Cutting credits without cutting corners

A state playbook for reduced-credit bachelor's degrees

Tom Sudkamp | Jason Lee | Greg DeSantis

Ohio Department of Higher Education | RAND | Jobs for the Future

Funding for RAND's study was provided by Arnold Ventures. JFF's Scaling College in 3 work is supported by Arnold Ventures and Strada Education Foundation. The views presented are those of the speakers and do not necessarily reflect the views of the funders.

Where is your state right now?

A quick show of hands

1 **Watching**
Tracking the idea

2 **Exploring**
Studying feasibility

3 **Enabling**
Piloting or approving

4 **Requiring**
Mandating or scaling

TODAY'S ARC

OHIO
From mandate to implementation

RAND
What the feasibility study found

JFF
National landscape and scaling lessons

Ask questions throughout the session

Scan the QR code to submit a question at any point

We'll return to your questions during the discussion

Ohio explores reduced-time bachelor’s degrees

Two policy eras opened different routes to a three-year degree

1

2015: Set a statewide expectation

Each state university had to offer a three-year pathway for at least 60% of bachelor’s degrees

2

Use existing acceleration tools

Dual enrollment, Advanced Placement, and summer sessions could help students finish sooner

3

2025: Test curricular redesign

Study where specific course requirements, electives, and total credit hours could be reduced

Policy shift from faster completion to testing whether the degree itself can be redesigned

Ohio is moving from mandate to implementation

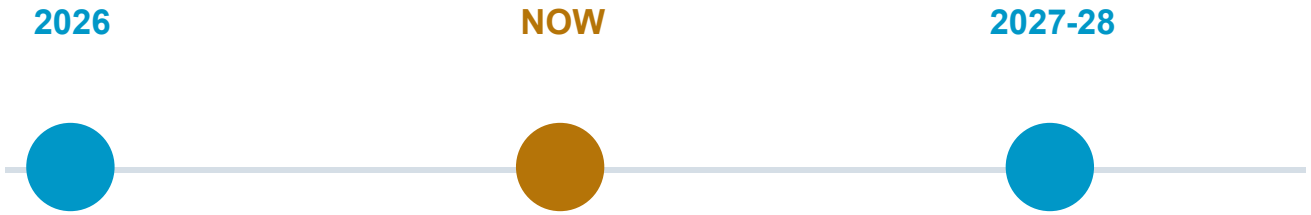
The requirement is statewide, field-targeted, and tied to a clear deadline

1

90-credit program

at each state university

by academic year 2027-28



Mandate enacted

A statutory requirement

Design and approval

Fields, curricula, and review

Programs established

At every state university

The law also calls for aligned College Credit Plus pathways and connects the programs to in-demand career areas.

Ohio gave institutions three implementation pathways

The mandate sets the destination while allowing different routes to get there

1

Create a new program

Design a new reduced-credit degree around a specific field and student pathway

2

Replace an existing program

Convert a traditional program into a reduced-credit version and retire the prior structure

3

Offer a parallel pathway

Add a reduced-credit version while retaining the existing 120-credit option

Implementation question: Which route best preserves quality, student choice, and institutional capacity?

The state role extends well beyond passing the law

Implementation requires translation, coordination, and continuous learning.

1	**Interpret the mandate**	Clarify what counts and what institutions must submit
2	**Align fields and workforce demand**	Connect program choices to state priorities
3	**Coordinate approvals**	Bring academic review, accreditation, and licensure into view
4	**Support institutional design**	Answer questions without prescribing a single curriculum
5	**Monitor implementation**	Track what launches, who enrolls, and what changes

Institutions quickly surfaced four hard questions

A credit target does not resolve the design and recognition questions underneath it.

01

Where is 90 credits feasible?

Fields differ in sequencing, licensure, clinical hours, and professional expectations.

02

What must the degree preserve?

Bachelor's-level learning, disciplinary depth, and meaningful preparation cannot be assumed.

03

Who must recognize the degree?

Approval does not settle transfer, graduate study, licensure, or employer acceptance.

04

What guardrails protect students?

Labeling, advising, disclosure, and monitoring matter while evidence is still limited.

Early implementation suggests lessons for states

These are working lessons for discussion, not a finished product.

1	**Bring faculty and institutional leaders in early**	Curricular redesign needs academic ownership.
2	**Choose fields with room to redesign**	Demand alone does not establish feasibility.
3	**Make approval expectations visible**	Institutions need a coordinated and transparent path through review.
4	**Build learning into implementation**	Track adoption, student experience, and downstream recognition.

Ohio sets curricular requirements for accelerated degrees

Accelerated bachelor’s degrees must maintain learning goals, outcomes, and rigor to preserve value and recognition.

01

Programmatic accreditation

Expected whenever available. Any exemption must be justified and approved by the Chancellor.

02

Licensure standards

Programs must satisfy the requirements for applicable professional licensure.

03

Equivalent learning outcomes

A parallel or replacement degree must meet the learning outcomes of the traditional program.

04

Bachelor’s-level rigor

New accelerated programs must demonstrate the rigor expected of a traditional bachelor’s degree.

Ask questions throughout the session

Scan the QR code to submit a question at any point

We'll return to your questions during the discussion

RAND tested feasibility across programs and systems

The study was designed to inform Ohio implementation while producing knowledge other states can use

Where can institutions reduce credits while preserving educational quality, workforce value, and student opportunity?

1. **Where are programs operating?**
   National inventory

2. **What external requirements matter?**
   Accreditation, licensure, and Ohio policy

3. **How do stakeholders interpret feasibility?**
   Interviews across institutions, regulators, and fields

4. **What happens to downstream options?**
   Graduate and professional admissions survey

The study assembled four sources of evidence

Broad scans were paired with selective stakeholder evidence and a field-level assessment

119

Programs

National inventory across 48 institutions and 25 states

7

Institutional accreditors

Policies, guidance, and review pathways

29

Stakeholder interviews

Institutions, accreditors, boards, fields, and national experts

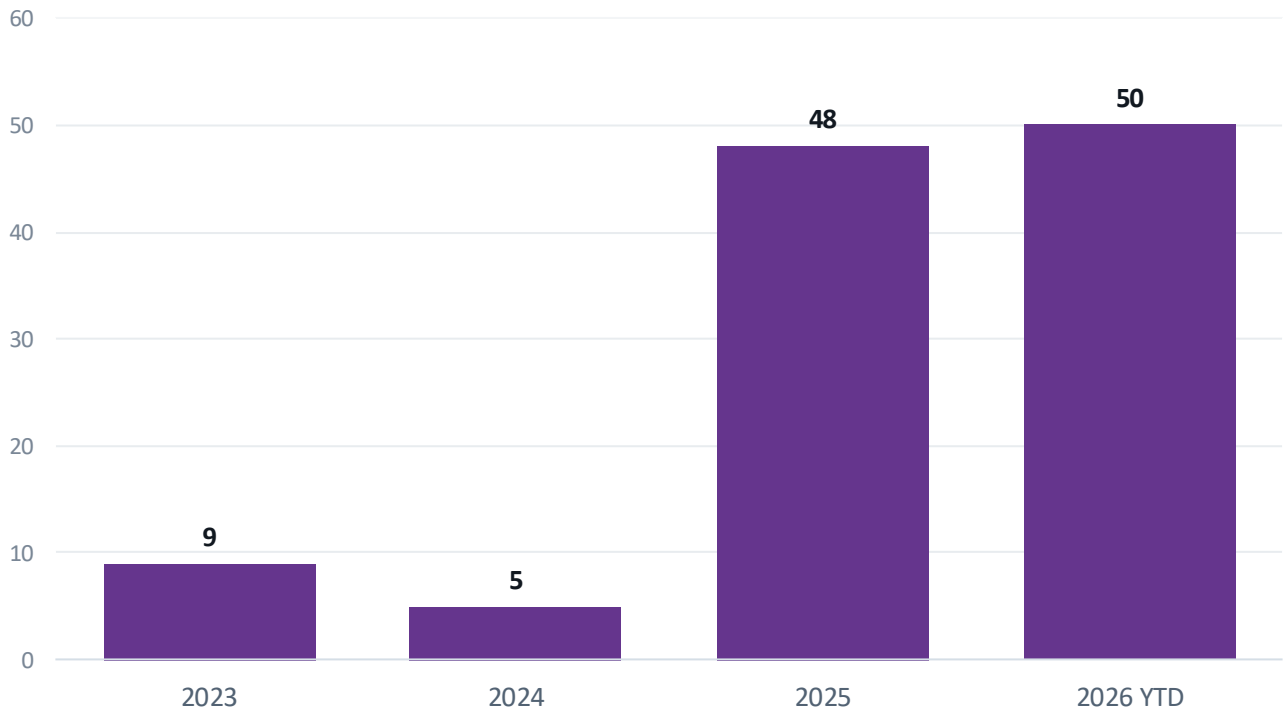
28

Survey responses

Graduate and professional admissions perspectives from 10 Ohio institutions

Program growth is rapid but still concentrated

Public announcements accelerated sharply in 2025 and the first five months of 2026



119

programs

48

institutions

25

states

Seven programs lacked an announcement year and are excluded from the chart.

Early adopters are found in private institutions and online programs

The first wave is not a cross-section of U.S. higher education.

78%

were announced by 4-year private non-profit institutions

52 of 119

were in business or computing and information sciences

51

were online-only programs

Accreditors offer several routes below 120 credits

Different pathways still converge on academic justification, mission fit, and clear communication

No fixed minimum	**HLC | NWCCU | WSCUC**	Review focuses on the institution's rationale and the degree's integrity
90-credit minimum	**ACCJC | NECHE**	Specific requirements and substantive-change or innovation review
Defined 90-119 range	**SACSCOC**	A distinct reduced-hour category with workforce rationale and labeling
No separate RCD category	**MSCHE**	No fixed reduced-credit threshold in the reviewed materials

RAND assessed every field through five lenses

Each lens tests whether a 90-credit pathway could work under current conditions

1. **Ohio statute and licensing boards**
2. **Specialized accreditation**
3. **Industry and professional expectations**
4. **Clinical, practicum, internship, observation, and other experiential requirements**
5. **Comparable reduced-credit programs elsewhere**

RESULT

Structured judgment

Evidence is synthesized across the five lenses rather than averaged into a numerical score.

Feasibility varies by field

MORE ROOM UNDER CURRENT CONDITIONS

Business | Information technology | Cybersecurity | Public administration

Flexible regulation, fewer external hour requirements, and multiple national examples

POSSIBLE WITH REDESIGN

Teacher preparation | Some applied health fields

Field, clinical, sequencing, or partner requirements demand coordination

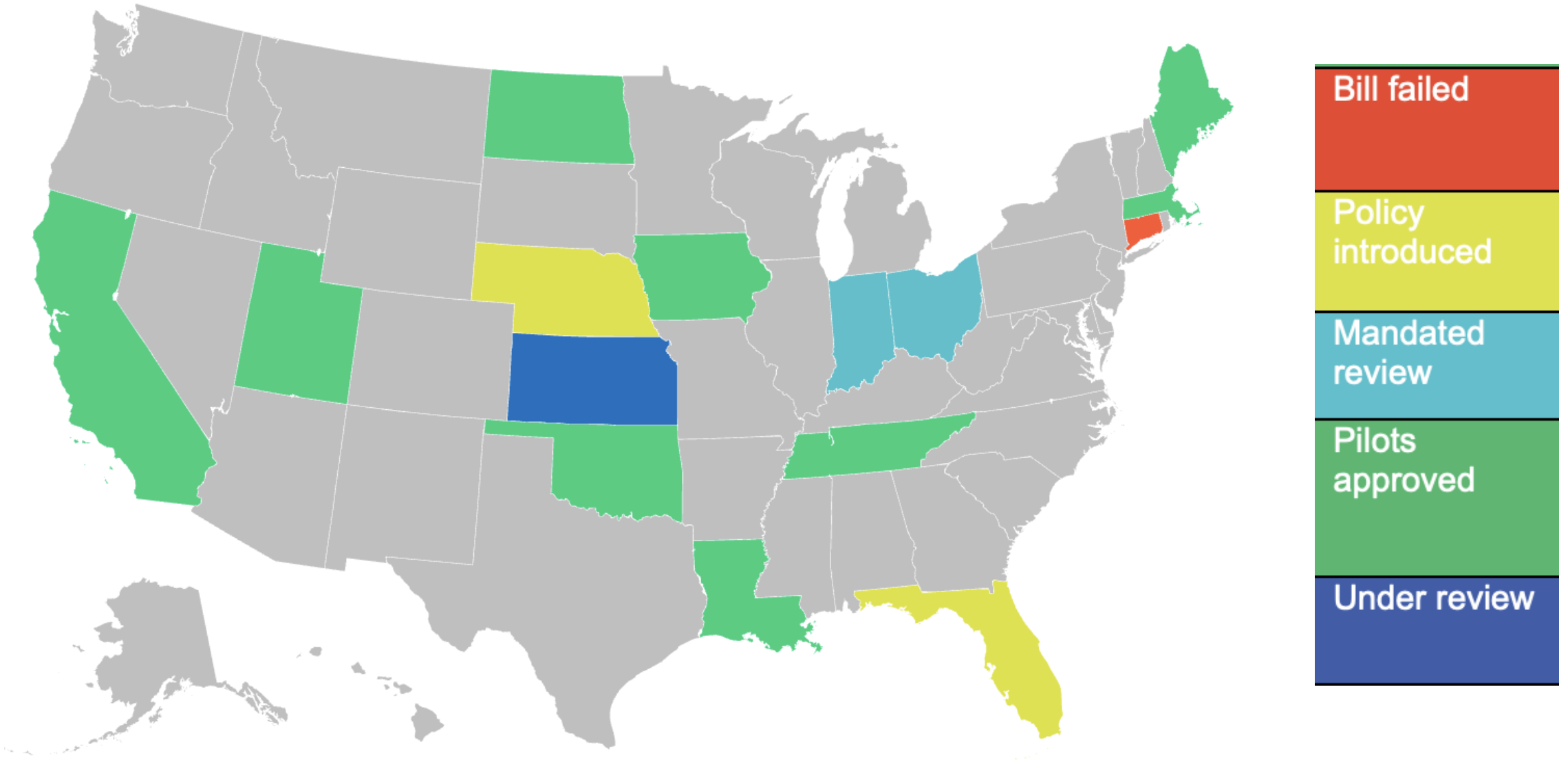
MORE CONSTRAINED

Architecture | Licensure-track engineering | Clinically intensive programs

External standards, cumulative technical sequences, or supervised practice limit flexibility

These are current assessments and broad field examples, not permanent verdicts.

Reduced-credit degrees are becoming state policy



Reduced-credit degrees are becoming state policy

CT	Bill failed	SB 396, which would have permitted colleges to offer 90-credit degrees, died in committee in 2026, so public institutions remain without approved 90-credit bachelor's pilots.
IN	Mandated review	Public universities are under a statewide requirement created in 2024 to develop at least one three-year bachelor's program.
KS	Under review	Kansas remains in exploratory review with a state-established task force to explore reduced-credit bachelor's pathways.
NE	Policy Introduced	No public-institution degree policy has been adopted; an interim study on sub-120-credit bachelor's degrees was introduced March 25, 2026, and referred to the Education Committee.
CA	Pilots approved	California State University campuses can now design reduced-credit bachelor's degrees under three newly approved degree types (Bachelor of Education, Bachelor of Professional Studies, and Bachelor of Applied Studies); development could begin in fall 2026,

JFF's work connects the landscape to implementation

Scaling College in 3 (SC3), supported by Strada and Arnold Ventures

SC3 Planned Phases

Reduced-Credit Bachelor's Degrees Primer

JFF release: September 2026

Ohio and Virginia Community of Practice: Led by JFF with AAC&U and Ithaka S+R

June 2026 – February 2028

Playbook for Scaling College in 3

Spring 2028

Updates Through JFF'S ELEVATE Network: www.jff.org/elevate

Reduced Credit Baccalaureate Resources

Ithaka S+R Program Identification Framework (forthcoming)

Data-driven approach for assessing program adaptation impact

Ithaka S+R State Alignment Framework (forthcoming)

How state conditions may impact program design and evaluation

National Task Force on Three-Year Degree Pathways

Task Force report and recommendations (forthcoming)

College in 3 Network helps institutions design and implement: college-in-3.org

Updates Through JFF'S ELEVATE Network: www.jff.org/elevate

Unanswered Questions Abound

- What should these programs be called?
- How do employers and graduate schools interpret the value of the degree?
- Which populations of students are interested in and are served well by these programs?
- How does work-based learning fit into shorter degree pathways?
- Which disciplines have room for redesign?
- What kinds of student-facing disclosures are necessary to help prospective learners make informed educational choices?

A state playbook examines five areas

1	**Purpose**	What problem should the pathway solve?
2	**Field and population**	Which disciplines and students have the strongest case?
3	**Learning and design**	What must be preserved, and where is there real flexibility?
4	**Recognition**	Will accreditors, licensing boards, employers, transfer partners, and graduate programs recognize it?
5	**Protection and evidence**	How will the state communicate limits, monitor outcomes, and change course?

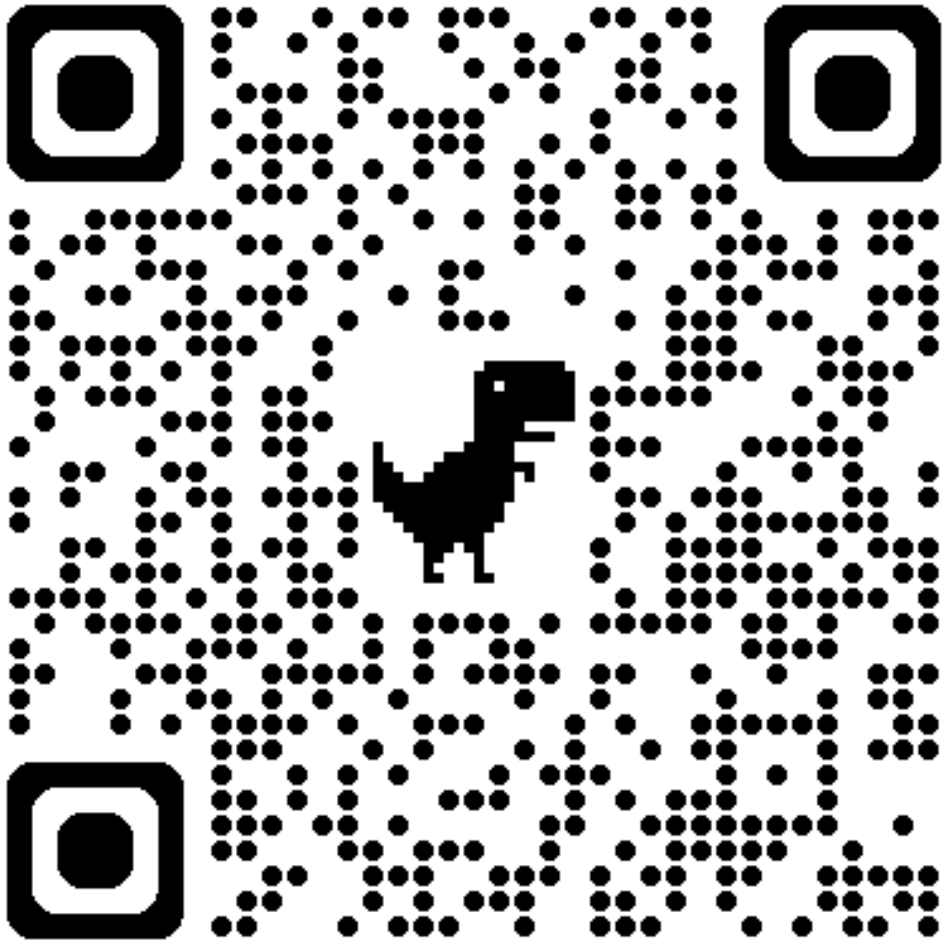
Ask questions throughout the session

Scan the QR code to submit a question at any point

We'll return to your questions during the discussion

How many reduced-credit bachelor’s degree programs will be approved by the end of the 2026-27 academic year?

Scan the QR code to guess



ELEVATE Postsecondary Network Interest Form

Scan the QR code to access the interest form

Three questions to take home

1. **What problem are we trying to solve?**

2. **Where can credits fall without outcomes, options, or recognition falling with them?**

3. **What evidence and guardrails would make us confident enough to proceed?**

Tom Sudkamp | Jason Lee | Greg DeSantis

Ohio Department of Higher Education | RAND | Jobs for the Future