New! Exclusive Rankings 2017 Edition

Find the Best Colleges for You!

- How to Write a Winning Essay
- Financial Aid Secrets
- 8 Ways to WOW Admissions
- Great Schools at Great Prices
Taking the FAST Track

Should you save money by accelerating?  BY CHRIS SWANEY

The only thing growing more quickly than the sticker price on a college education may be the debate around the value of a degree – particularly if a student takes on a big load of debt while majoring in something with no clear path to a decent job.

With an eye toward giving families a way to save time and money, colleges and universities nationwide are offering accelerated degree programs that speed students through the icy-covered halls of academia in three years, allow them to get both a bachelor's and master's degree in four or five years, and provide a streamlined path through law school or medical school. "Parents really perk up when they hear about the cost savings of an accelerated program," says Josh Boyd, associate professor and director of undergraduate studies at the Brian Lamb School of Communication at Purdue University in Indiana.

For Charlotte Tuggle, a mass communication major from Winston, Georgia, the accelerated program will mean a savings of $20,000 in tuition by the time she graduates in 2017. And she still has been able to squeeze in broadcast internships, she notes.

Faith Finoli is "getting to finish my undergraduate and osteopathic medical degree in seven rather than eight years" by choosing a three-year bachelor's in biology at Seton Hill University in Pennsylvania coupled with a D.O. degree that takes an additional four years from partner school Lake Erie College of Osteopathic Medicine. She graduates in 2018.

What all these fast-track programs have in common is that they require a high level of focus and motivation and a stress-inducing course load, although students who choose to accelerate often take full advantage of Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate credits. Is it one of these programs for you?

Consider the three-year bachelor's

While some students have always opted to take extra courses on their own each semester and go to summer school to graduate early, a handful of institutions have set up formal three-year pathways in at least some disciplines that typically require students to carry 16 to 20 credits per semester. Purdue communication students without any AP credits take an extra course four out of six semesters and put in two summers. At Bates College in Maine, the accelerated option is open to anyone who is willing to take five courses instead of four per semester and a class in each one-month "short term" that closes out the spring. At Wesleyan in Connecticut, students can opt to graduate in three years by adding summer terms and taking advantage of one or two AP or IB courses.

By contrast, American University in Washington, D.C., has fashioned three rigorous three-year "Scholars" programs, complete with opportunities to study abroad, mentoring, and internships, for small cohorts of accomplished students interested in international service, public health, and politics, policy and law. The State University of New York at Potsdam lets students who arrive with a high school average of at least 3.5 and maintain a 3.25 GPA take accelerated tracks in majors ranging from biology and chemistry to economics and English literature.
“I’ll miss leaving my classmates a bit early, but the fast track has been worth it,” says Cosima Compton, a 2016 business administration graduate of Hartwick College in Oneonta, New York, which offers a three-year plan in 22 majors. “My parents love saving $52,000 in tuition and fees.” Students get priority in class selection as well as mentoring and special counseling. They also get a complete draft schedule of all courses they might take before they ever hit campus.

Most of these programs so far have drawn a very limited number of students. Only 15 of the 600 communication majors at Purdue are currently accelerating, and only 8 percent of students at Hartwick are participating in three-year options. Partly that’s a function of the intense workload, and a desire to leave room in the day for athletics and other activities as well as down time with friends in the dorm. Experts also point out the advantages of having time to develop a network of peers and mentors in college and to explore the curriculum widely. Many students, they note, decide to switch majors at least once. Of course, plenty of people have to spend any extra time they have each week financing their education with a job.

On the other hand, for those who head to college clear about their career path—like Allyson Daniels, a 2016 graduate of Hartwick’s nursing program from Pembroke, New Hampshire—the shortened time frame can be a big draw. “I wanted to beat the competition and get into the job market early,” she says.

**The bachelor’s plus grad degree options**

At many universities, high achievers in certain fields can apply to enter the fast track to a master’s degree early enough in their undergraduate career to collect both diplomas in as little as four years. Among them: Brown University in Rhode Island, Emory University in Georgia, Northwestern University in Illinois, and Harvard and Brandeis universities in Massachusetts. More typically, fast trackers speed to that credential in five years instead of six. Students at Duke University’s Pratt School of Engineering can earn a bachelor’s and a master of engineering in five years, for example—as long as they get a B in any graduate class taken as an undergrad and maintain a 3.0 overall in their grad courses. And a growing number of business schools allow an early start so the MBA can be earned in a fifth year.

The latest wrinkle: A few schools, including Quinnipiac University in Connecticut and LaSalle University in Philadelphia, have begun offering a combined bachelor’s plus MBA that is possible to complete in four years. At Quinnipiac, students seeking the two degrees live with others in the program freshman year and follow a crammed course plan that packs in study abroad and internships. “I selected to do a week in Peru,” says Erika Edlund of Albany, New York, who combined a bachelor’s in health sciences and an MBA (taking five years) and landed a job at Quadigm, a national health care consulting and research company. Tuition is frozen for four years, and those taking the shortest route save up to 25 percent compared to the traditional MBA route, the school estimates.

A host of programs similarly provide a streamlined path to other professions. Applicants to Drexel University in Philadelphia, for instance, can seek entry to programs leading to a law degree in six years or a medical degree in seven. And students already enrolled have the option of accelerated tracks to advanced degrees in physical therapy or physician assistant studies. Georgia State University offers an expedited law program to students who have completed 24 to 30 credits in AP courses before arriving. By contrast, students at the University of Denver’s Sturm College of Law can earn a bachelor’s and law degree in six years by double-counting graduate law classes as elective undergraduate credits.

Temple University in Pennsylvania offers a seven-year combo undergrad/doctor of pharmacy option. Besides Drexel, institutions that accept highly qualified high school seniors into accelerated programs that funnel directly into medical school (assuming the student stays highly qualified) include Boston University, Kent State in Ohio, the University of Southern Florida, the University of Missouri—Kansas City, George Washington University in the District of Columbia and Northwestern.

Such programs can clearly offer advantages to the right students. But college advisers caution that the choice should be made only after a clear-eyed assessment of the demands.