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UIS not sold on three-year degrees

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When interim University of Illinois President Stanley Ikenberry asked college officials to find out what it would take to create an accelerated degree program, he kick-started the process at all three U of I campuses.

But creating a program where students can graduate with a degree in fewer than four years might work better at the university's main campus in Champaign-Urbana than at its campuses in Springfield and Chicago.

As many as one in five students at Urbana might be able to graduate in three years, saving money, especially on room and board, as well as time.

But University of Illinois Springfield provost Harry Berman said the three-year degree idea is "relative to the traditional full-time student."

"It's a matter of affordability for higher education, which is a big concern for all of us," said Berman. "We'd have to look and see what majors we could do it in."

No tuition savings

An accelerated program may not save students money on tuition because the number of credit hours required to graduate — 120 hours in the case of UIS — won't change. The requirements would just have to be met in a shorter time frame.

Advance-placement credits, which are college credits a student earns while still in high school, would be a part of any accelerated plan. An even bigger part, he said, would be summer school classes.

"We certainly accept AP credits at UIS, and we've always had a pretty robust summer school," he said. "It's a big part of what we do. We're ahead in our thinking on summer school."

UIS also has taken steps to make course offerings more advantageous to students. A number of its general education requirements, for example, have been put online.

Students can stay at home, work and make money while completing some of their coursework.

Online majors make up 26.5 percent of UIS headcount enrollment, according to Ray Schroeder, director of the Center for Online Learning, Research and Service. Additionally, 53.8 percent of UIS students took at least one online course this spring, while 31.9 percent were registered only in online courses.

The three-year degree clearly isn't for someone who changes majors two or three times during a college career.

One of the limitations at UIS is the fact that the university has lots of part-time students who go to school while they're working and who probably aren't living on campus anyway.

Lesser college experience

About 20 percent of UIS's 4,961 students live on campus. Just under half — 49.5 percent — of its students are full time.

"We also have plenty of students who need to make money during the summer," Berman said. "Taking two courses (to qualify as a full-time student in the summer) might not be feasible."

Berman said students who try to graduate in three years also are likely to miss out on volunteer opportunities, on study abroad programs and other life experiences gained in college.

"There are some students who are after the college experience," he said.

Courses required for graduation in some majors also may be offered more frequently at the Urbana campus than at UIS.

"What would it take?" Berman said. "What would we have to commit to?"

"We're examining the idea, and the place to start is to look at the data we have available," he added. "Do we have students already doing this? We have to look at it on a major-by-major basis."

Berman said UIS expects to have a report completed on the accelerated degree idea in about six months.

"The heart of the matter is affordability, and we share the president's concern," he said.

Chris Dettro can be reached at 788-1510.

Graduation rates

Four-year graduation rates (average percentage of full-time freshmen who graduate in four years from the same institution they entered)

* University of Illinois Springfield: 46 percent

* U of I Champaign-Urbana: 64 percent

* U of I Chicago: 23 percent

WIU's Quad Cities campus to offer 3-year degree

MACOMB (AP) — Western Illinois University's Quad Cities campus will offer students interested in the great outdoors a chance to earn a degree in three years.

The new Natural Resources Management track will begin this fall. The accelerated degree program is a partnership between WIU and the Eastern Iowa Community College District.

School officials say the curriculum will prepare students for careers in outdoor recreation and natural resources management.

Classes will be held at the Quad Cities campus and at the Nahant Marsh Education Center. The center is a 62-acre nature preserve along the Mississippi River.

Students will be given the chance to do a "summer wilderness experience." All students also will be required to finish a 12-week internship.

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