Enrollment Behaviors of Summer Session Students:

A Study of Relationships between Changes in Curriculum, Cost, and Support Services and the Attitudes and Enrollment Behaviors of Summer Session Students

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Introduction

The U.S. Department of Education projects a steady rise in K-12 enrollments over the next ten years with an overall increase nationally of 5.8 percent between the years 1996 and 2006. At the same time, the number of older students participating in postsecondary education has been growing even more rapidly than the number of younger students (U.S. Department of Education, 1995). The demographic wave of students over 40 could overwhelm the current infrastructure of traditional higher education institutions, especially when combined with the "baby boom echo" of students who will begin enrolling around the year 2000 ("Life After 40," 1996). Children of baby boomers (the baby boom echo) will continue to cram into America's classrooms into the next century ("New England's School Age Population," 1996). As this impending

enrollment bulge converges on higher education, many institutions are turning to summer session programming, which represents between one-fourth and one-third of the year's collegiate operation (Young & McDougall, 1991), to help ease the impact of additional demands on curriculum and support services during the academic year.

With careful planning focused on provisions for a balanced curriculum and appropriate support services, summer session can complement academic year programming, helping the institution and its students better manage course loads and time to degree. A clear understanding of the needs and expectations of the institution's matriculated student population is critical to the ongoing vitality, stability and future growth of summer session programs. Student enrollment decisions will be closely aligned with issues of cost, course availability, access, and the existence of services that minimize traditional bureaucratic impediments to a degree (Pew, 1996).

Methodology

In an effort to determine the needs of the student population at Keene State College, the Summer School office conducted a two-part study over eighteen months to examine the impact of changes in support services, curriculum, and fees on enrollment outcomes.

In Part One of the study, a questionnaire was developed in conjunction with a pilot project entitled "One Stop Shopping," which adopted a customer-service approach to delivery of student services. Under the model, summer session students register for courses, pay their tuition, receive ID cards, and obtain parking permits at one convenient location. The survey instrument was designed to gather demographic data about the summer school population and to measure the importance of selected programming options and support services to summer school students and their satisfaction with these options and services.

The Sample

Keene State College is a public, four-year, primarily undergraduate college located in Keene, New Hampshire. The College is part of the University System of New Hampshire, which includes the University of New Hampshire, Plymouth State College, and the College for Lifelong Learning. Noted for programs in teacher education, occupational safety, and film studies, it has an enrollment of 4,900 full- and part-time students.

Of the 1,117 students enrolled in Summer Session One, a sample of

300 students was randomly drawn from both day and evening classes. The survey instrument was personally distributed to these students and 252 responses, representing an 83 percemt return, were collected. The questionnaire solicited responses in the following areas:

- Registration Practices and Preferences
- Common Problems Encountered
- Reasons for Attending Summer Session

For purposes of analysis, students were categorized in three groups: traditional students (ages 17–24), representing 58 percent of the sample; non-traditional students (ages 25-44), representing 32 percent; and non-traditional students over age 45, representing 10 percent. Those students age 45 and above were classified as non-traditional, but their responses were significantly different to warrant a separate category.

Registration Practices and Preferences

As indicated in Tables 1 and 2 an overwhelming number (82 percent) of students registered in person for summer session 1997, and 64 percent indicated they would prefer to register in person for future summer sessions. Analysis of survey results and accompanying student comments indicate the importance of personal attention and immediate feedback on course availability. Student comments also revealed a great deal of satisfaction with the newly-implemented one-stop-shopping services.

Common Problems Encountered

Table 3 illustrates that both traditional and non-traditional students were largely self-advised. In Table 4 students indicated the most common problems they encountered. Curriculum problems fell into two main areas: First, students trying to fulfill general education requirements encountered scheduling conflicts that limited the number of course options available to them. Second, upperclassmen found too few higher-level course options available in their majors. Lack of financial aid and tuition costs also were problematic. The 45 and older group encountered relatively few problems, which may be reflective of the personal enrichment needs of this population.

Reasons for Attending Summer Session

Table 5 reveals that the biggest factor motivating summer school enrollment was the desire to graduate on time or ahead of schedule, further underscoring the importance of strengthening the curriculum and providing formal advising services.
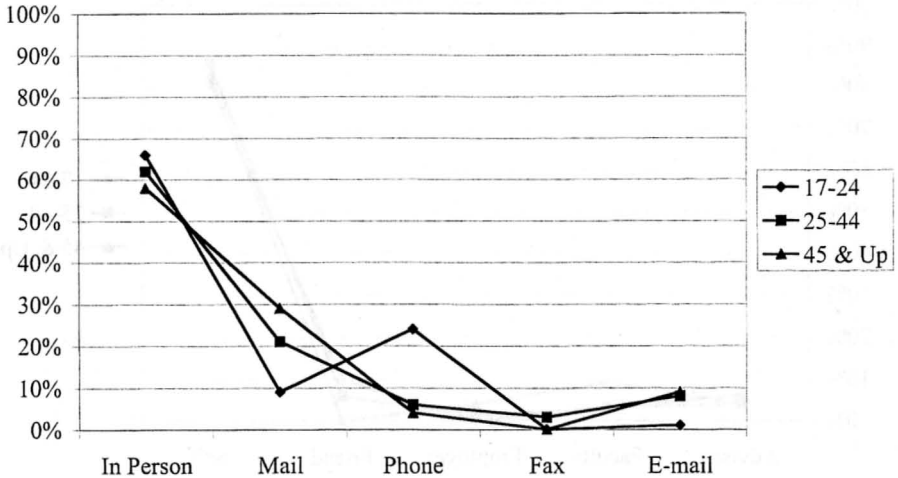
Table 1

How did you register for Summer Session this year?
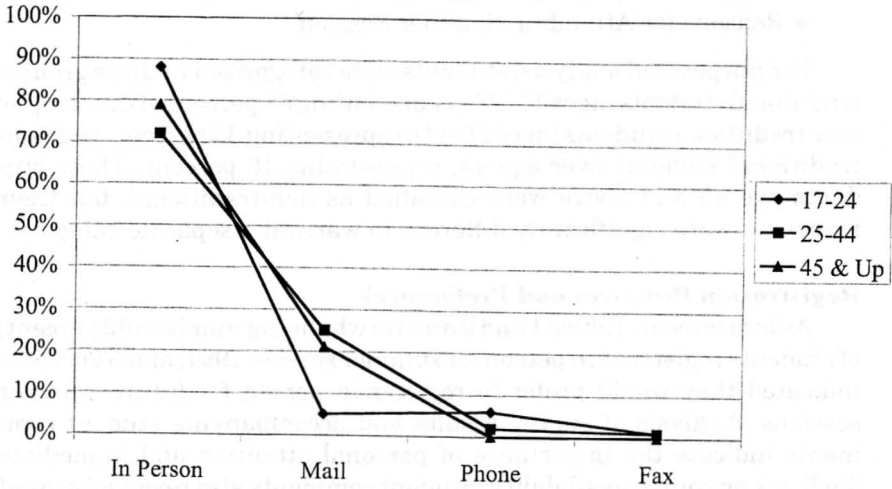
	In Person	Mail	Phone	Fax
17-24	88%	5%	6%	1%
25-44	72%	25%	2%	1%
45 & Up	79%	21%	0%	0%
Total %	80%	16%	3%	1%

Table 2
How would you prefer to register in the future?

	In Person	Mail	Phone	Fax	E-mail
17-24	66%	9%	24%	0%	1%
25-44	62%	21%	6%	3%	8%
45 & Up	58%	29%	4%	0%	9%
Total %	64%	15%	16%	1%	4%

Table 3
Who referred you to the Summer Session program?
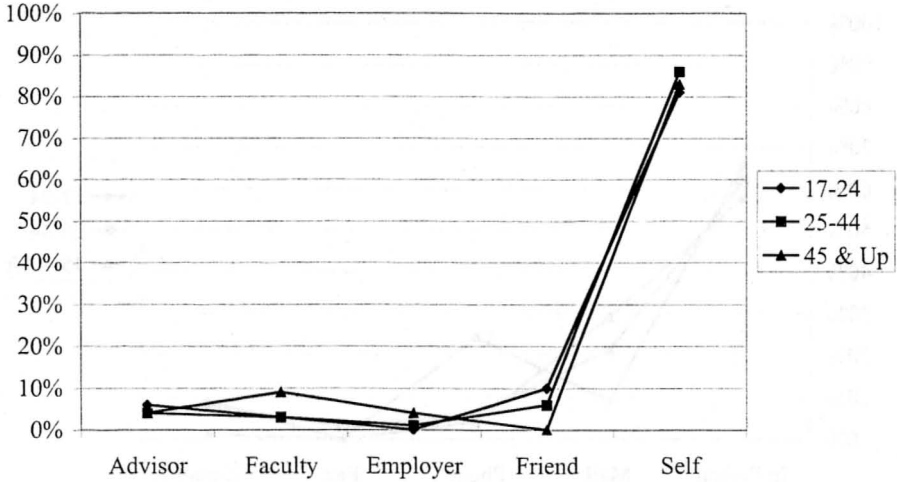
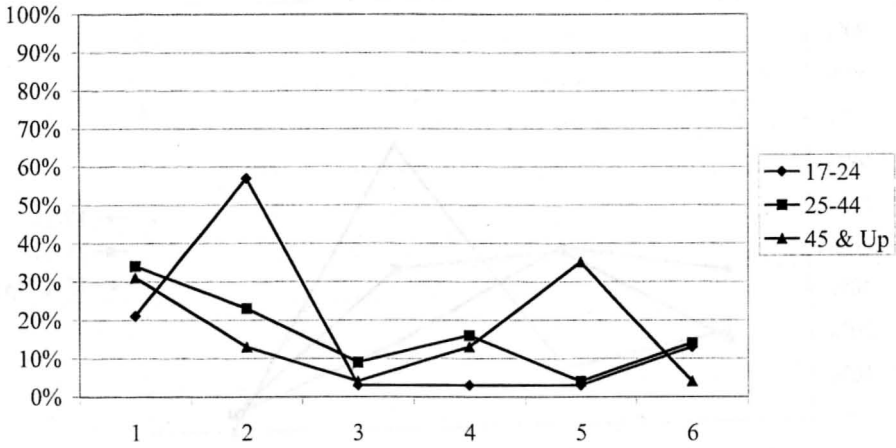|	Advisor	Faculty	Employer	Friend	Self
17-24	6%	3%	0%	10%	81%
25-44	4%	3%	1%	6%	86%
45 & Up	4%	9%	4%	0%	83%
Total %	5%	4%	1%	8%	82%

Table 4

What is the most common problem you encountered in
registering for summer school courses?
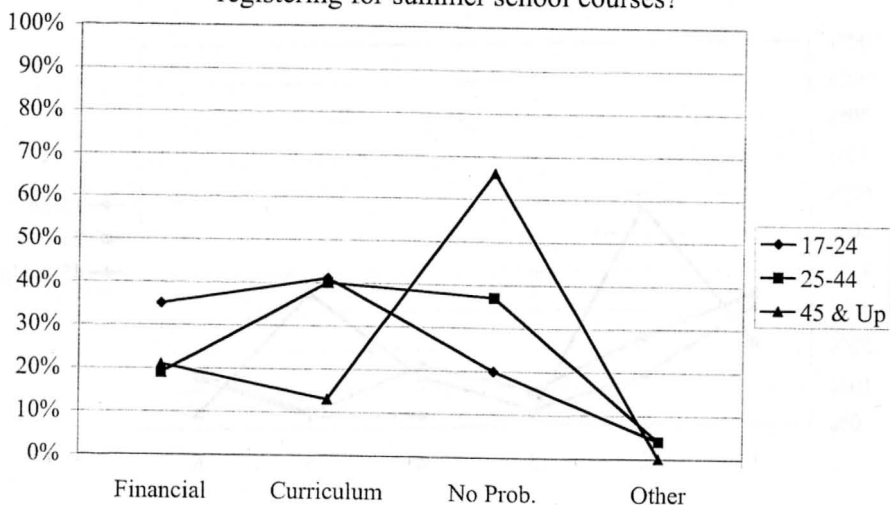
	Financial	Curriculum	No Prob.	Other
17-24	35%	41%	20%	4%
25-44	19%	40%	37%	4%
45 & Up	21%	13%	66%	0%
Total %	28%	39%	30%	3%

Table 5

What was your main reason for attending KSC Summer
Session?

	1. Graduate Early	2. Graduate On Time	3. Begin/Return To College	4. Professional Advancement	5. Personal Enrichment	6. Other
17-24	21%	57%	3%	3%	3%	13%
25-44	34%	23%	9%	16%	4%	14%
45 & Up	31%	13%	4%	13%	35%	4%
Total %	29%	31%	5%	11%	14%	10%

Outcomes

Results of Part One of this study indicated that improved services generated greater student satisfaction with the registration process, but these improvements alone had no significant impact on enrollments. Based on student responses and supported by enrollment data, curriculum and cost were the variables identified as more likely to impact enrollment outcomes.

Part Two of this study tracked Summer Session 1998 enrollments after changes were implemented to address student concerns regarding curriculum and cost. These changes included:

u Taking a proactive role in developing a stronger, more balanced curriculum by meeting with faculty coordinators to determine students' programmatic needs.

u Adopting a faculty salary increase to provide greater incentive for faculty participation in Summer Session.

u Freezing the cost of mandatory fees for summer session students for a three-year period.

Other incentives being proposed to the College's administration include:

u Revenue sharing with academic divisions.

u Financial aid for summer session students.

u Discounts on housing.

u Expansion of one-stop shopping to incorporate formal advising services.

The significant increase in Summer Session 1998 participation rates suggests a relationship between enrollment outcomes and the variables of curriculum and cost. As indicated in Tables 6 and 7 enrollment rose 2.5 percent from 1,117 in 1997 to 1,146 in 1998, while headcount increased 7.8 percent from 833 in 1997 to 898 in 1998.

Implications

Ensuring the vitality of an institution's summer session and developing a curriculum that complements the academic year will require proactive planning and scheduling squarely aimed at meeting the programmatic needs of students. As this study reveals, improving
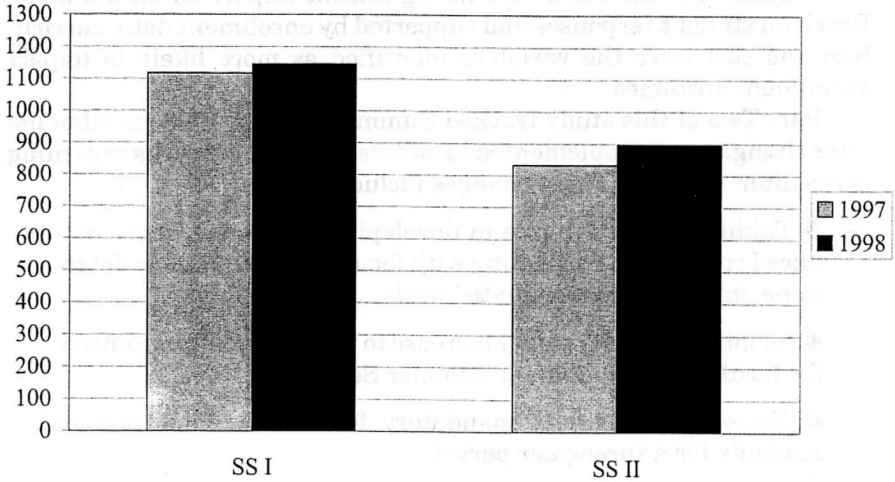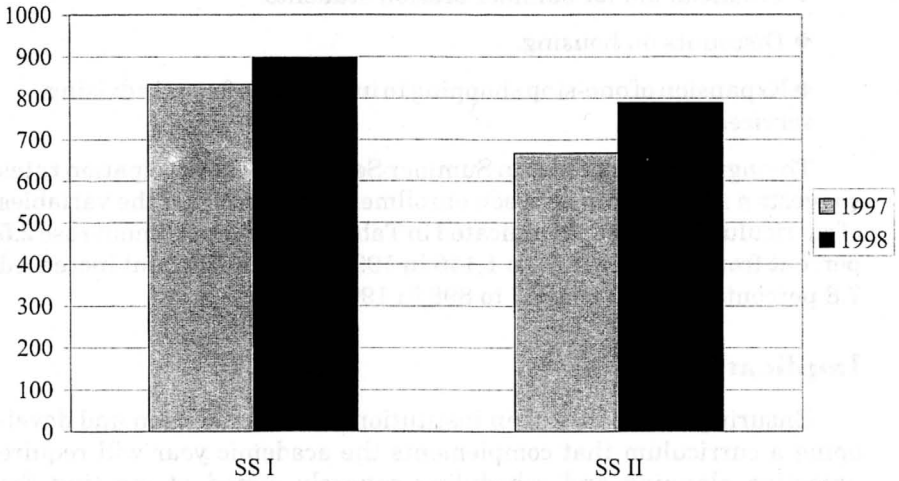
Table 6
Enrollment

Table 7
Head Count

registration and support services can positively impact student satisfaction, but is unlikely to effect a change in enrollment patterns unless the critical variables of course availability, scheduling, and cost are addressed as well. Manipulation of these variables in tandem does have the potential to significantly influence the enrollment behaviors of summer session students.

References

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