



THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA SYSTEM

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March 1, 2021

Sen. Deanna Ballard
Rep. Hugh Blackwell
Co-Chairs, Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee
North Carolina General Assembly
16 West Jones Street
Raleigh, NC 27601

Dear Chairs:

The University of North Carolina System is helping more North Carolinians graduate on time. Our four-year graduation rates have increased 12.5 percentage points over the past seven years, which means more than 4,600 additional on-time graduates in the spring of 2020 compared to the spring of 2013. On-time graduates have lower debt and are able to launch their careers more quickly. They also make the University more efficient, opening up seats for the next generation of students.

We are proud of these gains and eager to do more. Our universities are thinking creatively about how to award credit for prior learning, streamline degree programs, and create flexible schedules that allow students to earn credit year-round. These strategies can accelerate degree completion and cut down on both the actual cost and opportunity cost of college. Accelerated programs are especially appealing to adult learners with some college but no degree, a group of students who will be critical to North Carolina's economic growth and recovery.

I am pleased to submit the attached report on accelerated undergraduate degree programs requested by the General Assembly in Session Law 2020-56. The legislative request directed the Board of Governors of The University of North Carolina to submit to the Joint Committee a study to determine the feasibility of offering accelerated undergraduate degree programs.

We appreciate the opportunity to share our progress and plans with the Joint Committee, and we're deeply grateful for the General Assembly's ongoing support of our public universities. I would welcome the chance to discuss the report and answer any questions.

Sincerely,

Peter Hans
President

cc: UNC Board of Governors
Brittany Eller, Office of the Speaker
Carly Weaver, Office of the President Pro Tem
Bart Goodson, UNC System Office
Andrew Tripp, UNC System Office



THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA SYSTEM

ACCELERATED DEGREE COMPLETION STUDY

Report to the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee

March 1, 2021

**The University of North Carolina System
Chapel Hill, North Carolina**

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INTRODUCTION

This study, as required by H.B. 1096 (Session Law 2020-56), seeks to report on the feasibility of offering accelerated undergraduate degree programs at the constituent universities in the University of North Carolina System. These accelerated pathways should be effective and efficient for students and consistent with the access and affordability goals of the Strategic Plan for the University of North Carolina System adopted by the Board of Governors.

The University of North Carolina System's strategic plan calls on our institutions to make significant gains in enrolling and graduating more low-income and rural students than ever before, raising our graduation rates to new heights, and producing more credentials in critical workforce areas. The progress we make on these goals will be achieved through the hard work of our institutions, and the UNC System is committed to implementing strategies that can drive those improvements, including efforts that increase the pace at which students complete their degrees.

As directed by the General Assembly, this study addresses the following issues in the pursuit of accelerated bachelor's degrees:

1. The use of online education for certain courses to shorten time to degree completion, particularly for general education requirements.
2. The feasibility of increasing summer-term options or flexible calendar scheduling to accelerate degree completion.
3. The potential for piloting specific accelerated degree program models, such as three-year degree programs, combined bachelor's and master's degree programs, and competency-based programs. In reviewing potential pilot programs, the Board of Governors shall determine (i) whether a pilot program would be required or optional for constituent institutions, (ii) the type of flexibility that would be allowed during a pilot program, and (iii) whether incentive funding through the funding formula should be tied to constituent institutions relative to such a program.
4. Any obstacles or needed changes to state financial aid programs or the university funding model to incentivize accelerated paths to a degree.
5. The potential cost savings to students who enroll in accelerated degree programs, including any reduction to tuition and fees.
6. Any possible shifts in curriculum design to focus on specialized skills earlier in the degree program.
7. Issues related to student support to facilitate successful completion of requirements, selection of majors early in programs, and the management of increased student coursework loads in accelerated degree programs.
8. The importance of credit transfers from college-level high school courses, community college courses, or courses from other institutions to maximize accelerated degree program efficiency.
9. The level of student interest and demand for accelerated degree programs.

ABOUT ACCELERATED DEGREES

In general, this study defines "accelerated degrees" as bachelor's degrees that take less time to complete than the traditional four years (for the baccalaureate) and less than six years for non-combined bachelor's and master's degrees. Per accreditation requirements, accelerated degrees require the same number of credit hours as non-accelerated degrees (120 credit hours), but are completed in a compressed time period: three years or less in the case of a bachelor's, five (or "four plus one") in the case of combined

bachelor's and master's programs. These programs allow students, typically those who are academically well prepared and highly motivated, to finish faster and enter the job market in less time, lowering the cost and opportunity cost of pursuing a degree. But these programs are also more demanding and therefore require supports and structures to help students be successful.

Accelerated degrees typically reflect the implementation of strategies (or combinations of strategies) that enable students to earn credit more quickly than is typically the case in a traditional four-year program. Such strategies include:

- Early postsecondary credit through early college high schools, dual enrollment, or Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) programs
- Credit for prior learning, work experience, and earned credentials
- Competency-based education
- Transfer articulation
- Year-round enrollment
- Three-year structured pathways to a bachelor's degree
- Combined bachelor's and master's degrees

College Credit in High School

Many existing accelerated programs at the undergraduate level capitalize on college-level credit earned in high school through AP/IB, dual enrollment, and/or early college high schools. These programs are typically designed to appeal to academically advanced, traditional students, who can choose to put those credits toward their bachelor's degree and complete early. Programs that enable students to earn postsecondary credit early in their career have been shown to increase the likelihood of high school students enrolling in postsecondary programs as compared to the overall student population.¹ For instance, the AP program currently offers 38 different exams. If a high school student pursued a significant number of AP credits, the successful student would be able to enter college as a second-year student, naturally accelerating their college experience. However, there is little empirical research on the effect of AP credit in decreasing time to degree.

Three-Year Structured Pathways to a Bachelor's

Some bachelor's degree programs are designed to be completed in less than normal time, with universities developing the academic calendar, course sequence, and student supports with acceleration in mind. Such programs typically expect students to enroll in and earn credits year-round, and may include an online component to enable students to study while completing an internship as part of their program. A 2018 report found that at least 32 four-year universities offered three-year bachelor's degrees, but also pointed out that take-up rates tend to be low in these programs.² (Many universities in the United Kingdom award 90-credit bachelor's degrees that can be earned in three years, though these requirements fall below American accreditors' definition of 120 credit hours.)

¹ Chajewski, M., Mattern, K. D., & Shaw, E. J. (2011). Examining the role of Advanced Placement® exam participation in four-year college enrollment. *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice*, 30(4), 16–27.

² Paul Weinstein, "Which Colleges Offer Three-year Bachelor's Degrees, and Why Aren't They Working?" Progressive Policy Institute, May 2018: https://www.progressivepolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/PPI_ThreeYearDegrees2018.pdf.

Combined Bachelor's and Master's Programs

There has been significant growth in the number of combined bachelor's and master's degrees over the last decade, largely as a response to the Great Recession.³ Students who graduated at the height of the recession and in the years after were less willing or able to pay for traditional master's degrees; hence, the rise of compressed and combined bachelor's and master's degrees. It is unclear whether the current COVID-19 pandemic will have similar ramifications on the traditional undergraduate four-year experience, with students seeking more "just-in-time" and "just-enough" baccalaureate degrees. Finally, because accelerated pathways offer students the opportunity to move through their degrees and return to the workforce quickly, they appeal to working adult learners for whom traditional four-year degrees are too lengthy and expensive.⁴

STUDENT OUTCOMES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACCELERATION

The strategies outlined in this report would not only help some students graduate in less than four years, but also accelerate the path of students who typically take longer than four years to graduate, helping to narrow achievement gaps by race, gender, socioeconomic status, age, and/or geography. Reducing time to degree by one or two semesters could lead to substantial gains in the System's four-and five-year graduation rate and lower student debt. For instance, acceleration would enable some of the 71 percent of students who currently complete their degree within five years to finish in four, reducing their student debt, lowering the opportunity cost generated by additional years in college, and tempering enrollment growth Systemwide by moving students through more efficiently.

Table 1: UNC System Graduation Rates (2014 Cohort, Graduated from any University)

	Four-Year Graduation Rates	Five-Year Graduation Rates
UNC System	51.8%	71.1%
Race/Ethnicity		
American Indian	26.7%	46.9%
Asian	62.7%	82.8%
Black	35.0%	57.2%
Hispanic	49.4%	69.0%
Two or More Races	47.3%	64.0%
White	58.1%	76.8%
Gender		
Female	57.8%	75.0%
Male	44.0%	66.0%
Pell Eligibility		
Pell Eligible	40.2%	61.3%
Non-Pell Eligible	58.5%	76.7%

³ Education Advisory Board, "Designing Programs for the Millennial Workforce," 2015. Retrieved on January 30, 2021, from https://pages.eab.com/rs/732-GKV-655/images/30398_COE_Millennials.pdf.

⁴ Carnevale, A. P., Smith, N., Melton, M., & Price, E. W. (2015). Learning while earning: The new normal. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. Retrieved January 29, 2021 from <https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/Working-Learners-Report.pdf>.

These acceleration strategies would also assist students who needed to “catch up” after time lost due to various circumstances (COVID-19, childrearing, employment, etc.). Given the potential for COVID-19 to disrupt the pathways of many students, such strategies will likely be critical to our ability to make continued progress on our on-time graduation rates.

Some students do finish on an accelerated timeframe today, and that number has grown in recent years. For instance, among first-time, full-time students who started a degree in 2016, eight percent (2,300 students) finished in less than four years (three years plus one semester), an increase of more than four percentage points since the freshman class of 2009, when just 3.6 percent did so. A sizable number of first-time students—nearly 1,400 of those who started in 2017—finished in three years or less (just under five percent of the freshman class).

Table 2: Number and Percentage of Students Finishing a Bachelor’s Degree on an Accelerated Timeline

First Semester	Cohort Size	Number that Graduated in 3 Years	Percent Graduated in 3 Years	Number that Graduated in Less than 4 Years	Percent Graduated in Less than 4 Years
Fall 2009	27,461	326	1.2%	994	3.6%
Fall 2010	27,058	366	1.4%	1,050	3.9%
Fall 2011	26,899	405	1.5%	1,074	4.0%
Fall 2012	26,847	508	1.9%	1,182	4.4%
Fall 2013	26,586	637	2.4%	1,376	5.2%
Fall 2014	26,911	752	2.8%	1,606	6.0%
Fall 2015	27,910	930	3.3%	1,921	6.9%
Fall 2016	28,605	1,081	3.8%	2,299	8.0%
Fall 2017	29,749	1,388	4.7%		

These increases in accelerated completion could be due to numerous factors, including the state’s efforts to increase the number of early college high schools; the creation of the Career and College Promise program in 2011, which allowed for dual enrollment at the high school level; and the expansion of the AP program across the state. A concerted effort to expand accelerated degrees could aim to increase these baseline numbers by five to ten percentage points.

DEMAND FOR ACCELERATED DEGREES

There is not a lot of data on the level of student demand for accelerated degrees, but some evidence suggests that accelerated paths may be most popular among adult students. Given that early college high schools allow high school students to accumulate college credit prior to enrolling in college, graduates of these institutions are particularly well positioned to pursue their undergraduate degree on an accelerated timeline if they choose to. However, a recent study of the impact of early college high schools on the attainment of a postsecondary credential found that 7.0 percent of early college high school graduates attained a four-year degree three years after completing Grade 12 of high school.⁵ While this was a marked increase from the 1.4 percent of students who did not attend early college high schools (the

⁵ Edmunds, J. A., Unlu, F., Furey, J., Glennie, E., & Arshavsky, N. (2020, June). What Happens When You Combine High School and College? The Impact of the Early College Model on Postsecondary Performance and Completion. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Effectiveness*, 42(2), 257–258.

control group), it suggests that a fraction of traditional-age undergraduates are interested in accelerated paths.

Data suggests that adult learners—those over the age of 25—seek out universities that offer flexibility and acceleration. Because adult learners are often balancing work and childcare responsibilities, they are motivated to complete their degrees and return to the workforce as quickly as possible. Indeed, adults without degrees who are considering further education estimate that they would be able to complete a bachelor’s degree in 3.5 years, much faster than the average time to degree for four-year college graduates (5.1 years).⁶

In another recent survey of Americans aged 18-64, 55 percent saw time and logistical barriers to additional education and training, with around 40 percent citing “time away from work” and “balancing work and school” as being extremely or very travelling.⁷ In spring and summer of 2020, Strada Education’s Public Viewpoint survey found that 28 percent of respondents said the most important factor in choosing a degree or nondegree program was how streamlined the program is (i.e., programs that are faster, cheaper, and more convenient). That was second only to the relevance of the program and more important than the value of the program and whether it will lead to additional educational opportunities (“stackability”).⁸ In short, accelerated degree programs offer a valuable opportunity to attract, retain, and graduate adult learners.

UNC SYSTEM EFFORTS TO ACCELERATE DEGREE COMPLETION

In 2019, representatives of North Carolina’s public and private sectors, including the governor and General Assembly, adopted a shared postsecondary educational attainment goal: “Ensure that by 2030, 2 million North Carolinians (ages 25-44) have a high-quality postsecondary degree or credential.” To meet this goal, and with an increasing number of new jobs in North Carolina requiring education beyond high school, our continued improvement on measures of college completion is as critical as ever. A number of efforts to accelerate degree completion are already underway in various shapes and forms across the UNC System.

Summer Courses

Summer courses play an important role in the ability to accelerate students’ time to degree. Research indicates that students who complete courses in the summer are more likely to complete a degree and complete on-time. Data from the UNC System show a similar pattern: students who earned credit in the summer were much more likely to complete their degrees at four, five, and six years than those who did not earn credit in the summer. The gap ranges from 17 percentage points to 30 percentage points between those who earned summer credit and those who did not. Graduates who earn summer credit also finish more quickly and have less student debt.

⁶ Strada Public Viewpoint: COVID-19 Work and Education Survey Enrolling in Education: Motivations, Barriers, and Expectations for July 15, 2020. Retrieved on February 22, 2021 from <https://cci.stradaeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/11/pv-charts-071420.pdf>.

⁷ Strada Public Viewpoint: COVID-19 Work and Education Survey for May 6-June 25, 2020. Retrieved on February 22, 2021 from <https://cci.stradaeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/11/pv-topline-findings-071420.pdf>.

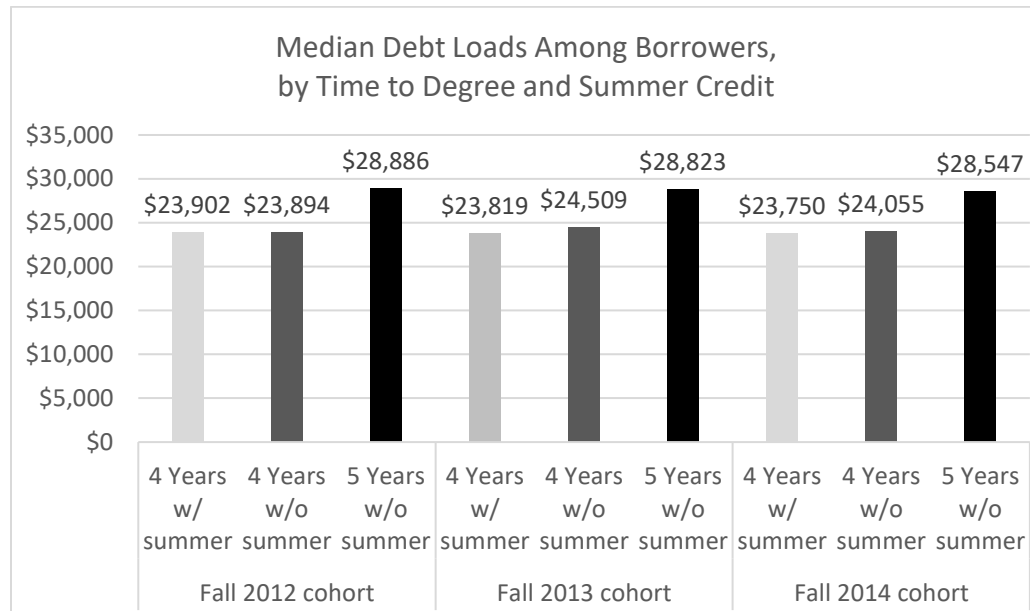
⁸ Strada Public Viewpoint: COVID-19 Work and Education Survey for August 26, 2020. Retrieved on February 22, 2021 from <https://cci.stradaeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/11/Report-August-26-2020.pdf>.

Table 3: Average Months to Degree Among Bachelor’s Degree Recipients, By Summer Credit

Academic Year Graduated	Earned Summer Credit	Number of Students	Average Months to Degree
2016-17	Yes	19,378	46.1
	No	4,872	51.4
2017-18	Yes	19,818	46.3
	No	4,981	50.8
2018-19	Yes	20,172	45.8
	No	5,097	50.9

Note: Only includes students who started as first-time full-time bachelors seeking.

Figure 1: Median Debt Load Among Graduates Who Borrowed, by Summer Credit



Note: Median debt numbers are based on cumulative federal loan balances (excluding Parent PLUS loans) reported in the Student DataMart.

UNC System Office research also shows that success rates in summer courses are comparable to or better than those offered in the fall and spring. That is, regardless of whether a course was of a five-week or ten-week duration, DWF rates (grades of D, F, or Withdrawal) in the summer were somewhat lower as compared to fall and spring. Utilization of summer sessions must be a key component of any accelerated degree program. Indeed, “Degree in 3” programs such as those at Ball State University, University of Iowa, Purdue University, and a new initiative at University of North Carolina at Asheville rely on students taking a full load of courses during two or even three summers to complete their degree early.⁹

⁹ <https://www.bsu.edu/academics/undergraduatestudy/majors>

One barrier is that in the UNC System, the state does not appropriate funding for courses offered on-campus during the summer (but does fund summer courses offered through distance education). As a result, the current business model for summer programs must be entirely receipt supported, which significantly limits course availability and leads to higher tuition in the summer than in the spring and fall on most campuses. In addition, students have only limited access to financial aid during the summer. This model creates little incentive for universities to offer summer sessions that resemble the fall and spring semesters, discourages the very students who would benefit most from summer enrollment, and limits more efficient use of physical plant.

On the student demand side, experience in other states and here in North Carolina suggests that summer aid can have a positive impact on summer enrollment. Indiana's Frank O'Bannon Scholarship requires students to complete 30 credits in an academic year to get the maximum grant and has created flexibility for students to use scholarship money in the summer to maximize their opportunity to do so. As a result, Indiana has seen increases in the number of grant recipients that attempt and earn 30 credits per academic year.

In recent years, the North Carolina State Education Assistance Authority has reserved a portion of the UNC System's need-based grant funding for universities to use as summer scholarships, with particular emphasis on students that are within a course or two of completing 30 credits in that academic year (or graduating). In 2019, institutions awarded \$2.85 million in summer aid to just over 3,000 students, and 81 percent of the grantees that had not met the 30-credit benchmark after spring semester had met it by the summer's end. About 6 percent (181 students) of the grantees completed their degree in summer 2019, thereby avoiding having to enroll for another fall semester. Offering student aid or even appropriating funding for summer courses has significant potential to increase the rates of summer course taking across the System, thereby encouraging on-time if not accelerated degree completion.

Online Courses

Many courses in undergraduate degree programs have prerequisites which are not always offered every semester, but the availability of multiple online courses across the UNC System make it easier for a student to find those courses needed to proceed down their degree path. UNC Online offers more than 400 fully online programs across the System. This service includes a cross-registration tool that allows students to register for classes at another constituent institution at no additional charge. Over 40,000 students participate in UNC Online courses each year.

The COVID-19 pandemic has driven our institutions to offer more courses online. To facilitate that expansion, in summer 2020 the UNC System Office established the Digital Enhancement Project to leverage disciplinary academic expertise and instructional design talent within the UNC System to rapidly develop high-quality online course materials to support faculty and students moving to online course delivery. The project created content for 13 lower-division, high-demand courses (see below) that are offered at most System institutions, typically fulfill general education requirements, are critical to student progress, traditionally enroll large numbers of students, and can be delivered online. The goals of the project were to reduce the faculty workload associated with the rapid transition to online teaching in summer and fall 2020 and to improve student learning, engagement, and retention during the COVID-19 disruption and beyond.

Table 4: Digital Enhancement Project Courses

General Biology	Introductory Statistics	Introductory Financial Accounting*
Anatomy and Physiology	Quantitative Reasoning	Microeconomics
Chemistry I	Pre-Calculus	Macroeconomics
Chemistry II	Calculus I	
Organic Chemistry	Calculus II	

*Does not fulfill General Education requirements.

Early results from this initiative show promise: 97 percent of faculty who used the resources agreed they were “worthwhile,” and 77 percent reported that the resources would improve their ability to deliver high-quality instruction on an ongoing basis. The System Office has received requests from faculty members to expand the initiative to subsequent courses and additional disciplines.

Credit for Prior Learning

A study by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning found that students who received credit for prior learning saved between two and ten months in time to degree.¹⁰ Since 2016, at least 19 states have developed policies that allow students to earn college credit for skills and knowledge gained outside the classroom. For example, the accelerated baccalaureate degree program at Southern Oregon University grants credit for learning completed in high school, which reduces the number of credits students are required to earn for graduation by between 29 and 45 general education and elective credits, depending on the high school GPA of the student. The program can save students up to a year’s worth of tuition, fees, and other expenses. Students must select a major when applying and sign a contract with the university to complete their course work in three years, and in return receive priority registration throughout their undergraduate program.

The UNC System has implemented several initiatives related to credit for prior learning that allow students to accelerate their time to bachelor’s degree completion even before they reach our campuses.

- **Advanced Placement Exams:** In 2018, the UNC System adopted a policy on awarding undergraduate credit based on AP course exam scores (Section 700.10.1 of the UNC Policy Manual). All UNC System institutions now accept AP scores of 3 or higher, International Baccalaureate Higher Level scores of 4 or higher, International Baccalaureate Standard Level scores of 5 or higher, or Cambridge Advanced International Certificate AS Level or A Level examination scores of C or higher for college credit. The policy enables students to complete their degrees in a timelier manner.
- **Credit for Military Training:** In collaboration with the North Carolina Community College System, the UNC System has developed a process to evaluate military training and education for academic credit. Representatives from both systems formed a Military Credit Advisory Council (MCAC) to ensure that faculty members from our own universities and community colleges evaluate military training courses and occupational experiences in an independent manner using standard levels of objectivity and rigor. To accomplish this, the MCAC has formed academic discipline-based evaluation panels comprised of faculty members from both systems that have convened to evaluate credit in a variety of disciplines, including nursing, allied health, business, English and communications, humanities and foreign language, and education.

¹⁰ National Council for State Legislatures, Credit for Prior Learning:
<https://www.ncsl.org/research/education/credit-for-prior-learning.aspx>

Flexible Scheduling

The traditional academic calendar, where students earn credits during 15-week semesters in the fall and the spring semester, limits the opportunities to move more quickly through required credits. Universities have therefore adopted more flexible, year-round schedules with multiple terms and start dates. Institutions across the country have implemented innovative approaches to assist these students:

- Bellevue University (NE) offers four-week courses on campus or online, and more than 60 percent of undergraduates participate in the accelerated courses. The graduation rate for students in the bachelor's in business compressed program is 70 percent, compared with 24 percent for students in the traditional business major.
- Amarillo College (TX) implemented eight-week courses and saw a 30-percentage point increase in course completion rates compared to the traditional 16-week term.¹¹

Flexible course scheduling is particularly important for adult learners, who may require more flexibility to complete their degree. Purdue University Global offers courses in six- and ten-week terms, with program start dates every four to six weeks. University of Maryland Global Campus offers three overlapping, seven-week sessions per semester for undergraduates learning online. This model enables students to start new courses six to eight times per year (including summer).

Several of our institutions use flexible scheduling to offer seven- or eight-week courses during the semester and outside of the traditional semester, during winter break. Condensed courses could help students who are only one or two courses from graduation complete their courses in the first half of the semester or over winter break and graduate earlier than if they had to complete traditional semester-long courses. Additionally, flexible course scheduling may allow students to spend more dedicated time participating in internships and other experiential learning opportunities.

To implement flexible scheduling, institutions must redesign courses and implement curricular design changes. One recent System Office initiative sought to do just that. Through the Part-Way Home Initiative, the UNC System Office awarded grants to support the design of seven- and eight-week course formats for 31 three credit-hour, online courses at seven UNC System institutions: East Carolina University, Elizabeth City State University, Fayetteville State University, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, North Carolina Central University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Projects selected focused on high-demand or over-subscribed courses.

Moving to more flexible scheduling also requires adequate preparation of and support for students, faculty, and campus registration and reporting systems, along with requisite changes to the way financial aid is administered. UNC Online is one tool that could be leveraged to create multiple start dates throughout the academic year.

Common Course Numbering

Many accelerated degree programs rely on or benefit from the transfer of credit from college-level high school courses, community college courses, or courses from other institutions to shorten the path to graduation. The UNC System has overseen several efforts to ease credit transfer from community colleges

¹¹ Education Advisory Board, Daily Briefing: How 3 colleges keep adult learners on track to graduate. <https://eab.com/insights/daily-briefing/adult-learner/how-3-colleges-keep-adult-learners-on-track-to-graduate/>.

and other institutions to the UNC System, most recently with the enactment of a policy on common course numbering that will help reduce credit loss or excess credit accumulation in transferring students.¹² In response, System Office staff are now working to develop regulations and a process for implementation of the UNC Common Numbering System (UNC-CNS), beginning with developing a set of course equivalencies for commonly taught, lower-division courses. The project will culminate in several tools and services made available to students, advisors, registrars, and other groups that clearly indicate accepted transfer courses.

SELECTED INSTITUTIONAL EFFORTS IN CRITICAL WORKFORCE AREAS

The Strategic Plan calls for our institutions to increase degree completion in several key critical workforce areas, including educator preparation, STEM fields, and healthcare careers. The following programs highlight some of these efforts that include degree acceleration as a key component.

BWF Fast Track Scholars: The Burroughs Wellcome Fast Track Scholars Program began in 2006 as a partnership between the Burroughs Wellcome Fund and four UNC System campuses: NC Central University, NC State University, UNC Asheville, and UNC-Chapel Hill. The BWF Fast Track program was designed to create a “fast track” pathway to teacher certification for science and math majors. At each of the four participating campuses, the provost, dean of Education, and dean(s) of Arts & Sciences collaborated to develop the “fast track” pathway offered to junior and senior science or math majors to obtain teacher certification in a science/math licensure area, along with a science or math baccalaureate degree. The BWF Fast Track program also provided scholars with financial support and the opportunity to participate in a STEM-focused international trip as a professional development opportunity after teaching in the classroom for two years. The BWF Fast Track partnership was designed to support approximately 30 slots at each participating campus. This program is an important example of an innovative partnership that created specific pathways to foster recruitment and preparation of high-quality STEM teacher candidates.

NC A&Teach, UNC-BEST, and UNC Asheville’s Teaching Certification Programs: The UNC-BEST and NC A&Teach programs recruit STEM majors in either their junior or senior year and provide an accelerated pathway to teacher licensure that includes careful instruction in pedagogy and time dedicated for students to be in a classroom environment. These abridged pathways provide students with the benefit and added marketability of teacher licensure without additional time, coursework, or expense. Both serve as examples of how campuses can take the initiative to tailor pathways in a way that is organically supported by the campus leadership and faculty—particularly by independently securing grant funding for their respective efforts that allows for financial assistance to be offered to participating students. UNC Asheville’s innovative approach to educator preparation provides an example of another alternative model. Students at UNC Asheville have the opportunity to pursue a major of their choosing while attaining

¹² At its December 17, 2020 meeting, the UNC Board of Governors approved the following amendment to Section 400.1.5 of the UNC Policy Manual, *Policy on Fostering Undergraduate Student Success*:

The UNC System Office shall, in consultation with faculty and staff from the constituent institutions, establish and maintain a common course numbering system for undergraduate lower division courses, which shall be mapped to the unique course numbers used at each respective institution of higher education. The president shall approve regulations to describe and implement this common undergraduate course numbering system, which shall be established and operational by the 2022-23 academic year.

teaching certification in four years, and the program currently offers teacher licensure in twelve areas of concentration, including middle and high school math and science.

Pathway to Practice: The Pathway to Practice program helps North Carolina address its growing teacher shortage by providing a new avenue for residency-licensed or lateral entry teachers to gain licensure. To provide more effective teacher preparation for residency-licensed teachers, UNC-Chapel Hill's School of Education and NC State's College of Education established Pathway to Practice to provide residency-licensed teachers with the teaching skills and knowledge they need to be effective in the classroom. Pathway to Practice is affordable, self-paced, competency-based, and offered 100 percent online. Since 2016, the program has supported almost 300 active, in-service teachers, at an average cost of \$5,000 per student. Tuition for the program is charged on an "all-you-can-learn" model, at \$1,250 per quarter, and runs outside of the regular tuition schedule at either university. The self-paced nature of the program allows for students to complete the program in as little as three months or space out their learning into a 12- to 15-month cycle. Students can save one to two years by not participating in a more traditional semester credit-hour based program. The program currently serves lateral entry teachers in 67 different North Carolina school districts, 70 percent of which are Tier I and Tier 2 counties.

Winston-Salem State University's RN to BSN Program: As the largest producer of African American Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSNs) in North Carolina, Winston-Salem State University strives to continue to integrate new pathways for those pursuing higher education. In 2018, a new pathway for practicing registered nurses to earn a bachelor's degree was launched as a pilot. The nine-month, self-paced program was delivered fully online and used achievement of competencies to evaluate student learning (i.e., competency-based education). The program enrolled two cohorts (seven students in 2018 and eight students in 2019) and graduated 14 students. The faculty shared enthusiasm for the program, indicating it allowed them to become more intimately involved in student learning and evaluating achievement of program outcomes.

Accelerated Bachelor's to Master's Degrees

Many institutions across the UNC System offer accelerated bachelor's to master's degrees (commonly referred to as "four plus one" programs) for current undergraduate students who enroll in master's programs at the same institution. East Carolina University, North Carolina Central University, N.C. A&T State University, UNC-Chapel Hill, Western Carolina University, and Winston-Salem State University offer accelerated four-semester Bachelor's of Science in Nursing for students who already hold a bachelor's degree. UNC Wilmington also offers three Online Accelerated Programs (OAP) at the undergraduate level, and eight at the graduate level. The OAP schedule includes two seven-week equivalency mini-sessions in each semester totaling six sessions each academic year (including summer).

Appalachian State University, NC State University, UNC Charlotte, UNC Greensboro, and Western Carolina University offer several accelerated admissions (or "early entry") programs, which allow current undergraduate students in their senior year to take graduate-level coursework to both forward count toward their master's and their undergraduate program. Some participating programs allow students to "double count" up to 12 hours of graduate coursework to fulfill program of study requirements for both the undergraduate and graduate degree programs, while other programs will guarantee admission to the program assuming all admission criteria are met.

UNC Asheville has long been committed to facilitating a three-year degree, but is making the possibility more explicit with a new website that shares specific plans for three-year degrees in English, Health and

Wellness, History, Management, and Psychology.¹³ These plans assume students arrive with no credits from AP, IB, early college high schools or other means; should a student with such credits enroll in one of UNC Asheville’s proposed three-year programs, they could complete their degree even faster.

STATEWIDE EFFORTS TO ACCELERATE DEGREE COMPLETION

Three collaborative efforts among the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, the North Carolina Community College System, and the UNC System can also be leveraged to increase the number of students who complete bachelor’s degrees in less time.

Career and College Promise

Career & College Promise (H.B. 200) is North Carolina’s dual enrollment program for high school students. This program allows eligible high school students to enroll in career and technical education and college transfer courses at North Carolina community colleges and universities through their high school. Students who successfully complete college courses earn college credit. In many cases, students can also earn dual credit — meeting high school graduation requirements with college courses. Over 59,000 students participated in Career and College Promise courses last year.¹⁴

Early College High Schools

North Carolina was an early adopter of the early college high school model. These programs allow students to take college-level courses—and potentially earn an associate’s degree—while in high school. North Carolina has 132 early college high schools (or Cooperative Innovative High Schools): 116 in partnership with North Carolina community colleges, 11 in partnership with UNC System institutions, and five in partnership with independent colleges.

A recent study of these programs found students attending a North Carolina early college high school were more likely to enroll in postsecondary education after high school graduation, attain their associate’s degree, and earn their bachelor’s degree more rapidly than the control group. Importantly, the study results show a statistically significant positive impact on four-year degree attainment for economically disadvantaged students.¹⁵

Dual and Co-Admission Programs

Over 17,000 students transferred into the UNC System in the fall 2019 semester—11,000 from the North Carolina Community College System. Both national research and UNC System data show that students who graduate with an associate’s degree before transferring have higher persistence and completion rates than those who transfer before completing their degrees. Working with our two-year college partners, the UNC System is developing strategies to help students understand the importance of finishing what they start.

One of these strategies is dual admission or co-admission programs that allow students to be dually admitted to a community college and a partner four-year institution. After completing program requirements at the community college, students are automatically admitted to the university. Students

¹³ See <https://advising.unca.edu/degree-plans/3-year-plans/>.

¹⁴ Grandos, A. (2020). Community colleges offering free courses to high school students. EdNC.

¹⁵ Edmunds, J. A., Unlu, F., Furey, J., Glennie, E., & Arshavsky, N. (2020). “What Happens When You Combine High School and College? The Impact of the Early College Model on Postsecondary Performance and Completion,” *Educational Evaluation & Policy Analysis*, 42(2), 257.

benefit from simultaneous intensive supports, programming, and advising from the community college and the partnering UNC System institution. This helps students grasp the academic rigor required once they matriculate at our institutions. Fifteen of the 16 UNC System four-year universities have dual admission programs with neighboring community colleges.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF ACCELERATED DEGREE PROGRAMS

The current UNC System funding model is based on enrollment and does not include any explicit incentives for institutions to accelerate degree completion. Potential strategies to incentivize accelerated pathways through the enrollment formula include treating all credit hours the same regardless of when courses are offered (including summer in-person courses and courses offered outside of the traditional semester model). Given that the funding model is an incremental model, this could be done by providing summer seed funding and adding more flexibility in course start and stop times to the funding model. In addition, some states have added performance-based bonuses to their funding models, where universities earn additional funding based on degree completions, graduation rates, and other metrics. A performance-based bonus could reward institutions based on the number of students that finish a degree on an accelerated timeline.

There are some financial aid implications for flexible scheduling since institutions calculate and disburse financial aid once per term. Some institutions require students to register for all of the courses a student will take at the beginning of the semester, including courses that start later in the semester. This impedes the flexibility that this model intends to offer students. Additionally, if an institution requires a student to register at the beginning of the term but does not disburse aid until the student attends class, the student may have an unmet payment obligation that may lead to canceled registration.

Additionally, competency-based education (CBE) requires significant modifications to the financial-aid model because of the reliance of Satisfactory Academic Progress tied to completion of the standard semester credit hour. On the institutional funding side for CBE, students start at different times in a competency-based program, and move at their own pace, so “census dates” are hard to pin down to count enrollment. The System’s funding model would need to count CBE students by “cross-walking” their competencies to semester-based courses and semester credit hours. Due to the flexibility afforded by CBE, students are able to start at different times and move at their own pace, so “census dates” are hard to pin down to count enrollment.

Students stand to benefit financially in several ways from accelerated degrees:

- Tuition savings: The UNC System’s current tuition policies cap undergraduate tuition at 12 credits per semester (24 per year), and cap graduate tuition at nine credits per semester (18 per year). Programs that encourage students to take additional credits beyond the cap generate savings for the student, as all courses beyond the first 24 credits are essentially “free” to undergraduates.
- Room and board savings: Students who complete their studies in three years instead of four, or even a semester early, also save on room and board. Non-tuition costs make up about two-thirds of the total cost of attendance in the UNC System, and as such are a primary driver of student costs and debt-loads. Students who can finish in fewer semesters will save, on average, \$7,031 per spring or fall term and \$4,640 per summer term in room and board.

- Student debt: In an earlier study of the benefits of summer school enrollment, the System Office found that students who can graduate in four years using summer school save approximately \$5,000 in student loan debt when compared to those that graduate in five years.
- Earlier entry into the workforce: For students who intend to enter the workforce upon graduation, earlier graduation would mean additional salary or wages. Graduating a semester early could allow a student to earn as much as seven months additional salary as compared to delaying one semester. According to the latest NC Tower data, the mean annual wages for a bachelor's recipient one-year post-graduation are \$26,450; students who finish a semester early could earn up to \$15,250 more than they would have otherwise. For graduates that work in North Carolina, increases in accelerated completion would benefit the state tax base.
- Earlier graduate enrollment: For students who intend to directly enter graduate school, timing their graduation could mean the difference between having to delay their next program by an additional year, which could have a very large financial impact upon completion of their next program.

Our current state aid programs do not incentivize students to take advantage of these savings. North Carolina's need-based aid programs do not offer any bonus or reward for students to take 15 or more credits per semester because 12 credit hours is considered full time and there is limited aid available in the summer.

STUDENT SUPPORT IMPLICATIONS FOR ACCELERATED DEGREE PROGRAMS

Intensive advising and coaching support are critical to the success of students in accelerated degree programs. Instead of just focusing on course registration, advisors who take a strategic or success coaching approach address all aspects of student development, helping students develop and apply critical thinking skills. In a study on the effectiveness of academic success coaching, students who were randomly assigned a coach were more likely to persist than students who did not receive coaching. The UNC System Office, through its Student Success Innovation Lab, is funding a success coaching/case management pilot at UNC Asheville to explore this in more depth. Early results show students who received case management support earned higher grades, completed more credits, and were more likely to return for the next semester.¹⁶

Academic success coaching is often used collaboratively with degree/course planning tools. As institutions move away from course catalogs for students' course selections, universities are implementing software that helps students create individualized education plans and track their progress toward degree completion. The plan recommends future courses based on a student's previous grades and the most efficient path to graduation. Many of the tools also offer a "What If" feature that helps students understand the implications of changing majors. These tools provide institutions with real-time registration data so administrators can adjust course scheduling to meet students' needs. Four UNC System institutions use one such tool, College Scheduler. A study on the effectiveness of College Scheduler at these institutions is currently underway.

Traditionally, students register for the fall and spring terms separately, but now, some institutions are encouraging students to register for several semesters in advance. This helps students plan ahead and see

¹⁶ Dills, A., Horgan, L., & Petitfils, B. (2020). "Working Smarter and Harder: Advising for Timely Graduation." Working Paper.

college as more than a semester-by-semester commitment. It also helps institutions understand course demand. Since Cleveland State University implemented multi-term registration, close to 90 percent of students opted into the program and retention rates increased by three percentage points.¹⁷

Georgia State University invested heavily in student retention and graduation in recent years by developing new programming focused on getting students to and through the institution, including implementing “meta majors.” With meta majors, incoming students choose from seven broad umbrella majors (STEM, business, arts and humanities, health, education, policy and social science, and exploratory) and as they progress in their coursework and determine career goals, they take courses that narrow into their field of choice. This model reduces the risk of students taking courses that do not count towards a degree, and students can switch majors with limited consequences. Since the change to meta majors, Georgia State has experienced a 30 percent drop in the number of students changing their majors and a reduction in lost credits and time to degree.¹⁸

ACCELERATED DEGREE PILOT

While many of the strategies to accelerate degree completion are present across the System, there is room for a concerted effort to integrate those strategies into complete accelerated degree programs that can be implemented and evaluated. And, as discussed earlier, students may not have incentive to chart their own path that leads to completion on an accelerated time frame, but degree programs that are consciously designed to attract students who wish to do so (and provide necessary supports) could create such an incentive.

To address these concerns, an accelerated degree pilot could offer the opportunity for institutions to develop accelerated bachelor’s and combined bachelor’s and master’s degree programs. Such a pilot is not on the UNC System’s list of budget priorities for 2021-22. However, in a future legislative session the General Assembly could consider funding a competitive process whereby universities in the System develop and propose an accelerated pathway (or pathways) that fit with their mission, focus, and student body. The competitive grant program could provide non-recurring funds that would cover the cost of faculty and staff time needed to develop the program and make requisite changes to the academic calendar, course offerings, and recruitment and marketing efforts. If funding were available, the grants could also include a smaller portion of recurring dollars to cover the ongoing costs of providing student support, including scholarships for summer and intersession enrollment—periods when state and federal grants may not be available to students.

The System Office would articulate a set of goals for the competitive program, a clear rubric for scoring proposals, and an evaluation plan for the program. To be eligible, accelerated programs would need to be offered at a UNC System institution or in partnership with neighboring community colleges, early college high schools and/or participating employers, and be eligible for federal and state financial aid. To ensure maximum impact on student success, the competitive process could prioritize universities that have the most room for improvement in on-time graduation rates and limited resources.

¹⁷ Education Advisory Board. “How can Multi-Term Registration Fix Course Bottlenecks?” April 14, 2016.

¹⁸ Georgia State University, “Meta Majors,” <https://success.gsu.edu/initiatives/meta-majors/>

Successful proposals would be expected to include, at a minimum:

- Concrete degree plans that provide students with a structured path from matriculation to graduation in less than four years;
- A plan to develop year-round course schedules for the proposed programs that include robust summer course availability, allow for flexible course formats (e.g., seven- to eight-week terms during the traditional semester, winter break courses), and make strategic use of online courses to maximize students' opportunities to learn from wherever they are;
- A commitment to award substantial credit for prior learning (e.g., military, College-Level Examination Program (CLEP), prior learning assessments);
- A description of the student support services (e.g., advising, success coaching, degree planning tools) available to accelerated students;
- Adequate time and resources to prepare faculty, campus registration, reporting, and financial aid systems for implementation;
- Research to determine the population of students (high school students, adult learners, Honors/AP/IB students) that the program would appeal to and structure accordingly; and
- Rigorous tracking systems to provide data on progress and completion for students graduating in less than four years.

The competitive grant program could encourage universities to develop accelerated programs in critical workforce areas, such as teaching, allied health, and information technology. As such, in addition to these minimum criteria, priority consideration could be given to proposals that include the following innovations:

- Stackable credentials that students can earn on their way to the bachelor's degree that include industry-recognized certifications and clear signals of student competencies;
- A clearly defined on-ramp to the workforce that is integrated into the program, including co-op or apprenticeship models where students spend their fourth year on the job; and/or,
- A formal partnership with local and regional employers to upskill employees with less than a bachelor's degree, preferably with employers helping to underwrite the cost through tuition benefits or other funding streams.

To address the financial incentives described above, the competitive grant program could include funding for:

- Flexible scholarship dollars that can help accelerated students afford the cost of additional credit hours during the academic year (and the opportunity cost of reducing work hours to keep up with academic demands); and,
- Funding for summer courses and courses offered outside of the traditional semester that are delivered in-person.

Over the long-term, the General Assembly could create a sustainable funding stream for accelerated pathways by committing to provide a share of the benefits of accelerating degree completion (more graduates entering the labor market in less time increases tax revenues) with the universities that are producing those graduates. For example, the Texas State Technical College System is funded in part on

the basis of how much graduates earn after graduation from one of their institutions.¹⁹ Such a formula could reward universities with accelerated degree programs and underwrite the cost of continued operation and expansion.

CONCLUSION

The UNC System is committed to increasing the number of students who graduate from constituent institutions in less time, and the strategies highlighted in this report provide a snapshot of existing efforts on which to build and promising ideas to implement. A targeted accelerated degree pilot would advance the UNC System and state’s student success goals. In the interim, the System Office staff will continue to examine innovative accelerated degree opportunities, offer peer-learning opportunities so that institutions can share best practices, and examine evidence-based research to improve current policies and incentives that may stand in the way of acceleration.

¹⁹ “With the passage of Senate Bill 1 in 2013 from the 83rd Legislature and the implementation of the new funding model, TSTC became the first college system in the nation funded substantially upon student employment outcomes and not educational activities. The returned-value funding model assesses and rewards TSTC for student job placement and earnings (outcomes) rather than contact hours (time in training). While TSTC’s returned-value funding model is not expected to fully shelter TSTC from the pressure on state appropriations, it allows flexibility to innovate its product and expand its mix of revenue streams.” TSTY FY2021 Budget Presentation retrieved from <https://www.tstc.edu/budgets/budget> on February 8, 2021.