

Policies, Practices and Perspectives: Deans of Graduate Studies' Observations on Acceptance of 3-Year Degrees.

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Abstract

As members of the College-in 3 (Cin3) Exchange continue to develop, launch and assess their 3-year degree programs, the question of how leaders of U.S. graduate and professional programs will view these degrees has become prominent. This issue prompted the Cin3 team to initiate a small study that involved interviews of ten leaders of graduate programs at nine institutions across the U.S. The purpose of this study was to understand the graduate studies admissions policies of a sample of institutions, how their admissions teams would evaluate the candidacy of a student with a bachelor's degree of less than 120 credits (commonly called "reduced-credit degrees"), and the likelihood that their institutions would accept these applicants. In addition, this study sought to glean information on how graduate department program directors and/or program committees would approach the evaluation of candidates with 3-year degrees.

Through these structured interviews, we learned that although graduate admissions policies tend to preclude 3-year degrees, there are mechanisms in place at many institutions for exceptions. Accreditors continued review of 3-year degrees and evolving guidelines may tip the balance for many institutions towards considering 3-year degrees. Furthermore, graduate admissions policies and reviewers' perceptions of 3-year degrees can change with appropriate evidence that graduates of these programs have acquired the learning to be successful with their graduate studies.

Respondents offered recommendations on how Cin3 Exchange members can effectively present 3-year degrees. First and foremost, this is a change that needs to be more widely discussed within institutions and among higher education stakeholders. At the same time, graduates with 3-year degrees of less than 120 credits need to be proactive in presenting their graduate school applications and institutions granting their 3-year degrees should support their efforts. As institutions design their 3-year degree programs, they can intentionally develop pipelines through agreements with graduate schools. Finally, the Cin3 Exchange should work along with member institutions to regularly update graduate admissions and policy officers on the design features of 3-year programs that ensure graduates are prepared to succeed in graduate studies.

Introduction

As members of the Cin3 Exchange continue to develop, seek approval for, launch and assess their 3-year degree programs, the question of how leaders of graduate and professional programs across the U.S. view these degrees has become prominent. As part of their development process for their pilot 3-year degree programs, many Cin3 Exchange institutions have explored how these degrees might be perceived by specific employers and graduate programs. Because there are so few graduates of 3-year programs to date, these

institutions have limited experience with how graduates of their 3-year degrees actually fare when applying to graduate school. This question prompted the Cin3 team to initiate a study that involved interviewing ten leaders of graduate schools or programs at nine institutions across the U.S.

The purpose of this study was to understand current graduate studies admissions policies at these institutions, how their admissions team evaluates the candidacy of a student with a bachelor's degree of less than 120 credits, and the likelihood that their institutions would accept these applicants. In addition, the study sought to learn from central administrative leaders how department program directors and/or program committees would likely evaluate candidates with these degrees. We also sought referrals for a potential follow-up study in select fields where Cin3 institutions are actively building 3-year programs.

Methodology

An invitation to participate in a 30-45 minute structured interview was extended to more than 40 Deans of Graduate Studies (or their designees) at 35 institutions. This invitation included an introduction to the College-in-3 Exchange, the goals for the study and an interview protocol. The intention was to sample the admission policies and practices as well as the perspectives of 8-10 Deans of Graduate studies or Professional schools.

Ten leaders were interviewed at nine institutions: five Deans of Graduate Studies, two Directors of Graduate School Policy, one Vice Provost of Academic Affairs, one Provost & Vice President for Academic Affairs, and one former President/Dean. Using the [2025 Carnegie institutional classification system](#), we categorized the nine institutions as follows: two public regional profession-focused Master's institutions, one public regional profession-focused Doctoral institution, one private Special Focus institution, and five public mixed Doctoral institutions. (See Appendix A). After an introduction and confirmation that it would be acceptable to record the interviews and include the names of the individuals in the report, the interview proceeded following the predistributed structured interview protocol. (See Appendix B).

Interviewees were asked to describe their graduate admissions requirements and their multi-stage candidate review process. Then they were asked to comment on whether the name and the number of credits of an applicant's degree would impact the initial screening of the applicants. After sharing a sample of the high demand fields (e.g., business, criminal justice, cybersecurity, health sciences) for which several Cin3 exchange members have designed and launched programs, the interviewees were asked to comment on whether there would be variations on how the initial screening for these fields would be conducted.

The interview then turned to discuss how the review of applicants is conducted at the departmental level and the key factors/criteria used by the program directors and/or faculty committees to review the application materials. Interviewees were asked whether it would matter during this stage of the process: 1) what the degrees were called, 2) how many credit hours were completed, 3) what the breadth and depth of courses taken were, 4) how

student learning outcomes were demonstrated, and 5) what experiential learning had been built into the program.

Finally, the interviewees were asked to comment on whether reviewers' perceptions of an institution or program might be an issue for applicants with reduced credit bachelor degrees. If yes, they were asked to comment on how reviewer bias might be addressed by the applicant and/or the institution offering 3-year degrees. Interviewees were also asked whether there might be a parallel with how faculty committees consider 3-year degrees from international students. In closing, the interviewees were asked if they might suggest a few people with whom we might follow up from select fields and/or departments at a later time.

As the interviews were completed, notes were compiled by interview question. Analysis was conducted across each case, by institutional types and by question. Themes were identified to inform the following findings.

Findings

Current policies at seven of the nine institutions preclude accepting candidates with 3-year domestic degrees but the interviews revealed that these policies can and do evolve. Indeed, two of the Doctoral institutions explained how they created policies to accept international candidates with 3-year degrees. Several respondents spoke about practices that enable exceptions to their 4-year degree policy when faculty advocate for candidates who can demonstrate their capacity for success. Furthermore, planning was underway at several institutions for what one respondent noted as the "inevitable creation of 3-year degrees." Three respondents, two at Doctoral institutions and a third at a Master's Institution, spoke about their institution's interest and efforts to date in initiating their own 3-year degrees.

Graduate Studies Process and Admission Requirements. There are multiple players in the development and implementation of graduate studies policies and admissions procedures at the institutions consulted in this study. The depth and breadth of the infrastructure in place align with the institutions' size and can include graduate admissions staff, graduate school deans and associate deans, graduate councils, and graduate academic committees. One of the respondents was part of a graduate school leadership team (which oversees policies), served on the graduate council (which approves programs and creates policies), convened the graduate academic committee (which considers exceptions to their graduate admission requirements) and played a significant role in building the policy to accept 3-year international degrees. Those working on graduate admissions at the department level might include a faculty graduate director for a small program or a faculty committee and subcommittee structure for a large department with multiple academic programs and laboratories.

Most of the institutions have a multi-stage three- to five-step review process with the most elaborate process including an interview. Central administrators manage the internal application system for most of the academic programs. But two respondents highlighted the independent review and application system of their pharmacy and health sciences and/or medicine programs. Central admissions officers conduct a preliminary screening of

materials submitted through the application system. In addition to confirming that basic requirements are met, some look more deeply into academic program requirements and prerequisites. One respondent noted efforts to promote holistic reviews by training faculty coordinators and review committees. Others noted how they respond to department queries about anything out of the norm.

Graduate Admissions Policies currently preclude accepting 3-year degrees but can evolve. At a time when many public Master's institutions are seeking to increase their enrollments, one might expect these institutions to have admission requirements that are more flexible and open to accepting candidates with 3-year degrees. However, the respondents at the Master's institutions indicated that their current policies require a degree of 120 semester credits or 180 quarter credits. One of the respondents expressed caution about 3-year degrees and was monitoring closely how their accrediting bodies are looking at 3-year degrees. Another respondent from a Master's institution was excited about 3-year degrees, noting that their institution is actively developing such degrees and explained how they had practices in place for making exceptions to their policies.

The respondents from the Doctoral institutions offered additional nuances. Three of them noted that their policies preclude accepting 3-year degrees, except for select international 3-year degrees. However, one of the three noted that while their policy states they will not accept degrees of less than 120 credits, they are actively looking at creating their own 3-year degrees in response to a state mandate to do so. This respondent also noted the value of engaging high-profile institutions in this conversation to elevate the status of these degrees.

Respondents at two of the Doctoral institutions made a point of sharing how their institutional policies evolved to accept 3-year international degrees. One spoke about how AAU institutions worked through a process and agreed to accept 3-year degrees from Europe, the UK and India. Another respondent spoke about recently putting in place a new policy for accepting international 3-year degrees. Historically, they only accepted candidates with 4-year degrees. The respondent at this second doctoral institution, who is of international origin and has first-hand knowledge of the substance of European 3-year degrees, was instrumental in developing a rationale and engaging stakeholders in accepting this policy change. At that time, it was determined that the institution was not prepared to include 3-year domestic degrees in this policy. Their institution would more likely accept accelerated programs of 120 credits. This respondent emphasized that for domestic degrees of 90-120 credits to be accepted, there will have to be additional assurances that the students are well prepared for graduate studies. Yet, this same respondent noted the inevitability of 3-year domestic degrees.

When responding to the question of whether the nomenclature of the degree matters, the respondents offered mixed responses. Two of the respondents stated that the nomenclature does not matter. However, others thought it might and a few reacted to the qualifying language (i.e., "reduced credit," "optimized") that institutions were using for their 3-year degrees. One noted that "reduced credit" suggests that the degree is less valuable and begs the question of what has been cut. Another noted that adding the term

"optimized" diminishes the value of the 4-year degree. What mattered to all respondents is that the degree is from an accredited institution.

Enabling exceptions through consideration of evidence of the applicant's capacity to succeed in graduate studies. A respondent from a Master's institution explained how their graduate admissions policy concerning 3-year degrees works in practice. At the moment a bachelor's degree of 180 quarter credits is required. If an applicant submits a transcript showing less than the required number of credits, their admissions team would reject the applicant. However, the respondent is also working with staff to make exceptions for quality applicants. For example, they had a student applicant from Nigeria who had a 3-year degree and was interested in applying to the Primatology program. In addition to the 3-year international degree, this applicant had considerable practical experience with gorillas. So the respondent worked with the faculty who wanted to accept this student into their graduate program to enable an exception to policy. It was noted that other institutions in the region are creating 3-year degrees. When asked if their institution will consider accepting these 3-year degrees, the respondent replied that the value of the bachelor's degree is not based on the arbitrary length of the degree but rather on how the program enables a student's learning and development.

A respondent at one of the Doctoral institutions described the mechanism in place for consideration of applicants who do not meet the graduate admission criteria. All of the completed applications in their system can be viewed by the department faculty reviewers, even those that were not recommended by the graduate admissions officer. Should a department wish to advocate for a candidate that may not meet all standards, it can forward a letter of support recommending this candidate to the Graduate Academic Council (GAC). In a given academic year, the GAC will receive between 80-120 applications for review as exceptions. Until a protocol is developed and reviewed by the Graduate Council for 3-year degrees, the GAC would look favorably upon a candidate who completed a certain number of graduate courses, or obtained a graduate certificate and/or professional experience as evidence of the student's capacity to work at an advanced level. The respondent shared an example of an MFA applicant who had considerable experience as a photographer.

Critical Factors for Department Reviews. When asked to comment on key factors used by reviewers at the department level, interviewees noted that given the decentralized nature of graduate admissions reviews, it was difficult to respond. One respondent stated that the institution offers 200 Master's programs and it was not possible to generalize across these programs. Nonetheless, they offered the following observations.

Consider the distinction between how applicants for Master's programs and those for Ph.D programs are reviewed. Respondents at the Doctoral universities noted the emphasis placed upon evidence of research experience in applications for the Ph.D programs - especially in the sciences. One Doctoral university respondent indicated that the number of credits in the undergraduate degree is not a significant factor for departments reviewing applicants for their Ph.D programs. What they are most concerned about is whether the applicant has conducted research and whether they have co-curricular experiences along with strong grades. Applicants of "truncated programs" (as the

respondent put it) would need to convince the reviewers that they have ample research experience. Reviewers will likely look at whether applicants had summer research experiences, for example, as they would have likely been taking summer classes to move through their programs.

Another respondent at a Doctoral institution observed that the Cin3 programs in the sample seem to be offering mostly programs that prepare graduates for Master's and professional degrees. They noted that while high demand Master's degree programs at this particular institution may select only 15% of the applicants, every institution has undersubscribed programs. This institution has Master's programs with 4000 enrolled students and others with 20. How the admissions review process plays out at this institution will be related to the capacity of a given program. Their College of Business, for example, has an online program with 4000 students; that program is likely to accept students up to the program's full capacity. Their health programs are still in a growth mode and would be accepting large numbers at a Master's level. In both cases, it would strengthen their candidacy if applicants had internships as part of their undergraduate degree.

Breadth and depth of prerequisite coursework matters. One respondent noted that the overall number of credits does not matter but there may be questions about how the reduction of credits was achieved in the candidate's 3-year degree. Reviewers may drill down to look at the learning outcomes within particular prerequisite courses. This respondent explained how they use data from their annual assessment process to identify students struggling academically. This assessment informs how reviewers look at prerequisite work going forward. For example, during COVID most students had to take an online anatomy class as undergraduates; this modality for prerequisite coursework proved to be less effective in preparing students for graduate-level coursework than in-person anatomy courses. So they had to address this issue with current and future students. In sum, respondents reported that the breadth and depth of prerequisite coursework matters for students' success in graduate studies.

When addressing reviewers' perceptions of 3-year degrees there are helpful parallels with other innovations in learning. One respondent explained that when on-line programs were first introduced, they had to address reviewers' perceptions that these programs were of lesser quality than in-person programs. With time, reviewers came to appreciate the innovative ways that online tools can create rich learning environments. This same respondent noted that initially, 3-year degree programs will very likely be perceived as being of lesser quality. The respondent explained that it will be important to communicate that a review should focus not on what is being taken away from a given 3-year program but rather about how these programs have been redesigned. Another strategy is to account for the hidden contact hours that students acquire through experiential learning - such as clinical rotations - that are built into the program design.

Three-year domestic degrees are seen by some as inevitable, but evidence of student learning and preparation for graduate school is critical at this juncture. One respondent at a Doctoral institution noted that 3-year degrees should not, in theory, be an obstacle for students applying to graduate school. The primary concern is that graduates

from 3-year degrees be adequately prepared for graduate studies. This individual offered the example of a 3-year engineering degree that is intense, technical, and rigorously attentive to the field of study as an illustration of appropriate preparation. Institutions offering 3-year programs need to offer evidence to graduate program reviewers that applicants have acquired the learning needed to be successful in their graduate studies.

Recommendations

The respondents were receptive to sharing their perspectives and recommendations on how Cin3 Exchange members can effectively present 3-year degrees. First, this is a change that needs to be advanced both within their institutions and among higher education stakeholders. At the same time, graduates holding 3-year degrees with less than the standard 120 semester credits need to proactively present their 3-year degrees in their graduate school applications and institutions sponsoring their degree should support them. As institutions design their undergraduate programs, they could develop pipelines through agreements with graduate schools. More specifically, respondents recommended the following:

Familiarize higher education with the concept of a 3-year degree to increase its acceptance. The 3-year degree has just begun to gain traction. As more institutions offer 3-year degrees, acceptance among institutions as well as the public is likely to increase. One respondent at a Doctoral institution noted that there are various efforts underway to streamline degrees across their system. As long as this change is widely discussed and there is “no vocal opposition” to 3-year degrees, this respondent could envision shifts in faculty reviews of candidates with 3-year degrees.

Another respondent surmised that the crux of the matter is how we elevate the status of 3-year degrees. The respondent stated that it would help advance the idea of 3-year degrees if more high-profile institutions were involved in the conversation and if there were opportunities for discussion of 3-year degrees among these institutions. Such a forum might prompt one or two high-profile universities to take action.

One respondent at a Doctoral institution suggested that keeping the admissions officers aware of the shifting landscape will be important, as they often field questions from committee reviewers. The admissions team at this institution provides an annual update to faculty review committees on trends and issues in graduate admissions. The Cin3 Exchange leadership and members could go to higher education conferences and engage with the Council on Graduate Schools in offering presentations to graduate admission officers.

Prepare students to be proactive. All of the respondents had suggestions for proactive strategies that could be undertaken by the institutions developing 3-year degrees to support their graduates’ success in applying to graduate schools.

- ***Provide descriptive language.*** Provision of such language would enable graduates to describe the degree structure and reinforce that it is a bachelor’s degree, even though it may be fewer credits than the traditional degree. Graduates could also draw

upon such language to describe the program impact in their Statements of Purpose and interviews in the application process.

- **Provide links to informational websites.** Links might be included on the transcript itself to information on the institution's websites that demonstrates how the degree has been structured and how it compares to a 4-year degree program. It would be particularly important to demonstrate that the degree does not diminish the general education component of the degree.
- **Highlight critical learning outcomes in prerequisites.** A supplemental letter might be prepared to further substantiate how specific courses achieve the prerequisite learning outcomes.

Market programs as drawing top-notch students. How the institutions market their programs will be very important. Where possible, they could highlight how their programs are drawing students at the top of their classes who are really motivated to progress quickly through their undergraduate degrees on to their advanced studies.

Develop pipelines with graduate schools. Institutions developing 3-year degree programs could develop pipeline programs with other institutions. For example: an institution developing a 3-year degree program in Psychology would identify and develop a pipeline with a specific graduate program in Psychology. To facilitate this pipeline, an MOU could be put in place with the Psychology graduate program; faculty at the graduate institution could be briefed on how the 3-year degree program has been structured to provide the learning required to prepare students for their graduate studies. Evidence of success of students going through these pilot pipeline programs could lead to the development of pathways with other graduate schools.

Conclusion: Looking Ahead

It is not surprising that existing graduate admissions policies tend to preclude admissions of candidates with 3-year degrees. As of December 2025, there were perhaps a handful of graduates with degrees of less than 120 credits. Thus, graduate schools have virtually no experience evaluating these degrees. Although 3-year degrees are gaining traction, the movement is still in its early stages.

For Cin3 Exchange institutions and others developing 3-year degrees, it is good news that there are mechanisms in place at many institutions for exceptions. This is important groundwork. Furthermore, graduate admission policies and reviewers' perceptions of 3-year degrees can evolve with appropriate evidence that graduates of these programs are acquiring the learning needed to succeed in graduate studies.

Recommendations on how Cin3 Exchange members can effectively present 3-year degrees included, first and foremost, advancing 3-year degrees as an innovative change initiative. This change needs to be presented, explained, and discussed both within institutions and with higher education stakeholders to broaden understanding and acceptance of this innovation. At the same time, institutions should prepare their graduates with degrees of

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less than 120 credit hours to be proactive in presenting their credentials. When designing 3-year degree programs, institutions can also develop pipelines with specific graduate schools. Finally, the Cin3 Exchange should work along with member institutions to regularly update graduate admissions and policy officers on the design features of 3-year programs that ensure graduates are prepared for success in graduate studies.

Conventional wisdom tells us that colleges and universities are very slow to change but change they do. Although ten interviews did not provide exhaustive information, the willingness of the respondents to consider different pathways to graduate studies suggests that master's and even doctoral degrees will not be beyond the reach of 3-year degree program graduates.

Appendix A: Respondents

Cin3 would like to extend again our gratitude to each of the following higher education leaders who explained their current or former institutions policies and practices and offered their professional expertise and perspectives for this study.

Name	Title	Institution	<u>Carnegie Classification</u>
Ashley Colquitt	Associate Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School	Appalachian State University	Professions-focused Undergraduate/ Graduate-Master's Large/Medium
Helene (Helga) Shugart	Associate Dean Graduate School	University of Utah	Mixed Undergraduate/ Graduate-Doctorate Large
Megan Prosser	Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs	Keck Graduate Institute, a member of the Claremont Colleges.	Special Focus: Technology, Engineering, and Sciences
Randy Smith	Vice Provost for Academic Programs	The Ohio State University	Mixed Undergraduate/ Graduate-Doctorate Large
Robert Weisbuch	Director, Robert Weisbuch & Associates, Former Dean / President	University of Michigan / Drew University	Mixed Undergraduate/ Graduate-Doctorate Large
Rodrigo Rentería -Valencia	Dean of Graduate Studies and Research	Central Washington University	Professions-focused Undergraduate/ Graduate-Master's Large/Medium
Sharon James McGee	Dean of Graduate and Continuing Studies	East Tennessee State University	Professions-focused Undergraduate/ Graduate-Doctorate Medium
Stephen Roth	Associate Provost and Dean of the Graduate School	University of Maryland, College Park	Mixed Undergraduate/ Graduate-Doctorate Large
Toni Abbott	Director of the University of Minnesota Graduate School's Educational Policy Office	University of Minnesota – Twin Cities	Mixed Undergraduate/ Graduate-Doctorate Large
Wojtek Chodzko-Zajko	Vice Provost for Graduate Education and Dean of the Graduate College	University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign	Mixed Undergraduate/ Graduate-Doctorate Large

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

College in 3 Study Conversation with Graduate and Professional Deans

Preamble:

Thank you again for your readiness to participate in this 30-45 minute phone interview. This conversation will help inform the College-in-3's work with members of the Cin3 Exchange.

As members of the exchange continue to develop, seek approval and launch programs, we are talking about how graduate and professional programs across the U.S. are going to view these degrees. The purpose of this conversation is to understand your institution's admissions policies, how you might approach evaluating the candidacy of a student with a bachelor's degree of less than 120 credits and the likelihood that your institution would accept that individual.

With your permission, I would like to record this conversation to supplement notes that I will be taking. These notes will be compiled into a brief report. We hope that you would be willing to be listed as an interviewee in the report with the understanding that nothing would be attributed directly to you.

Questions

- 1) ***We understand standard admission requirements may include some or all of the following: Transcripts, Test Scores, Letters of Recommendation, Statement of Purpose, Writing Samples or Portfolios***

Do your general submission requirements for Graduate and Professional Studies align with these practices?

- 1) If not, how do they vary? What do you require in general?
- 2) Are there differences among Graduate programs and Professional schools?

- 2) ***We understand that most graduate programs and professional schools have a multi-stage review process.***

Is that the case at your institution? If so, what does the multi-stage review process look like? Is there one process at your institution or does it vary among Graduate programs and Professional schools?

- 3) ***If there is an initial Screening process, aside from not having submitted something that is required, what other factors might prevent an applicant from being forwarded on for additional review?***

- a) Will it matter, for example, what the undergraduate Degrees are called? (e.g., Reduced Credit, Bachelor of Arts Applied Bachelor of Science? Optimized Bachelors of Arts.)
 - b) Will it matter how many undergraduate credits the applicant has completed? (More than 90; Less than 120)
- 4) **Many of the degrees that have been designed and launched to date focus on high demand pre-professional fields and are less than 120 credits.** At your institution would there be variance in the initial screening for select fields?
[Refer to evolving list of [Cin3 Fields of Study](#); (e.g. business, criminal justice, cybersecurity, health sciences)]
- 5) **If there is a review by a Faculty or Committee at the Department level, what are the most critical factors / criteria and process used by the Faculty and/or committee as they review the application materials?**
- 6) Among the key factors / criteria that are used by your reviewers -- can we zoom in and speak more specifically about those related to the applicants

Academic background

- **Undergraduate GPA: Especially in relevant coursework.**
- **Academic rigor: Reputation of the undergraduate institution and difficulty of the program.**
- **Preparation: Prerequisite courses, research methods, or statistics (depending on the field).**

And Professional Experience (especially for professional programs)

- **Relevant work, internships, or leadership experience.**
- **Demonstrated readiness to apply theory to practice.**

- a) At this stage of the review, will it matter
 - What the degrees are called?
 - How many credit hours are completed?
 - What breadth and depth of coursework is taken?
 - How student learning outcomes are demonstrated?
 - What experiential learning has been built into the program of study?

7) In the [Council of Graduate Schools' 2018 report on Master's Admissions](#), there is a comment about reviewers' perceptions:

Reviewer perceptions of an institution or program can override the value of the credential submitted and make admission processes less transparent for applicants, as well as for other stakeholders. (pg. 17)

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Do you think this will be an issue for applicants with reduced credit degrees? If so, how might it be best addressed by the applicant and /or the institution offering the 3-year degree? Is there any parallel between how you evaluate degrees of less than 4 years from international institutions to how you might evaluate a US degree of less than 120 credits?

8) Might you be able to suggest a few people with whom we might follow-up from select fields / departments at a later time? [Refer to evolving list of [Cin3 Fields of Study](#) (e.g. business, criminal justice, cybersecurity, health sciences)]

Closing -- Thank you -- Plan to complete the report by mid-January.