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What Can We Say about the Impact of Compressed Calendars and Courses on Student Success?

February 2007

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Student success in the compressed calendar format was the focus of a breakout session at the Fall 2006 Plenary Session entitled "Does Length Matter? The Impact of Compressed Calendars and Courses on Student Success." Members of the Relations with Local Senates Committee gathered both data and written interpretations for the comparison of student success in compressed and standard format semesters. Much of the data was collected from the California Community College System Office website by the research team at Chaffey College and used with permission by faculty on the state committee. The information presented and the ensuing dialog may assist faculty in their local discussions on issues involved in creating a pedagogically sound calendar.

Data were collected from 33 of the 40 colleges on compressed calendar in 2005–2006 and the success and retention rates compared for three years prior to switching to the compressed format and three years after the switch. Success was defined as earning a grade of "C" or better. Retention included students registered in the class at the end of the semester regardless of grade. The data presented are only as accurate as the institution's internal auditing and review processes allow. The collective data for all 33 community colleges demonstrated that student success was slowly increasing the three years prior to the switch and then continued to slowly increase after changing to the compressed format (see Figure 1). The change in success rate was 3 % over the six year period, ending with a value of 68.1%. If, however, we look at data from the individual colleges, we will see fluctuations across those six years. The success rate for some colleges dipped after the conversion to compressed calendar and then continued to rise; other colleges had more random ups and downs. Interpreting the data from individual colleges is difficult since so many variables can be involved, such as changes in data collection processes and increased attention to student success. The significant finding of the data was that there was not total chaos and avalanching success rates when colleges adopted a compressed calendar. Instead, success of students continued to be fostered.

The retention rates of the 33 colleges taken collectively also presented an optimistic view of compressed calendars.

As with student success, retention was increasing for three years prior to the switch to compressed calendars and continued to rise thereafter, with a rise from 81.7% to 84% over the six year period (see Figure 2). There was a slight dip in retention the second year after switching to a compressed calendar. Once again, the data from the individual colleges fluctuated. The collective data on both success and retention did raise an interesting question: Why are only 68.1% of the 84% retained students earning a grade of C or better?

Success rates were also compared for these categories of courses:

- Pre-collegiate Basic Skills–Courses that do not count toward a degree and are not calculated into overall GPA.
- Basic Skills (2 levels below transfer level) –Courses can be used to satisfy degree requirements and are calculated into GPA.
- Non-Basic Skills (transfer level)

The data found in these categories revealed that students in both transfer level and pre-collegiate level classes tolerated the compressed calendar and showed slight improvements on success and retention rates. It is not clear why the pre-collegiate group paralleled the transfer level classes. The students enrolled in basic skills classes, however, declined in success and retention for the first two years after the switch, and then rates improved. The research team at Chaffey does state that only 0.33% of all enrollments were in basic skills and so any minor change in actual numbers can result in a large percentage. The data presented at the breakout session does parallel the observations of Glendale College. In analysis of their own data, Glendale found success rates in developmental levels of English and math more consistently decreased; success rates of students in pre-transfer or transfer level courses seemed to increase; and success in ESL in nearly all levels increased. Glendale also observed that student success rates increased in English, Chemistry, and Biology sequences and the Glendale Student Success Task Force concluded that higher-level students seemed to do better at their college in a compressed calendar. However, developmental students and those with disabilities may do worse.

Both the presentation and the dialog reinforced the need to pursue alternative calendars with the involvement of the campus in order to plan for a smooth conversion. Campus dialogs need to address concerns and strategies for issues such as time for student activities, professional development, shared governance, committees, etc. Discussion at the session revealed that faculty on a compressed calendar felt the "urgency" of the shorter term, yet nearly all present did not want to go back to the extended semester. Some colleges successfully integrated college hours into their compressed formats and others felt there was no time for committees or student activities. Faculty at the discussion referred to a breakout at a previous plenary session where a survey of campuses on compressed calendars revealed a neutral effect on collegial consultation. In addition, local research was emphasized since other influencing factors on student success and retention could be readily identified. Faculty attending the breakout and listening to the discussion were armed with sufficient data about both concerns and successes so that they could present informed opinions when participating in their campus dialogs on alternative calendars.

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