NOT ON A SCHOOL NIGHT: USING CREATIVE SCHEDULING AS A STRATEGIC ADVANTAGE IN AN INCREASINGLY COMPLEX EDUCTIONAL MARKETPLACE

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ABSTRACT

Changing from traditional timing and duration of instruction has helped spawn new types of universities. This paper investigates whether traditional 4-year colleges might become more competitive in the changing higher education environment by rethinking traditional notions of academic time.

INTRODUCTION

It was the best of times it was the best of times. The 1990s economic boom held forth promises of unprecedented opportunity and wealth. High-paying jobs were abundant for those with the right skills. Many non-traditional students recognized that education would be a key to their success in a knowledge- based economy. They returned to colleges and universities to continue or complete their educations in order to sharpen their competitive edges. While the potential payoffs of higher education were attractive, the immediate allure of higher-paying jobs in an expanding economy increased the opportunity cost of pursuing traditional full-time academic programs.

The University of Phoenix and National University recognized an attractive opportunity and rose to the marketing challenge of targeting fully-employed professionals with attractive part-time programs. Smartly, they positioned themselves against traditional universities on a critical dimension – time. These institutions recognized that by offering courses at times that would not interfere with key money-earning hours, they could attract a student body willing to trade more money (a relatively abundant commodity) for more scheduling convenience. They positioned themselves as offering convenient schedules, modular courses not stretched over long semesters, and a relatively shorter time to degree. The price tag was relatively high compared with traditional state-supported institutions.

These traditional institutions, such as the California State University system, began to see these newer universities as potential competitive rivals. CSU offered a traditional college experience at a significantly lower price. However they could not compete with the Phoenixes and Nationals' capacity to mint new MBAs and credentialed teachers to meet the seemingly unending demand for building California's workforce. In an effort to increase accessibility and meet enrollment targets, the system began an initiative to implement year round operations (YRO), increase evening and weekend classes, and decrease the time to degree.

What a difference a decade makes. California now faces staggering budget deficits, the fallout of a high tech bust, the exodus of jobs to lower-cost markets, and the belt tightening challenges of a new governor chosen in an historical recall election. The CSU faces massive funding cuts in the face of increasing demands on its higher education system from a growing population with more time than money on its hands. This paper investigates whether or not moving beyond traditional academic schedules can help the CSU overcome many of these obstacles and help it remain a strong player in a competitive educational market.

THE STUDY

The two-phased study was conducted at Cal State San Marcos. The qualitative first phase involved a series of nine focus groups. The focus groups included faculty, students, administrators, and staff – all constituencies that might be affected by changing academic schedules. The goal was to define the main scheduling concerns of each constituency. Focus group transcripts were analyzed and used to define questionnaire items to include in the second, quantitative phase of the study. A survey instrument was developed and distributed to students, faculty, administrators, and staff.

With ten members in each of the groups, a total of 100 members of the university community participated. There was roughly even participation from among the faculty, staff, administration, and student body. Participants were asked some broad questions about flexible scheduling, whether or not they had experienced schedules other than the traditional semester system, and perceived advantages or drawbacks to offering courses in blocks other than 16 week semesters. They were

also asked which type(s) of scheduling they would find most or least beneficial to them. There were four different moderators trained to follow a set questionnaire protocol.

The discussions touched on all five dimensions of time – timing, periodicity, frequency, duration, and tempo (Lauer 1981). However, comments on only two of these dimensions were translated into o survey questions for the second phase of the study. These are timing and duration. Timing refers to scheduling of events, such as class sessions. Duration describes how long individual class sessions, courses, semesters, and degree programs last. This was done for two reasons. The first was keep the survey instrument short and the response task as simple as possible. The second was because timing and duration of sessions are the most easily-changed elements of the schedule. The population for the survey included all faculty and staff and students. Completed surveys were collected from 99 students, 34 faculty.

RESULTS

Although the focus groups were structured around the five general questions listed above, Lauer's (1981) five dimensions of social time provide convenient taxonomy for summarizing the discussions. These dimensions include periodicity, duration, tempo, timing, and sequence. These five themes were woven throughout the discussions of the advantages and disadvantages of traditional versus non-traditional academic schedules. In the following analyses, the word traditional refers to the semester-based academic year that includes a fall semester, winter break, spring semester, and summer vacation. Semesters last 15-16 weeks and sessions run weekdays and evenings.

Periodicity and *duration* are two closely related dimensions of social time. In the context of this study, periodicity refers to the frequency with which sessions begin and end and duration refers to how long courses, classes, or semesters last. The discussion focused on the tradeoff between duration and frequency. For example, the tradeoff might be shorter more intensive 4-week course that begin and end four times during the semester, or longer semester long courses that begin only in the fall and spring semesters.

The shorter, more intensive courses seem to be quite appealing to students and faculty. Some noted that dragging out a course over a full semester, followed by a long vacation, adversely affects students' academic engagement. Not only do they get bored with the subject during the semester, but they risk forgetting material over the long breaks. This necessitates spending as good part of each new semester reviewing old material. This leads to another dimension of social time that is critical to academic scheduling: *sequencing.* The pedagogical reason necessitating course sequencing is self evident; introductory courses must precede advanced topics.

One instructor noted that he enjoyed the intensity and momentum of the shorter modules where he met his students every day for a four week period. Others who are more accustomed to traditional semesters were blown away by the intensity of the short courses. It is clear that the tradeoff is between cramming a semester's worth of material into a week, and dragging a week's worth of material over a semester. Some noted the diminished returns of classes lasting more than two or three hours. While it might be convenient for students to attend class once a week for eight hours, there is a limit to their attention spans and ability to absorb material.

Too much flexibility also may lead to confusion and logistic difficulties for students. If a wide variety of course formats were offered, students might be enrolled simultaneously four, six, eight, and sixteen week modules, for example. One student expressed it best: "it is difficult to keep up when constantly switching gears between sprints and marathons."

More frequent starting and stopping of new courses, might be more pedagogically appealing to faculty and students, but might be terribly challenging for administrative staff. Whereas there are only two peak busy times for enrollment and registration, and grade recording in a traditional semester year, offering short modules that start up frequently requires more administrative effort, offering staff little or no downtime to manage operations. Federal regulations governing financial are tied to the traditional semester calendar. Processing student financial aid according to an alternative calendar would become much more complicated, according to the administrative staff.

The duration and periodicity of academic scheduling affect the *Tempo* of teaching, learning, and running an academic institution. Tempo refers to the speed or pace of activities. Many of the participants agreed that sixteen week semesters are too long and ten-week quarters (a popular variant in higher education) might be too short. However, one faculty member noted that in the shorter courses, it seems like as

soon as midterms are graded, it's time for final exams. One participant described the quarter system as "in and out" learning.

Timing of classes is perhaps the most immediately changeable element of the academic calendar. Without changing the duration and periodicity of courses, it is possible to change the timing of classes. Traditional college courses are offered in Monday/Wednesday or Tuesday/Thursday daytime schedules. This makes for crowded conditions during the week, but excess capacity on Fridays, weekends, as well as late evening and early mornings. While it is easy enough to schedule faculty to come in to teach during these traditionally low demand hours and while working students or those with children might find it convenient, administrative staff noted that the issue is not so simple. A full range of services – from advising to financial aid and registration, among other functions, would need to expand their working hours from the typical 9-5 Monday-Friday schedule to a more comprehensive schedule. Unlike students and faculty, whose academic schedules are flexible by the standards of the working public, staffers typically work regular business hours. .

The focus groups indicated that the most immediate changes to the university's academic time schedule would be timing. Since there is excess capacity on weekends and, to some extent, in the evenings, changes to the timing of instruction (absent the cost for non-instructional services) seemed the most reasonable place for more in-depth study. The survey instrument concentrated upon the timing of instruction in terms of hours of the day and days of the week. Students, faculty, and staff were asked which times and days would be most and least conducive for student learning and access.

TIMING AND STUDENT LEARNING

Faculty, staff and students tended to agree that classes scheduled earlier than 8 a.m. or past 10 p.m. would not be desirable. Three-quarters of the faculty and approximately two-thirds of students and staff believe that instruction would be compromised by holding classes too late into the evening. In contrast, fewer than half of all those surveyed believed that instructional quality would suffer from early morning classes on weekdays. Most students surveyed agreed that classes should be held between 8 a.m. and 10 p.m. Few expressed interest in attending classes any earlier in the morning or later in the evening. Most of the students agreed that it would be difficult to maintain focus and concentration if classes were held at dawn or much after 10 p.m. Most believed that neither students nor instructors would be at peak mental performance levels during these times.

TIMING AND ACCESS

A major campus initiative has been to increase access to a broader variety of students. A significant proportion of the university's students work full time. Many are first generation college students. A large number of students are older than traditional college-aged (18-22), are married, and have children of their own. Increasing access to California's diverse population was a major catalyst behind the decision to change the academic calendar from the agrarian-based tradition to the year-round model.

The results indicate that, given the choice of the extreme ends of the day, students, staff, and faculty all view the adding earlier classes as providing more access than adding more classes after 10 p.m. In a separate item, more than three quarters of the faculty and staff viewed adding more evening courses between 7p.m. and 10p.m. as a good way to increase student access.

These logistical obstacles that extremely early morning classes or late evening classes present to students fell into two general categories: conflicts with family time or conflicts with work schedules. Many of the students surveyed are parents of young children. These students indicated that it would be impossible to attend classes that conflicted with getting their children ready for school or spending time with their families in the evenings. Others noted that their full time day jobs limited their availability to attending classes in the evening. Even so, most felt that sitting in a lecture hall much beyond 10p.m. after a long day of work would not yield many benefits. Another common theme among the students at this commuter campus was traffic.

Like students, staff members also worried about maintaining security on campus at night. However, they also mentioned that increased night time security would pose an additional resource demand on the campus. Expanding services beyond the 9-5 Monday-Friday schedule would impinge on staff members' personal family time.

Faculty concerns seemed to bridge those of both students and staff. The strongest agreement among the three groups surveyed was the increased access that would result from offering more classes between 8 a.m. and noon on Saturdays. Among staff, 91% recognized Saturday mornings and 69% saw Saturday evenings as opportunities for increased

access. Saturday mornings appealed to 65% of faculty and 44% of students, and more than half of the faculty saw Saturday afternoons as possible options. The numbers fell off markedly for time slots on Saturday evenings

DISCUSSION

This study was undertaken during relatively flush times for the state of California. With a robust economy, budget deficits, and growing demand for instruction among upwardly-mobile working adults, the Cal State system needed to remain competitive with institutions like National and Phoenix. The system could not build facilities and hire faculty fast enough to keep up with the growing demand of the new tidal wave of incoming students. Flexible scheduling would help maximize the use of existing facilities and bolster the ever increasing growth in full-time equivalent students (FTES). The system was attempting to position itself as offering a more traditional, academically sound education at a lower price, yet still offering flexible schedules like National and Phoenix.

Now, with a stagnating economy, growing unemployment, and budget cuts, the Cal State University finds itself with an embarrassment of riches, in terms of available FTES. For the first time in it brief history, Cal State San Marcos is being asked to cap admissions and, for some programs, declare impaction status. During the boom years, non-traditional students return to the university in droves to upgrade their skills and earn degrees, many took fewer courses over longer periods of time than normal 4-year baccalaureate course of study.

In meeting the demands of a new economic reality of little if any growth in personnel programs, the central administration is beginning a new effort to decrease time to degree. This would enable more students to get through there programs more quickly and possibly, in the long run, provide more access to more students through leaner, more efficient operations. This seems to make sense, in light of the changing economic landscape of the state. While tuition and fees rose for the first time in decades, the opportunity cost for pursuing full time study has fallen in light of decreased demand for middle managers, high tech specialists, and credentialed teachers. Even though tuition has increased by a significant percentage (some fees have tripled), the price of a state-supported education is far less than the price tags of private education or the quick convenient programs offered at Phoenix and National.

The allure of quick learn-as-you-work programs might wane in light of the slowing economy. However, this not the time for traditional colleges and universities should not adapt an 'I –told-you-it-would-not-work' retrenchment attitude toward academic time. Indeed, the jobs lost in the high-tech and service sectors have not disappeared: they have relocated offshore to countries like India, Bangladesh, China, and Pakistan. Working (or unemployed) adults will look towards state-assisted educational programs to remain competitive in a shrinking marketplace. While they may have lost their jobs, these individuals have not lost their families and the challenges of managing busy schedules and busy lives may, indeed, become more intense. The trade-off between money and time may now favor institutions like the Cal State system over more costly private or non-traditional institutions.

Faculty, staff, and students approach the question of the appropriateness of instructional times from a variety of perspectives. Each of these constituencies brings different talents and needs to the institution. Nonetheless, these three groups are made up of adult individuals, all of whom have lives beyond the walls of the ivory tower. This is especially true on the campus upon which the study was conducted. As a commuter campus located in the suburbs of a major metropolitan area, the vast majority of these individuals must drive to school. Driving distances vary from a mile to over sixty miles in some cases. There is a strong sense, among all surveyed, that there are times when the campus is "closed" while school is in session between the hours of 8 a.m. and 10 p.m. Monday through Friday, and perhaps on Saturday.

As they fit the traditional academic year into their year-round lives, faculty, students and staff share many common concerns. Several respondents in each group noted that Sunday classes would conflict with religious beliefs and the need for at least a two-day- a- week sabbatical. Somehow, going to school (or work) on Sunday conflicts with most people's sensibilities - whether religious or not. Sunday, more than Saturday, seems to be the sacred weekend most are not willing to sacrifice. While the 'not on a school night' may become an excuse used six nights a week instead of five, it seems that, for the time being, Americans may cling dearly the 'never on a Sunday' mantra.

SELECTED REFERENCES

Available from the authors.