Article

To Print or Not to Print: An Investigation of Print Marketing Preference and Use in the Campus Community

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Abstract

The current trend of increasing return on investment by phasing out print marketing campaigns in favor of digital and social media-based marketing may not be appropriate for all campus communities or stakeholders.

The authors investigated the communication preferences of students, faculty, and staff at a diverse, public university. In addition, they surveyed the primary use and effectiveness of a printed schedule.

Their findings indicate that most students use the printed Summer Term schedule to check the session calendar, dates, deadlines, and policies. They also compared printed schedule use among new and returning students.

In stark contrast to the students surveyed, faculty and staff were found to use the printed schedule to obtain general campus information.

The printed schedule, both mailed directly and available for pick-up on campus, was preferred as a method of communication at a level on par with social media.

While these findings may not be generalizable to all summer term programs, they indicate that the conversation regarding print marketing is perhaps one that should be revisited.

Keywords: print marketing, direct mail marketing, new and returning students, faculty and staff, marketing preference, marketing effectiveness

Introduction

Summer Term at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), is a self-supporting program; we enjoy no institutional or outside monetary support. As such, marketing is critical to program success, so appropriate and informed marketing strategies ensure the budget is spent appropriately. Summer Term marketing aims to increase student enrollment, increase brand awareness, and share important policies and procedures (Bilella, 2013; Sedgwick, Ruppert, & Zenteno, 2020). The UNLV Summer Term program uses a mix of traditional and digital marketing pieces, including direct mail, advertisements in university mailed pieces, online advertisements, and social media.

Objectively, one of our most important marketing pieces is the Summer Term schedule. It contains information on the upcoming session, including

- drop dates and deadlines,
- policies that are specific to the summer semester,
- general campus information, and
- information about courses offered.

The [North American Association of Summer Sessions (NAASS),](#) a professional summer term organization, provides online and in-person networking space for summer term programs to share best practices. Through these conversations, we discovered that few programs provide printed schedules to students and constituents, and fewer still send them via direct mail. Believing that the return on investment with print marketing had plummeted, colleges and universities have been communicating mostly through smaller print marketing pieces and digital marketing. As a result, we decided to conduct a cost/benefit analysis by exploring the preferences of our constituents to determine if the printed Summer Term schedule was worth retaining.

Institutional Profile

UNLV is a large R-1[1] urban public university serving more than 30,000 students. More than 80% of our population are undergraduate students and over 70% attend full time (UNLV, September 13, 2021). In some ways, UNLV is similar to peer institutions. However, in a number of ways, UNLV is a unique institution with unique challenges.

For the past five years we have ranked among the top two most diverse campuses in the US (UNLV 2021), and we are classified as a minority-serving institution with a high first-generation population (UNLV 2020, UNLV 2021). We are also classified as a veteran-serving institution, which brings another facet of diversity and student needs to the table. Further, most of our students are commuter students (they do not live on campus), and we have a high non-traditional

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1   According to the [Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education.](#)

student population. Many of our students are professionals who keep a job while attending university.

We balance our decision-making against the needs of our constituents; first-generation students often need additional support to be successful as they navigate the confusing, jargon-filled world of higher education. To get an accurate understanding of what our unique community needs, we determined it was best to survey our constituents.

Summer Term Profile

Summer term at UNLV takes place during the 13 weeks between spring and fall semesters. Session I is three weeks long, while Sessions II and III are each five weeks long. We also have 12-week courses that span all three sessions and dynamic courses that can start and end anytime within the 12-week period.

To control for the impacts of COVID-19, we are providing the following statistics for summer 2019. Our students completed more than 75,000 student credit hours across the 12-week term. Summer term students make up a subpopulation of UNLV students that generally reflects the overall demographic trends of the university. More than 12,000 students attend summer term at UNLV—almost 80% of our attendees are undergraduate students and approximately 10% are non-degree seeking.

Summer term enrollment has remained relatively steady over recent years, COVID-19 impacts notwithstanding, but one of the identified aims of our marketing is to increase student enrollment.

Website traffic fluctuates heavily, with little use during the fall and steady increases into and throughout summer. Spikes in enrollment occurred during COVID-19, but we anticipate enrollment to settle back down in the upcoming year. Hence, the timing for our exploration of the printed schedule was serendipitous in that it provides guidance as we continue to pivot in response to recent global changes.

One such pivot revolved around our social media presence and campaigns. We recently increased both our organic posting and our advertising presence on social media platforms. This has resulted in an increase in engagement with students. For example, we beat industry standards in terms of engagement on Instagram—average engagement was 0.85% (Hootsuite, 2021) whereas we achieved 5.89%. In 2021, social media accounted for almost as much website traffic as organic searches.

The Summer Term Schedule

Annually, UNLV Summer Term prints and mails the Summer Term schedule. This piece serves dual purposes:

- **It allows us to communicate the Summer Term policies**, which are different from the fall and spring program policies. For example, in fall and spring, a student can drop a class well into the first week with no financial penalty; however, in summer term, the class must be dropped the business day before that class begins.

- **It is seen as the major marketing piece for Summer Term.** The schedule is mailed to the home addresses of all active students, as well as distributed to local community resource hubs, such as libraries and community centers. It is also sent to some targeted constituents; for example, we distribute copies to the local school district as teachers tend to take summer classes to support their credentials.

In 2019, 55,000 schedules were printed and distributed for a cost of around $28,500:

- 80% were mailed to active students
- 10% were mailed to targeted constituents
- 10% were distributed across various campus offices and outreach events

At UNLV, the printed schedule is unique to Summer Term. The closest comparison would be the fall and spring catalog, which includes campus policies and procedures, as well as course descriptions and degree requirements. However, that document is only provided online and is not seen as a marketing piece by the university.

A PDF version of the Summer Term schedule is posted on the Summer Term website, however, all the information in the schedule is also spread throughout the website. There is no unique information provided only in the printed schedule.

The Summer Term schedule contains information covering four main topics:

- **Session calendar and course dates:** The dates for sessions I, II, and III are included on the cover of the schedule, and a color-coded calendar is included inside.

- **Drop dates, deadlines, and policies:** The bulk of the information in the schedule is included in this section, including tuition and fees, financial aid and payment plan information, and registration guidelines.

- **General campus information:** Here, we provide information on parking services, student computing accounts, transcript requests, and more.

- **Listing of courses that will be offered:** This is a list of courses confirmed as of the date of publication; it does not include actual course dates or times. Students are directed to the Summer Term website or the UNLV registration system to review course dates and times.

Prior to conducting this survey, the schedule had received mixed reviews from Summer Term staff. Students often seemed to skim it, or not read the information at all.

Every year, Summer Term staff pushed hard to schedule courses as quickly as possible to make the print deadline. Department and college staff sometimes became upset when they realized their late-scheduled courses did not make the cutoff for inclusion in the printed schedule.

Despite this, feedback from the community regarding the schedule tended to be positive. Administrative staff around campus raved about the schedule, often extolling the usefulness in discussing Summer Term with students. Advisors, for example, liked to hand it out at advising meetings so they could refer students to the policies in the schedule rather than having to memorize unique Summer Term policies. Students readily picked up schedules from locations across campus, often stopping to flip through the schedule, talk about summer term, and ask questions.

Further, research shows print marketing affects people in a unique way (Mspark, 2019) and remains a thriving channel to share information with potential incoming students (Rogers & Stoner, 2015). This solidified the need to explore the preferences of our particular constituents to better inform future schedule decisions.

Research Method

Participants

In the spring and summer of 2020, participants were recruited via social media posts and a link on the homepage of the Summer Term website to complete a survey. Reminders were sent out via social media every-other week during the survey period.

Participants were split into two groups: students and employees.

Students were asked about their prior summer attendance. This helped us better understand if the schedule had a different impact for a new summer student compared to a seasoned summer student.

Student participants were given the option to enter a raffle for one of three $10 coffee gift cards.

There are three types of employees at UNLV:

- **Administrative faculty** are employees whose primary functions are professional in nature and not academic instructional work.
- **Academic faculty** are employees whose primary functions involve instructional teaching and/or research
- **Classified staff** are state employees working in support positions.

We heard from colleagues that they used the schedule heavily to help them better navigate the unique aspects of summer term at UNLV. We anticipated that each of these three groups would find use in different topics contained in the schedule. For example, classified staff tend to assist faculty and departments in scheduling courses and organizing instructor schedules. Administrative faculty, on the other hand, includes advisors who meet with students and help them plan their academic careers. Faculty might refer to the schedule when answering student questions about dropping a class during the summer.

The Survey

The goal of the survey, as part of a cost/benefit analysis, was to determine if the printed schedule was fulfilling its intended purposes:

- To provide important information regarding Summer Term course dates, drop dates, deadlines, and policies
- To serve as a marketing piece to on- and off-campus constituents
- To provide general campus information

A related, yet distinct, aim of the survey was to identify ways constituents preferred to receive Summer Term information.

Content and face validity of the survey questions were established via review by experts who examined the items for undue complexity, ability to capture the information we were seeking, and potential ambiguity.

The survey contained a split in the logic flow upon answering if they were a student or staff member. Students were then asked how many credits they have taken during summer term. In alignment with best practices, this was the only demographic question (Exner, Carrillo, & Leif, 2021).

Staff were asked to identify their classification (academic faculty, administrative faculty, or classified) and their function on campus (advising, academic, or administrative support). Further, they were asked if they directly advised students on enrollment decisions. Academic faculty were asked how many credits they had taught in summer term.

From here, all respondents were merged into one flow to answer the schedule-specific questions. The questions reflected the four types of information in the schedule and asked what types the participant used and how important each topic was to them. Finally, they were asked the most effective way to communicate these types of information.

Results

Participant demographics:

- **Students:** 347 students participated in the study. Of these, 204 had attended summer term in the past.
- **Employees:** 29 employees participated in the study (19 administrative faculty, 6 academic faculty, and 4 classified staff).

All analyses were performed separately on student and employee respondents. Again, no other demographic information was collected as that was required to meet the goals of this study (Exner, Carrillo, & Leif, 2021).

Fulfillment of Intended Purpose

The first goal of the survey was to determine the extent to which the printed schedule was fulfilling its three purposes. Respondents were asked to indicate the way(s) they used the printed schedule; multiple answers were allowed (see Figure 1).

The majority of students indicated that they did indeed use the printed schedule. Most used the schedule to review courses that would be offered or review the session calendar and course dates. Students also used the schedule as a source of information about drop dates, deadlines, and policies. Of note, the printed schedule was not often used as a source of general campus information.
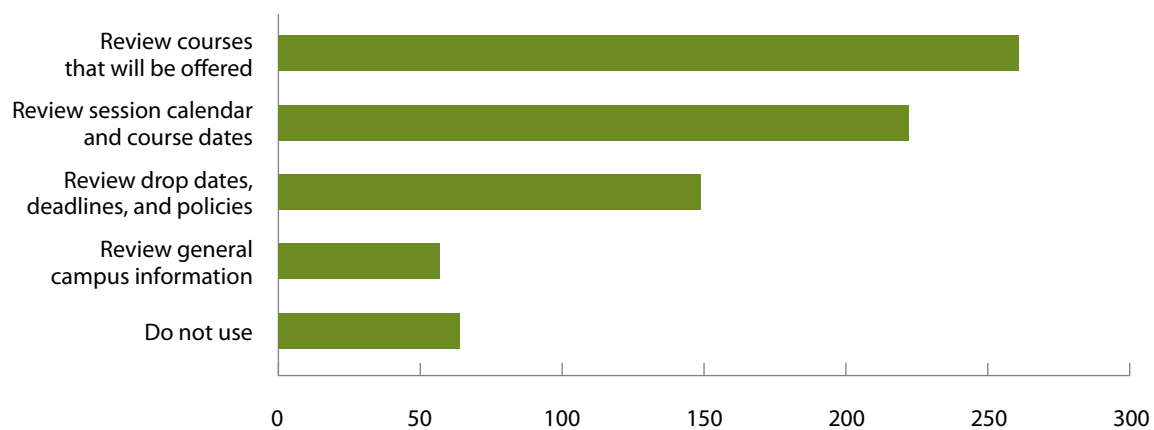

Figure 1: Ways Students Use the Printed Schedule

To examine the different ways students might use the Summer Term printed schedule depending on whether or not they had attended summer term in the past, the responses were broken down by the number of summer term credits taken (see Figure 2).

Courses were the category of information of primary interest for students across all credit amounts—whether shopping for courses to fulfill requirements or expediting a set degree sequence.

After taking their first course, the importance of the calendar increases for students. They quickly learned the value of checking course start and end dates in the printed schedule. One reason for this could be that students missed courses they wanted to take in their first summer as they were unaware of the registration or start and end dates of the sessions.

Regardless of summer term attendance, students did not look to the schedule as a source of general campus information. After several credits, students were less likely to use the printed schedule, perhaps as their familiarity with online Summer Term resources grew.
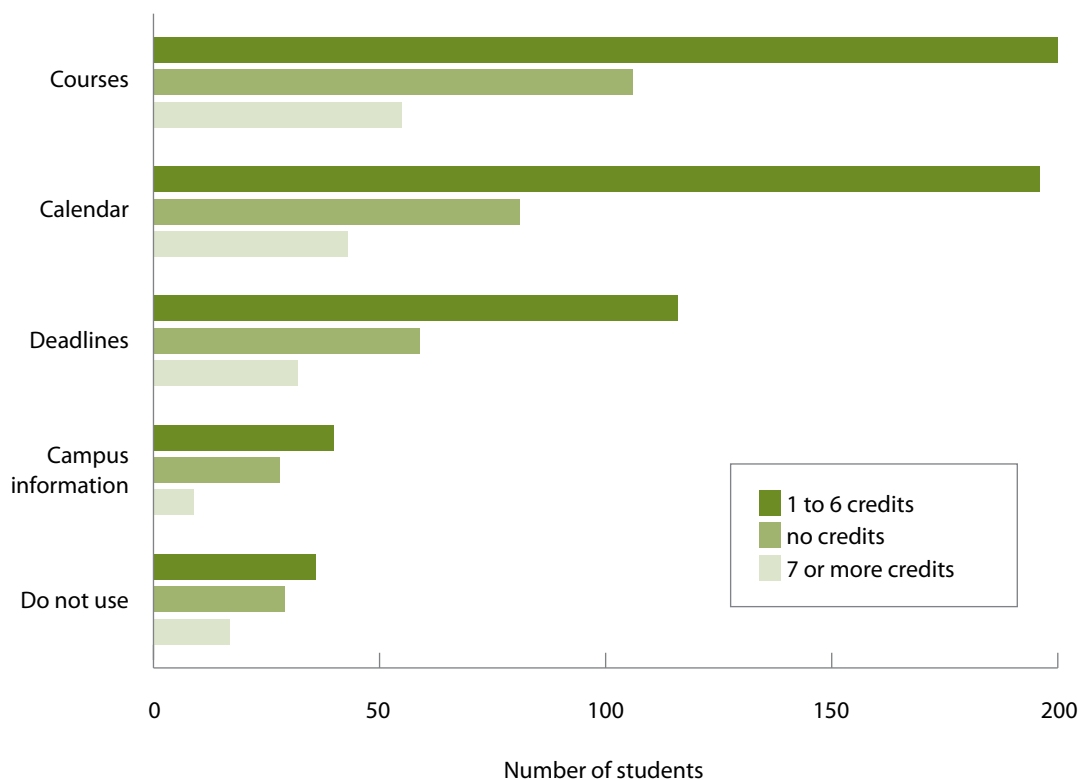

Legend:
- 1 to 6 credits
- no credits
- 7 or more credits

Figure 2: Student Printed Schedule Use, by Number of Credits Taken

Respondents were asked to rank the importance of specific components of the Summer Term printed schedule, on a scale of 1 to 4 (see Figure 3). Students ranked the calendar (course dates) and deadlines (drop dates), as somewhat important in general and roughly equally important as each other. Students were more polarized regarding the importance of the courses that will be

offered and the general campus information, finding them either the most important thing or the least important thing, in approximately equal measure.
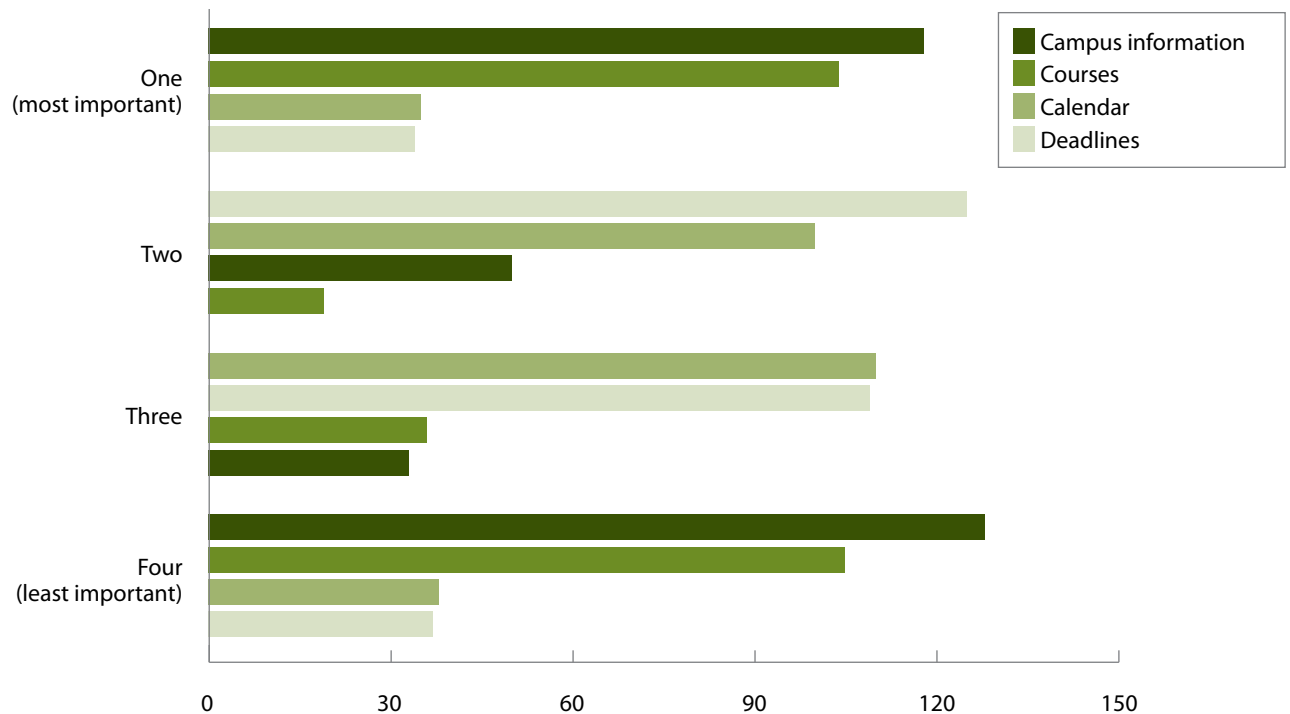
Figure 3: Student Ranking of Importance, Contents of Printed Schedule

Employees were also asked to participate in the survey (see Figure 4). Among those who used the printed schedule, there was not a consistent pattern of use across roles.

Verbal feedback from this group overall was exceedingly positive, with many expressing a strong desire to keep producing the schedule in its current format. However, for administrative faculty and academic faculty, the most common response was that they did not use the printed schedule. This seems especially insightful, as they knew, they were completing a survey regarding their use of the printed schedule, so the assumption is that those who opt in to take this survey would be predisposed to *using* the survey.

Courses, calendar, deadlines, and campus information were all considered relatively equally among all groups. A notable exception was that none of the surveyed academic faculty used it to access campus information.
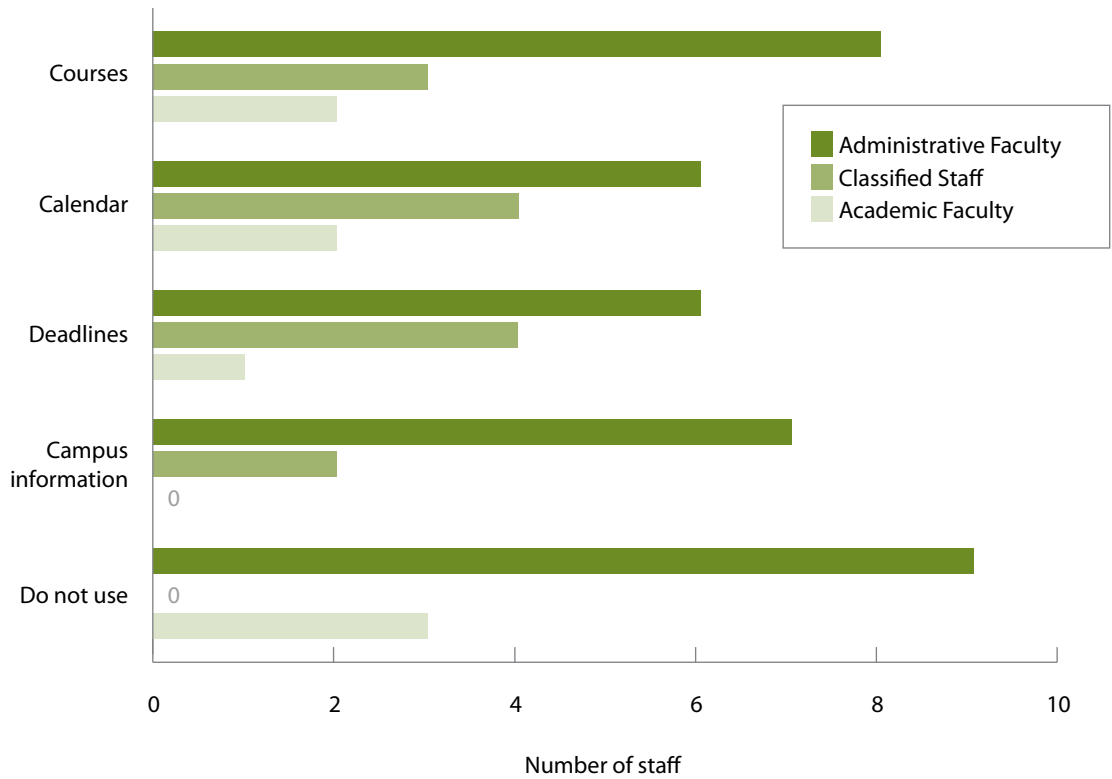
Figure 4: Staff Printed Schedule Use, by Role

Effective Communication

The second goal of the survey was to identify ways constituents wanted to receive information from Summer Term. Respondents were asked to indicate the most effective way(s) to communicate information regarding Summer Term class offerings, policies, or procedures; multiple answers were allowed (see Figure 5).

Largely, students wanted to visit the website of their own volition; however, no student respondent chose only that option. This indicates to us that students also wanted to be reminded to visit the website. Generally, students found social media an effective medium for conveying class offerings, policies, and procedures.
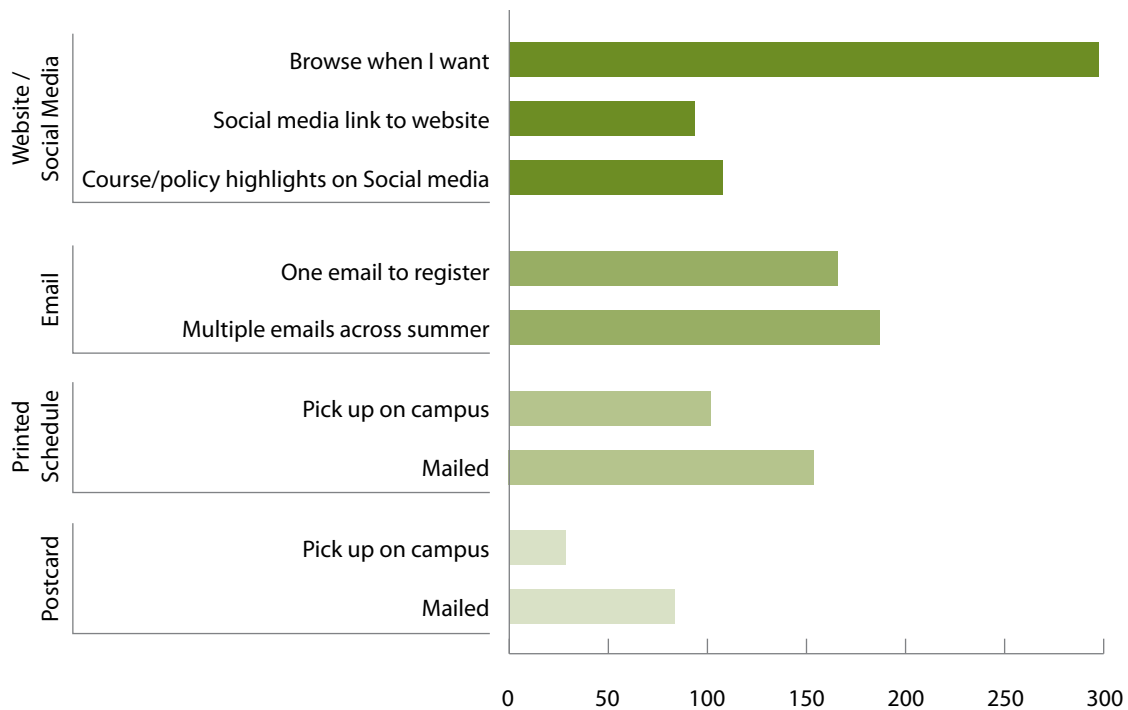
Figure 5: How Constituents Wanted to Receive Information from Summer Term

Surprisingly, students indicated a strong preference towards email communication, an area we were not using. Students indicated they would appreciate one or more emails reminding them to check the website. Both new and returning Summer Term students expressed a desire for a multiple email campaign as opposed to a single email. While we don't want to overwhelm students or their inboxes, more communication regarding timelines, deadlines, policies, and information may be welcomed. Of note, students preferred emails to social media communication, and most respondents who indicated social media was an effective communication medium also chose multiple emails.

Printed pieces were the least desired overall. However, compared to social media, more students found the printed schedule an effective communication medium, either mailed to them or picked up around campus. Students requested opt-out and paperless options in the comment section, expressing a desire to be environmentally friendly.

Students were encouraged to share any other mediums they considered an effective way to communicate class offerings, policies, or procedures. Responses included a desire for

- individual colleges to market their summer offerings,
- advisors to encourage summer attendance in degree planning appointments, and
- Summer Term visiting classrooms to make announcements.

To examine the potential for the effective mediums of communication to change depending on if a student had attended summer term in the past, the responses were broken down by the number of summer term credits taken (see Figure 6).

New students were amenable to having the printed schedule available on campus, but this on-campus demand sharply decreases among returning students. This may be due to the familiarity of returning students with Summer Term online resources or the knowledge that the schedule will be mailed to them.

The preference for students wanting to visit the website of their own volition remained steady across summer term credit history. Similarly, the second most effective communication medium (multiple emails) remained consistent across attendance rates. This could further support the idea that students of all experience levels would benefit from multiple emails throughout the summer with information regarding timelines, deadlines, policies, and information.
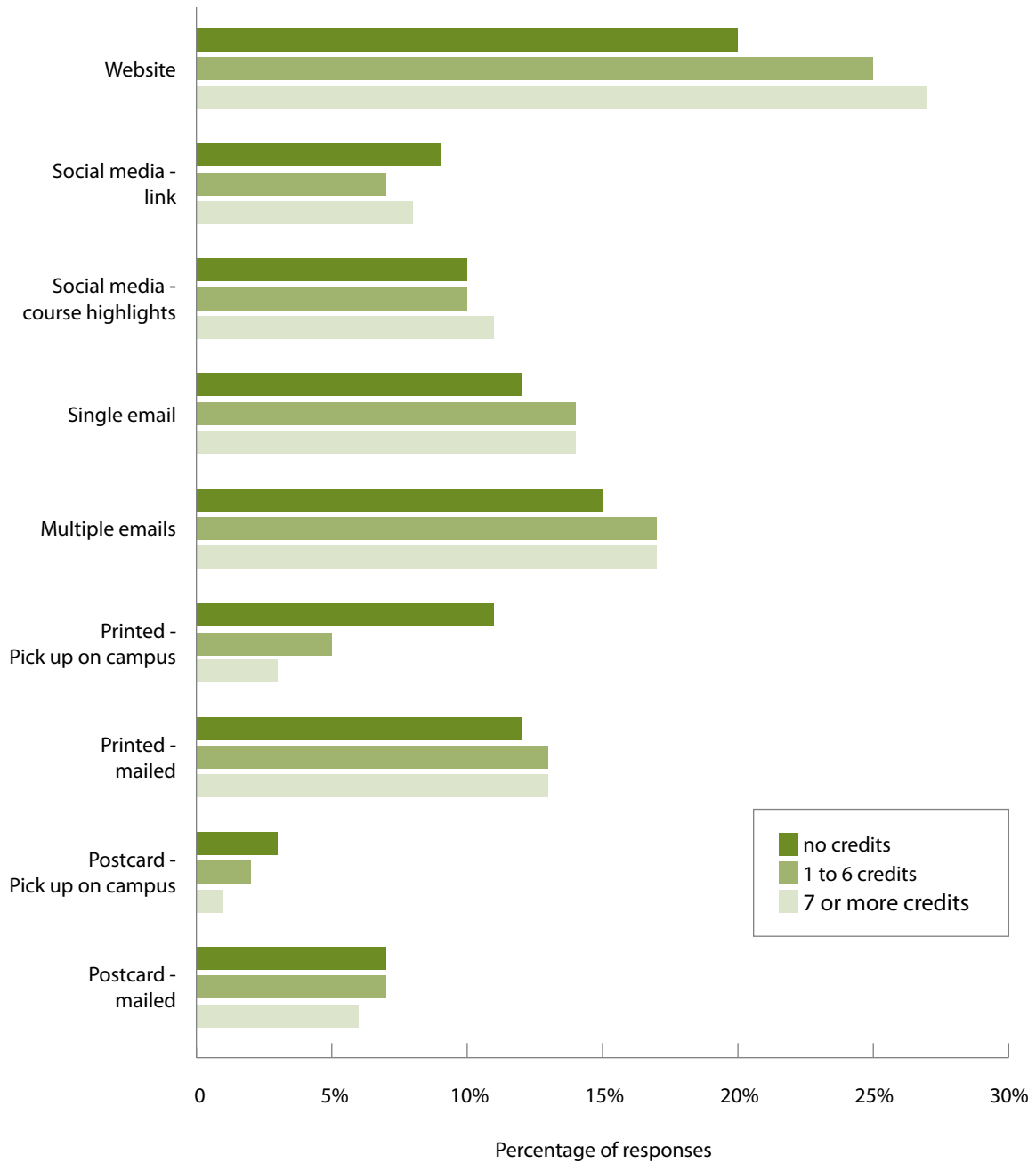
Figure 6: Most Effective Medium of Communication with Students,
by Number of Credits Taken

Employees were also surveyed on effective communication (see Figure 7). Across staff types, the website is considered a highly effective medium of communication. Of note, however, is that

classified staff find the printed schedule to be more important than the website. Similarly, multiple emails were rated highly by all groups, though by a more pronounced margin for academic faculty. All groups identified social media channels as effective mediums of communication.
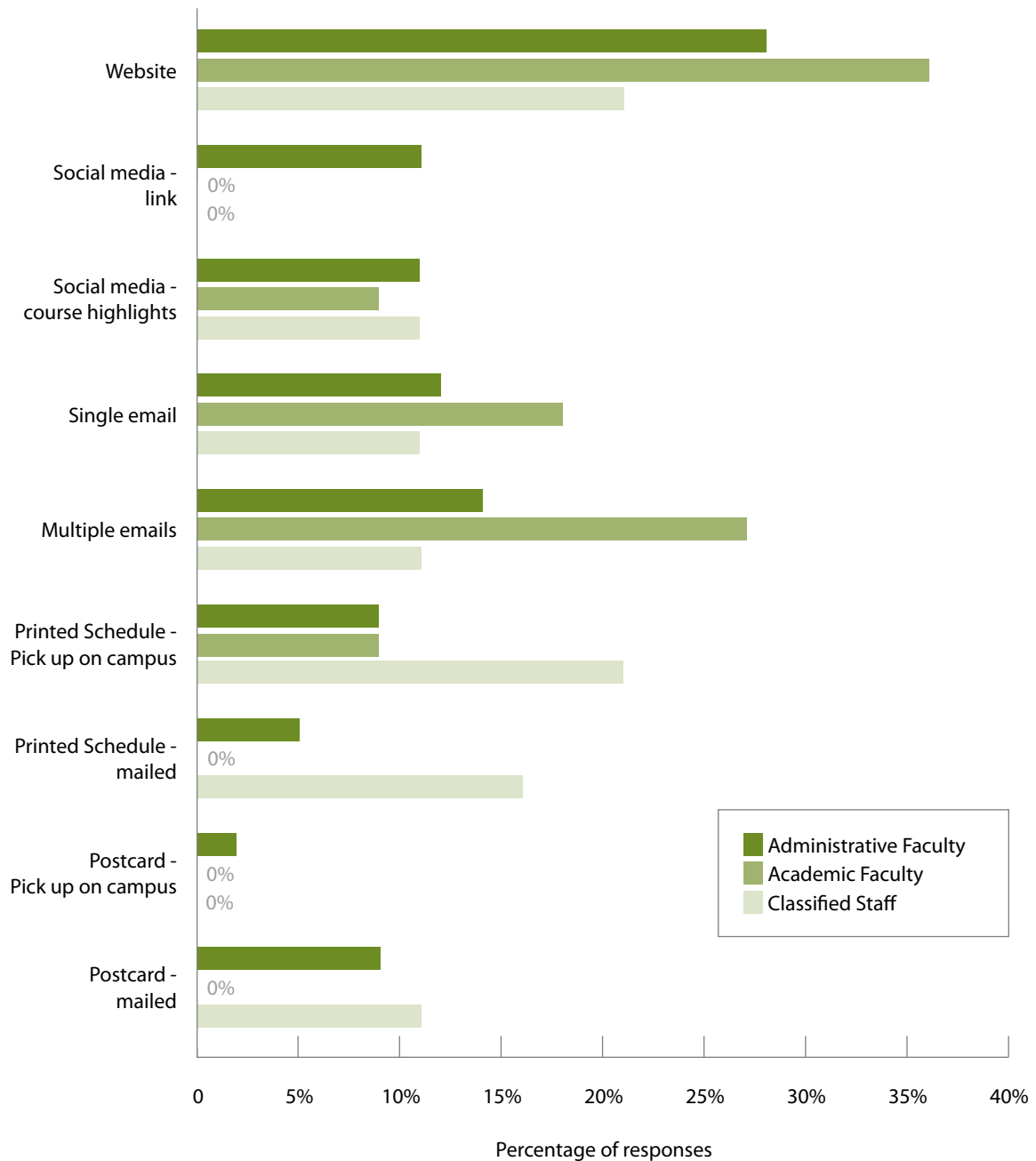

Figure 7: Most Effective Medium of Communication with Staff, by Role

Conclusion and Implications

The Summer Term program at UNLV is one of a handful of summer term programs that still send printed schedules. Program budgets for summer programs are constantly in flux and maximizing return on investment is a necessary component of success (Bilella, 2013; Sedgwick et al., 2020). The composition of constituents at UNLV is unique within higher education; it cannot be taken as fact that what works for other institutions will work with our population. Therefore, UNLV Summer Term decided to conduct a cost/benefit analysis to explore the preferences of our unique constituents and to determine if retaining the printed schedule was fiscally responsible.

A pervasive myth exists that direct mail marketing is "dead": a waste of money and time and an effort to sustain (Tamilo, 2020). However, research shows the usefulness of direct mail print marketing has not suffered due to the increased use of digital marketing. In a study by the Data and Marketing Association (2018), researchers found that the response rate from direct mail was around 9% while the response rate for digital marketing was closer to 1%. Neuromarketing research has found that print ads evoke stronger emotions (Ciceri, Russo, Songa, Gabrielli, & Clemen, 2020), require 21% less cognitive effort to process (Canada Post, 2015), and are committed to memory easier (Venkatraman, Dimoka, Vo, & Pavlou, 2021).

This isn't to say that digital marketing should be abandoned. Digital marketing is enticing for its reach, ease of use, and affordability (Ritz, Wolf, & McQuitt, 2019; Sinha, 2018). Indeed, research shows the ideal marketing strategy is a cross-channel combination of print and digital marketing (Cross, 2019; Lesscher, Lobschat, & Verhoef, 2020).

Fulfillment of Intended Purposes

The first goal of our survey was to determine the extent to which the printed schedule was fulfilling its purposes.

This research found that the majority of students do use the Summer Term printed schedule and find value in its use to communicate information on courses, the term calendar, and deadlines. General campus information was the least useful information for students, whether they were new or returning summer term students. Courses were of primary interest for students who had not attended summer term in the past, followed closely by the calendar and deadlines. For returning students, the use of the printed schedule to review the calendar increased sharply, roughly equal to use of the schedule to review course offerings. This somewhat aligned with the ranking of importance for the various features of the schedule. The calendar and deadlines were consistently rated of medium importance; however, course offerings and general campus information were rated either most important or least important, with no consensus emerging.

Employees also shared their use of the Summer Term printed schedule, with surprising results. When asked in person about their use of, and value found in, the printed schedule, employee constituents expressed strong, positive feelings and a desire to continue receiving it. However, most of

the administrative and academic faculty who completed the survey reported that they did not use the printed schedule at all.

Effective Communication

The second goal of the survey was to identify desired ways to receive Summer Term information.

When asked about effective mediums of communication, students highlighted three areas. Students found the Summer Term website to be an effective channel for communication. Surprisingly, students indicated a desire for a robust email campaign throughout the summer, keeping them abreast of session dates, policies, and deadlines. Finally, students identified the printed schedule as an effective medium, narrowly outranking social media.

Most staff, on the other hand, did not turn to the printed schedule for information. Instead, they found answers on the Summer Term website or via email. Unlike students, employee constituents generally found the campus information section to be of high value.

Summer Term students turned to the schedule for information regarding the session calendar, dates, deadlines, and policies.

Historically, this marketing piece was mailed to student home addresses as well as made available for pick up around campus (e.g., advising offices). The general campus information section was consistently rated as the least important and least valued component of the schedule. Future marketing efforts might pare this down to focus specifically on session calendar, dates, deadlines, and policies to better meet the needs of both new and returning summer term students. Additionally, Summer Term would be well served by increasing email communication with students, perhaps launching an email campaign covering much of the same information contained in the current printed schedule.

Limitations

There are some limitations to this study.

First, due to the low response rate, these conclusions must be interpreted with caution. The campus has more than 30,000 students and our survey had 347 responses.

Similarly, while an exact count isn't available of the number of academic, administrative, and classified employees who engage with Summer Term, the 29 employees who responded to our survey represent a small fraction of the total number of employee constituents.

Second, UNLV has a unique campus population mix compared to other institutions of higher education our size. Due to this, our results may not be generalizable to the larger summer term program population.

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