

Calendar Conversion

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Overview

Discussion of the standard term length has long been a topic in higher education. At Ohlone, the discussion expanded from the standard semester versus quarter system, into trying to offer courses in multiple timeframes (15, 12, and 9 week terms) to build enrollment and better meet the needs of students. While short term classes within the regular term were becoming more popular, overall enrollment at the college had taken a 4-5 percent decrease and a significant loss was seen in adult learners. It was believed that both the term start date and length were negatively affecting student access and success.

This is the story of how the college implemented a significant calendar change to the benefit of students. This was a change from the traditional 18-week semester to a 16-week semester, which has been called the “alternative” calendar by the Chancellor’s Office (although a majority of colleges have moved to the calendar, so the term “alternative” may need re-thinking).

In the spring of 2005 a group of interested faculty formed a task force through the College Council to review several different possible ways to structure the college unified calendar. The group wanted to be sure that course offerings fit into both traditional (18-24 year old, full-time students) and non-traditional (adult, working) student needs while allowing for innovation in the curriculum. Other community college calendars, student enrollment experiences, student retention and success, and faculty reactions were examined and surveyed. The group also pulled together several factions of the college (students, CSEA and SEIU staff, and administration) to examine these different models and provide input on pros and cons of shifting towards a condensed calendar.

At an all faculty meeting in August 2005, two items related to the condensed calendar were on the agenda.

1. A suggestion that the college shift its start date back (at least one week) to begin as close as possible to the Labor Day weekend. This later start date was seen as better coinciding with the high school start dates as well as the start dates of neighboring colleges. It was also suggested, from monitoring enrollment patterns over the last four years, that starting earlier was not to the advantage of students.
2. A recommendation to the administration to shift to a 16 week calendar.

The result was a unanimous endorsement of the later start date and to approve the 16 week calendar by an 85 percent margin. This event, in and of itself, was in fact a significant campus event but even more impressive was the fact that the faculty proponents of the recommendations were suggesting an implementation plan for fall 2006 (a full year later) to allow staff the time for all the computer programming changes as well as the state approval process. Because registration for a fall term typically begins in mid-April and the class schedule must be completed by mid-February to meet printing deadlines, this actually meant that the new schedule needed to be fully implemented in about four to five months. The typical approval process by the state took six months after the entire request package had been submitted. The condensed calendar was developed, accepted by the Board, and approved by the Chancellor’s Office by the end of January 2006, students registered in April 2006 for the fall 2006 term, and a record enrollment was set for the college.

Relationship to College Values

*We provide lifelong learning opportunities for students, college personnel, and the community.
We open access to higher education and actively reach out to underserved populations.*

The shift to the 16 week calendar with later starting dates was intended to create a more convenient schedule for the students we serve. The condensed calendar allowed for fewer meeting times of longer duration and quicker feedback on performance. The research from other colleges on such a calendar indicated increases in enrollment, retention, and student success. A condensed calendar was also seen as advantageous in allowing for more time between terms to assess, advise, and register students and also provided for the possibility of a short (four week) winter term. For the adult learner the feedback received was that this schedule translated into fewer days away from work, fewer child care days, and the potential for more meaningful (longer) class sessions.

We value trust, respect, and integrity.

An ongoing atmosphere of trust and support was evident on the campus throughout this process. This was especially important when the “rules of engagement” with the Chancellor’s Office began to shift and vacillate in the middle of the process.

We promote teamwork and open communication.

The manner in which the college initiated and implemented this project was only successful because of how it involved all areas of the campus in the analysis and decision making.

Contribution to Achieving College Goals

Develop strategies to increase the proportion of full-time students including learning communities, cohort groups, enhanced facilities, and improved course availability.

This endeavor certainly promoted many of the values of the college. The task of implementing the condensed calendar was achieved and its effectiveness will be evaluated in terms of student enrollment, effectiveness, and success. However, the aspect that was perhaps more significant was the process that the college experienced in achieving the task.

Two technical details were especially difficult. The first detail was how to adjust the college’s computer system to accommodate a change, and the second detail was what would be allowed by the Chancellor’s Office. Because the college’s computer support staff and involved end users were involved in these discussions from the beginning, the tenor of this process was solution-oriented and collaborative. Resulting suggestions were grounded in a philosophy of improvement of instruction and service and were perceived as achievable.

Throughout the entire process support from all campus members was tremendous. The entire campus community displayed a willingness to learn and work together towards this common goal and value. Academic departments were challenged to redesign their course offerings to fit into the new schedule and care had to be taken across divisions to make sure that students could still obtain a workable schedule. Financial Aid, Human Resources, Payroll, and Information Technology all worked through the myriad of technical problems that had to be resolved because of a shared database. The outcome was a college community more knowledgeable about the system supporting them and a technical staff much more involved in why their work is important.

Develop across the curriculum the Learning College Model, utilizing methods and technologies that hold the most promise for improving student course and program completion success rates.

A group of faculty, staff, administration, and managers were all involved over a few months time-frame in an ongoing effort of assessing the needs and evaluating the parameters allowed by law and the various impacts. This project demanded that all involved take a great deal of risk because the specific outcomes were often learned along the way and because the actual implementation of the college’s proposal was never certain. The Learning College Model was actually shared with the Chancellor’s Office staff by consulting with them regularly, serving on an ad hoc statewide task force,

and helping to create a curriculum grid that is now being used by the state as one of the acceptable templates for a condensed calendar.

With the direction and support provided by the Faculty Senate and then approval of College Council, the Chancellor's Office was contacted to begin the approval process. At this time the Chancellor's Office was scrutinizing colleges who had shifted to a 16 week calendar who were allegedly inflating their contact hours (and thus apportionment funding) beyond the standard amount of time necessary for a Carnegie unit of credit. Because community colleges are funded on "seat time" or hours, the approval process was actually under consideration and the Chancellor's Office response to our request was initially to put a freeze on all such requests until the abuses had been investigated. Given this concern and the extremely tight timeline under which we were working, the Chancellor's Office staff agreed to work with us as we developed our proposal and to place its consideration on a "fast track" for January 2005. A grid of every possible course offering needed to be prepared showing no excessive structural inflation of hours/apportionment. Since the Academic Calendar must be approved before a class schedule is produced, the timeline for implementation became even tighter. Six such requests were received by the Chancellor's Office for calendar changes during this time and only Ohlone and Gavilan College, who used the Ohlone grid, received approval.

Demonstration of the Meeting of One or More of the Accreditation Standards

II.A; II.B

Student needs in terms of course scheduling and convenience were the central principles that drove this change.

III.A; III.B; III.C

The allocation of human, physical, and technological resources all had to be in play to reach a successful conclusion. All three areas had to be reallocated and reprioritized to support this project.

IV

This change was initiated at the grass roots level of students and faculty and then facilitated by administration. This process was key to developing solutions that were supported by all areas of the college. This attention to process also eased negotiation concerns with the three unions involved on campus. Teams of staff, faculty, and managers worked diligently through a shared governance system.

Expression of Accreditation Themes

Evaluation, Planning, and Improvement

The process used by the college to evaluate enrollment patterns, student needs, and possible alternatives; develop a plan to improve the structure to better meet those needs; and actually implement an improved system is great evidence of success for this standard. Perhaps an even greater example was the manner in which the campus took it upon itself to learn about, explore, and reinvent itself in a systemic manner.

Enrollment patterns from April 2006 through the middle of August 2006 mirrored those of the previous three years. While positive in the sense that enrollment had not dropped, the results of these efforts seemed lackluster in terms of any substantive enrollment changes. Beginning with August 20, 2006 (the college's former start date), enrollment began to climb daily over the previous year. By census day the enrollment stood at the highest rate ever achieved by the college, with a 4.8 percent increase in headcount and a 10.5 percent increase in FTES as compared to the previous year. This translates into a higher percentage of full time students. At the end of fall 2006 the FTES was 12 percent greater than the previous year. While marketing efforts, automated waitlists, and a later

start date certainly factor into this success story, it seems clear that the united efforts of the entire college community have paid off.

The shorter term and resultant registration period did prompt discussion and concern from faculty and students. This discussion caused the college to reexamine some of its registration and no show workflows to better stabilize enrollments during the first two weeks of classes.

Anecdotal comments from students seem positive, although students do have difficulty with a shorter add/drop period. Student retention and success figures seem to have improved over both fall 2006 and spring 2007 but have not maintained through fall 2007. The changing demographic (an older student body returning to classes) may be the cause of this fluctuation, but additional analysis is needed.

Dialogue

This task could not have been accomplished without the ongoing energy that went into individual group and campus dialogue. It was through the dialogue that issues were clarified and prioritized, solutions found, and strategies for success developed. The ongoing dialogue with the Chancellor's Office was equally important in the attainment of this goal.