.