

Flex your college's courses

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New thinking about course scheduling policies and practices makes student needs a top priority

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A more centralized approach to course scheduling at Somerset Community College has increased the rates of filled classroom seats and helped students fit in the courses they need to graduate on time. Between 2008 and 2014, the average seat-fill rate has increased by 24 percent and the average student credit load has increased by 48 percent.



Students don't quite run the show when it comes to course scheduling. But colleges and universities are striving to make it easier for them—with their ongoing juggle of work, family and school commitments—to take the classes necessary to meet educational objectives in time to [graduate](#).

Course scheduling policies and practices tend to date back—way back—to a time of paper-based processes that were much less capable of allowing big variations in how classes were offered. And faculty have traditionally wanted a say in when and where they teach. But, driven by student scheduling needs and the explosion of data analysis tools, registrars and other officials at more institutions are providing more flexibility in course scheduling.

Degree audits keep students on target as they choose courses each semester. Students can choose multiple session lengths for in-person and online classes—fitting more instruction into a single semester. Online courses allow self-paced instruction.

And as administrative systems manage the back-end logistics needed to make it all happen, campus leaders can overcome resistance to change by reminding faculty that a flexible schedule will help achieve everyone's common goal: student success.

Out with the old

Consider New Mexico State University. For years the school offered only what the faculty wanted to teach and thought necessary, says Hector Sanchez, assistant registrar. As such, the institution was basically operating in the blind when it came to course scheduling.

Some courses filled too soon. Others were offered only in the spring or fall. These limitations resulted in some students waiting a term to get a required course or signing up for classes just to maintain their credit loads.

"This old way of handing course scheduling was negatively impacting a lot of students," says Sanchez. "And it stood to negatively impact the university's overall graduation rate."

About three years ago, the registrar's office installed an analytics tool from Ad Astra to determine which high-demand courses were not being offered frequently enough—and which classes were taught too often. The software also identified scheduling bottlenecks and helped schedule rooms and loads more efficiently.

New Mexico State and other universities have also expanded course delivery options to include the hybrid online/in-person model. In 2014, Hodges University in Florida launched Upower—a program of self-paced, online program options. Undergraduates pay \$2,500 and graduates pay \$3,000 for six months of unlimited course access, and can begin the program the first of each month. The school offers two associate-level, five bachelors-level and three masters-level programs through Upower. Four students graduated during the first year of the program. Currently, there are 200 students enrolled, says Al Ball, dean of Hodge's Fisher School of Technology.

In implementing this program, the school had to meet a variety of regulatory challenges, requiring the exchange of many emails and phone calls between Hodges and the Department of Education to determine Title IV policy. Internally, various departments also had to change some policies and procedures, such as requiring any program changing to Upower to spend at least 18 months in planning and development, says Ball.

To support the program (which now has 200 students) and institute the new policies, the registrar's office worked closely with program chairs, the other student services departments and Ball, says Kelly Miller, director of student records.

Miller says her office was in "constant communication" with IT to ensure changes in the SIS were properly set up. New terms and schedules for Upower students had to be created and thorough testing was required to make sure students could access the courses in Blackboard upon subscribing, and that they were being charged correctly.

A new course status was created in the system to allow students to enroll in a full-time course load to meet their financial aid requirements. The update prevents courses that don't fit the schedule from being made available to students.

Course sessions redefined

Another big change at Hodges is the offering of accelerated, eight-week terms, providing an alternative to the 15-week term. "Mini Term A" (first half of semester) and "Mini Term B" (second half of semester) are the equivalent of the standard 15-week course in terms of objectives, learning outcomes and credits.

Redefining course sessions can also mean altering weekly meet times. When administrators at Volunteer State Community College in Tennessee noticed that their Tuesday/Thursday sections often filled up sooner than their Monday/Wednesday/Friday session, they decided to survey students about their ideal schedule for "on-ground" courses. This survey revealed that students preferred to have classes on Monday/Wednesday and Tuesday/Thursday, freeing up the fifth day of the week, says Tim Amyx, director of admissions and college registrar.

"Work and family obligations were the primary reason," he says. "With the support of faculty, we moved to the four-day schedule this fall (2015) with great success. It was all about offering the opportunity for our learners to fit college classes into their otherwise busy lives."

Even with the change, the campus is hardly empty on Fridays. Science labs are offered, all college offices remain open, and instructors can maintain office hours and attend committee meetings.

A tool from College Scheduler helps students find courses that fit their needs—such as having to avoid scheduling during a particular work shift. Also, freshmen are required to use the Student Educational Planner in Ellucian's DegreeWorks system to select courses that will meet degree requirements.

The Ohio State University has always offered plenty of scheduling choices, with the number of distance learning and hybrid courses expanding over the years. For 2016, the university will begin offering more condensed-learning

summer courses, sessions lasting four, six, eight or 12 weeks. The previous options were four or seven weeks long, explains Jack Miner, director of operations of the University Registrar.

Thinking out-of-the-box about course sessions can also mean adjusting class sizes. The NYU College of Dentistry, which has a full-time enrollment of 1,900, moved from full-class (about 380 students in a single room) to small-group scheduling in the fall of 2014. The action more effectively allows students away on clinical rotations (which could be in other parts of the country or world) to keep up with course work.

Now, small-group activities can total 96, 48, 24 or fewer students, depending on the class or course, says Andrew Spielman, professor and associate dean for academic affairs. Many courses are in a flexible format. Frequency varies. For example, in anatomy there are 32 groups with 12 students each and the course is offered 16 times per day, four times per week for a semester. But other courses might repeat just four times per year.

Other strategies include using the program Comquip from IQ Session to match class enrollment to the room that's a best fit—the institution has 28 different-sized classrooms. Faculty must start classes on the hour and end 10 minutes before the hour. This prevents needed classes from overlapping and makes course scheduling a little less complicated, since classes begin and end at the same time. It also improves classroom utilization and gives students time to move from one class to the next.

The school has shaved 300 curricular hours from its academic requirements, in some cases by changing the in-class activity with blended learning or determining which activities require less preparation time, says Spielman.

“Other components were simply removed and never replaced,” he adds. “The net effect was decompression and flexibility for students.”

In addition, all course content is being moved online, with podcasts and webinars also helping students on clinical rotations who don't have to return to class to keep up. Online examination software means students get corrected exams back more quickly, further freeing up class time.

The efficiencies also allowed the college to add new courses and learning modules to the curriculum.

“Students are very busy in a dental curriculum and need to be given additional opportunities for learning and to have flexible clinic rotations to ensure proper achievement of clinical competencies,” Spielman says.

Focusing on the benefits of flexible scheduling

Change can be hard for many people to accept, especially faculty who often regard any tinkering with course scheduling as an intrusion into their territory. Even so, those desiring change shouldn't be deterred. The effort is worth it, resulting in greater efficiencies and providing more benefit to the students, says Spielman.

In fact, the scheduling changes let the NYU College of Dentistry maximize the use of facilities, says Spielman. “Classroom utilization between 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. on average is about 60 to 70 percent. Some spaces, like preclinical lab and clinics, are used 85 percent of the time.”

At Hodges, Upower irked some faculty, as it required them to adopt a new attitude. They had to get used to being “on call” 24/7, since students in the subscription-based program expect quick turnarounds on communication and grading, says Ball.

“Furthermore, since students enter a course at different points, faculty consistently work at different points within a course at all times,” he says. “Self-paced learning is a different approach to education. It's been challenging to get people to think outside of the traditional education box and get them thinking about providing education in a different way.”

Time and education, such as face-to-face training sessions, helped to relieve fear and to overcome most objections, says Ball.

“Once we began to achieve faculty buy-in, we conducted collaborative design and organizational sessions with the faculty, which further promoted acceptance,” says Ball.

At Somerset Community College in Kentucky, inserting more flexibility into course scheduling initially caused some controversy among faculty, says Provost Tony Honeycutt. Several years ago, the college reviewed its scheduling processes thoroughly, using Ad Astra’s Strategic Scheduling CheckUp tool.

The analysis revealed areas within the academic schedule that were preventing students from having to deal with scheduling bottlenecks, off-grid scheduling patterns and incorrectly sequenced classes, he says.

Like other institutions, Somerset had historically based course scheduling on what faculty wanted to teach and when. Now officials take a more centralized approach based on student needs. The changes have brought increased speed toward graduation and higher seat-fill rates. And the college has saved \$4 million since 2008 by not delivering low-enrollment and duplicate sections.

“We still have scheduling meetings with divisional leaders to continually review progress and make adjustments,” says Honeycutt. “Scheduling cannot be a ‘one and done.’ Each term is different and requires a different approach that should be based on student demand, not on what was offered in the past. Flexibility isn’t a luxury. It’s a requirement.”

Resources

Pamela Mills-Senn is a Long Beach, California-based writer.

Also in this article:

[How to offer students flexible schedules](#)