

# Degree Acceleration

## Colleges Helping Students Graduate Faster

By Matt L. Ottinger

**H**igher education productivity is in the spotlight, with efforts focused on more Hoosiers earning bachelor degrees within four or even six years. But some colleges and universities are going above and beyond by expediting the experience for motivated students.

Two years ago, we documented Manchester College and its Fast Forward program of three-year bachelor degrees. Grace College, a small theological school in Winona Lake, is now offering a similar broad-based option.

### Grace-fully quick

Grace has a total enrollment of approximately 1,750 students, with 1,100 of those being traditional undergraduates, according to Provost William Katip.

“That’s the group we really designed our three-year program for,” he says.

The 120-credit three-year program – available for all degrees in all disciplines – will begin next fall, and Katip expects as many as 40% of students to pursue the expedited option, which is open to those who maintain a 3.0 grade point average or higher.

“We’ve seen a lot of students already trying to go at a faster clip,” he reveals. “With our student body, money is a big deal. We had a task force the president appointed to address costs, and we put together an innovative plan to help them.”

When asked about the reaction thus far, Katip contends it’s been quite positive.

“We’ve gotten good feedback from current students, but we actually did some market research with students and parents in our prospect pool (sophomores and juniors in high school) and they showed very strong interest (in a three-year program).”

He adds that the school is on pace to receive 25% more applications this year than last.

“We have almost as many in December as we had in April last year, and I think that’s driven by excitement for this program,” Katip explains.

Governor Mitch Daniels, who has been a vocal proponent of three-year degree programs at Indiana’s colleges and universities, offered praise for Grace following the announcement of its three-year initiative.

“Grace College is showing the academic innovation and leadership for which it is known,” Daniels said. “This recent move is exactly the sort of new alternative I had hoped for in asking universities to create a three-year option for students.”

Nearly one year ago, Daniels spoke at a meeting of university presidents, trustees and other higher education officials and criticized the funding system and its primary emphasis on enrollment numbers.

“What we’re really trying to do is get as many people as we can herded in and keep them in there as long as we can,” Daniels remarked, adding his desire was to see Hoosier graduates immediately contributing to the workforce.

Katip adds that Grace also offers a few master’s degrees, and students on the fast track can obtain those plus an undergraduate degree in four years.

### Cardinals, Ravens fly fast together

Ball State and Anderson universities may not seem like ideal partners, as one is a large public institution while the other is a small, private Christian university. But

Manchester College students can now use the Fast Forward program (the first in the state available in all major areas of study) to graduate in just three years.



the two have forged an agreement allowing computer science students to obtain both undergraduate and graduate degrees in only four years of coursework. The partnership stems from collaboration between two friends – Steve Jones, director of Ball State’s Center for Information and Communication Sciences, and Charles Koontz, chair of the computer science department at Anderson University.

Jones explains the two have known each other for years, and Koontz’s son was even his graduate assistant.

“(Koontz) was sending students over to my grad program,” Jones explains, “and they were going on to have great success in the industry.”

Jones points out that Anderson’s curriculum allows students to graduate in three years by taking summer courses, and Ball State’s 11-month Master’s of Information and Communication Sciences program is in its 25th year. In fact, he states the program boasted a “90% job placement rate last year in the worst economic climate,” with graduates joining such companies as Intel, Cisco Systems and AT&T.

Jones says his program has traditionally received between two to four students from Anderson annually. Business leaders associated with Ball State have been very enthusiastic about the possibilities this new partnership produces.

“We have gotten great feedback from the Industrial Advisory Board,” Jones offers. “When they heard about this, they went crazy. Getting more young people involved and out in the industry in a timely manner is such a plus for everyone.”

He adds that “taxpayers have loved the fact that BSU can create a master’s student in 11 months.”

## Benefits of speed

Richard Ludwick, a former college provost, is president and CEO of the Independent Colleges of Indiana (ICI) – a not-for-profit organization that represents Indiana’s 31 independent colleges and universities. He says that while Grace and Manchester have the formal three-year programs, an expedited plan is not out of the question at most institutions.

“In the context of Indiana, our independent sector is most flexible in its ability to respond (to the need for three-year programs),” he stresses. “What’s unique about our institutions is that they place the student at the center of the learning experience. So if a student decides they want to expedite their degree, our schools go out of their way to accommodate that. I can’t think of an independent school where you technically couldn’t do a three-year program, unless a particular degree had certain coursework limitations.”

Ludwick adds that accepting credits from other schools lends itself to helping students graduate faster.

He emphasizes that while three-year programs are beneficial, getting students out in four years has become a version of expedition in itself.

“Most people initially go to college for four years, but as a whole it’s more like six or seven years of education,” Ludwick contends. “So students that come to independent colleges have already made a decision to move through more quickly than others, because independent sector students graduate in four



**Access to state-of-the-art equipment and facilities is nothing new at Ball State University. Now, the school’s 11-month master’s program combines with Anderson University’s three-year undergrad curriculum for computer science majors to help students accomplish both in four years.**

years at twice the rate of other schools.”

An ICI report indicates 59% of Indiana’s independent college students graduate in four years, compared to 30% at public colleges and universities.

Ludwick and Katip agree that cost savings are substantial to students and their families for moving through college more quickly.

“In essence, the students get a 50% reduction in cost (if they graduate in three years),” Katip offers, citing 25% saved on tuition and board and the other 25% gained in the first year of earned salary.

## Speed bumps?

Jones says there were some hurdles involved in his expedited program because of the missions of the two schools.

“There are challenges because the red tape involved in public and private schools working together is nasty,” he asserts. “Fortunately, our associate provost was great in working through that.”

He adds that since Anderson University is affiliated with the Church of God, it could pose a challenge for students concerned about attending class in a large public university environment.

“Because it’s affiliated with the church, Anderson draws students in from all over based on faith,” Jones explains. “But for (Ball State), that’s a positive – because it gets us students



A school official expects as many as 40% of students to pursue an expedited path to graduation at Grace College & Theological Seminary.



we wouldn't normally get."

Additionally, the nature of the expedited program only lends itself to a highly motivated student due to the year-round coursework, he adds.

Ludwick says that schools that strive to have formal three-year programs must be certain courses are available at appropriate times for students.

"You want to make sure you have the courses you need for the summer semester," he reports. "It really takes some thought, but you have to make sure they're there. Those summer courses tend to be more general so more students can take them then, and then they can get into specific curriculum during the year.

"The other thing is you need to make sure experiential learning – like internships – can be fit into it. So you have to make sure those integrate well into the program."

He also contends it's important for students to gain the proper personal development benefits of college before moving on into adulthood.

"Once you've experienced personal enrichment in college, then it's good to get right out into the professional world."

#### INFORMATION LINK

**Resources:** Steve Jones, Ball State University, at [cms.bsu.edu](http://cms.bsu.edu)

William Katip, Grace College, at [www.grace.edu](http://www.grace.edu)

Richard Ludwick, Independent Colleges of Indiana, at [www.icindiana.org](http://www.icindiana.org)

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