

Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

Bradley, M.J., Seidman, R.H. & Painchaud, S.R. (2012). *Saving higher education: The integrated, competency-based three-year bachelor's degree program*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. Pages: 219. ISBN 978-0-470-88819-3.

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One of the reforms that has been proposed to deal with the escalating costs of higher education is to replace many four-year baccalaureate degrees with three-year degrees. Often it is not clear whether the three-year degree that is proposed is intended to be a qualitatively different kind of baccalaureate degree than the existing four-year baccalaureate degree, or simply the result of compressing the curriculum of the four-year degree into three years.

Most proposals for new three-year baccalaureate degrees fail to spell out the curriculum details of the proposed new degree. The book, *Saving Higher Education: The Integrated, Competency-based Three-year Bachelor's Degree Program*, is an exception in this regard. The book describes the three-year degree that has actually been implemented at Southern New Hampshire University, a regionally-accredited, private, not-for-profit institution. Although the authors say that the book is “not meant to be a case study”, they present abundant information on how the new program was developed and implemented, and data on cost implications for students and the institution, as well as on academic performance and retention and graduation rates. The three authors are faculty members at SNHU; one was the first director of the three-year program and dean of the business school, which is where the program resides administratively; and two were members of the team that in 1995, received a grant from the U.S. Department of Education Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education to create the program.

The book provides Educational Testing Service test score data for graduating students which show that the performance of SNHU's first three cohorts of three-year baccalaureate degree graduates exceeded the national average for graduates of four-year programs in comparable programs at comparable institutions. However, beginning with the fourth cohort, the performance of graduates of three-year programs at SNHU has fluctuated but on average been about the same as the national average for four-year programs. The authors don't speculate on why the scores might have been relatively higher for the first few

cohorts. Retention and graduation rates at SNHU have exceeded the national average. For example, SNHU's graduation rate for three-year programs through 2010 is reported to be 78.5 percent, compared to a rate of 39.2 percent for what are said to be comparable institutions. However, no data are presented on the number of students in the three-year baccalaureate program who have gone on to further study or their success rate in getting admitted to graduate schools.

As one might expect, the reported savings for students over the cost of a four-year degree is 25 percent, in addition to which students have the benefit of entering the workforce and earning money one year sooner. According to the authors, over 80 percent of the students have indicated that without this three-year option, they would not have enrolled at the institution. On that basis, they conclude that a new tuition revenue stream, worth over \$2 million in 2010-2011, was created by the three-year program.

The authors contrast their Integrated, Competency-based Model with two other models of three-year baccalaureate degrees: the Accelerated Three-year Degree Model, and the Prior Learning Three-year Degree Model. In the Accelerated Model, students compress the four-year curriculum into three years by taking heavier course loads during regular terms and attending summer sessions. In the Prior Learning Model, students are given sufficient credit for prior learning so that they can complete the four-year program in three years. Each of these models has obvious advantages and limitations. An appendix shows that as of June, 2011, 43 postsecondary institutions in the U.S. were offering three-year degree programs, only two of which (SNHU and the University of Charleston – West Virginia) were employing the Integrated Model. The others were employing the Accelerated Model, and a few of those had also added the Prior Learning Model.

While the authors present their Integrated, Competency-based Model as different from the other two models, it would be more accurate to describe it as a more efficient version of the Accelerated Model. Like the four-year program, "120 credits are still required for graduation" in the three-year program. The difference is that the credits are organized differently in the Integrated Model, and unlike versions of the Accelerated Model at most other institutions, students are not required to take courses on weekends, at night, or during the summer or intersession. The key to the organization of credit activity in the Integrated Model is to take the required program competencies as the starting point and then determine how the curriculum can be structured most efficiently – and instrumentally – to achieve those competencies. An important step in this process is the construction of a matrix that shows the frequencies with which specific required competencies are addressed at different levels in each course. The authors report that when the previous four-year curriculum was analyzed in relation to the learning outcomes that were thought to be necessary to achieve the program competencies, it was found that there was considerable redundancy among the existing courses. One such examination showed that theories of motivation were covered at the foundation level in seven different courses. Another example involved public speaking. It was found that the required competency in public speaking could be developed sufficiently in other courses so that a separate three credit course in public speaking was not necessary. The study team also found that the use of "end-of-semester weeklong integrating experiences" in which students worked in teams could provide a more time-efficient way for students to take the next step needed to attain a related set of competencies than some traditional courses.

Given that in many – probably most – undergraduate university programs, existing four-year curricula were not developed strictly for the purpose of developing specific competencies in the most time-efficient manner, it is easy to imagine that a strategic re-vamping of curriculum could produce a substantial reduction of the time that students need to earn a baccalaureate degree, if the requirements for that degree consist solely of attaining specific competencies. However, I have two concerns about the Integrated Model described in this book. One pertains to the claim that the three-year program still consists of 120 academic credits. This claim seems to involve double-counting courses that contribute to the development of multiple competencies and the use of new ways of measuring credits. In the Integrated Model, the authors note, it is *learning* rather than *seat-time* that is held constant. Credits are merely, and somewhat arbitrarily, attributed on the basis of competencies attained. But if it is really the attainment of specific competencies that determines the content of the curriculum, rather than the time that students are required to spend in various learning activities, then the concept of academic credits is an anachronism that could be dispensed with.

My other concern about the Integrated Program is whether conceptualizing curriculum exclusively in terms of a set of learning experiences that are intended to produce specific competencies in learners is suitable for all undergraduate programs. It may be appropriate for programs whose goal is the development of specific workplace competencies. However, the Integrated Model may not be appropriate in programs for which there is less clarity or less consensus about goals, such as a bachelor of arts, where opportunity for self-discovery and serendipitous learning is so important. While the authors don't exactly address this issue, they do point out that students need to have settled on their major at the start of their studies in order to benefit from the three-year program.

As the title of the book suggests, the three-year baccalaureate degree is presented as an innovation that could save higher education from the consequences of escalating costs that threaten to prevent many middle-class students from obtaining a university degree. The book is directed particularly at those many "tuition-driven colleges and universities" that may have to "close their doors due to the deadly combination of declining enrolment and rising costs." Even with that audience in mind, however, the title of the book seems ill-advised, both because there is unlikely to be a single solution to the problem of the rising costs of higher education, and because there are other problems affecting higher education besides rising costs.

While the central focus of the book is on the three-year baccalaureate degree, one of its major strengths is a highly focused, research-based discussion of innovative approaches to curriculum and program design. These innovations, such as competency-driven curricula, collaborative learning, and course management systems, hold promise for improving both efficiency and quality. For example, applying the technique shown in the book for identifying duplication among courses and treating curriculum as an interconnected system for facilitating the attainment of program competencies could likely bring significant benefits for many postsecondary institutions and their students. Owing to the strength of such contributions, this book would be of value not just to those who may be interested in the adoption of three-year baccalaureate degrees, but to others with broader interests in the reform of education in universities and colleges.♣