A Summer School Experiment:

Faculty and Student Satisfaction

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Introduction

The lifeblood of any small university is enrollment. The number of students enrolled at the university will direct, dictate, and define program development and program expansion.

Summer school can be an important barometer of a university's financial health. Summer school can also suffer ill effects from declining enrollments. Managed correctly, summer school can provide a substantial boost to the annual budget.

When planning and managing summer school, a number of decisions are made that directly affect faculty, students, and the university. Some of these decisions are controlled by central administration while others are left to the discretion of the academic departments. A few of the important questions that help define summer school at a college or university are listed in the next section. This list is followed by a brief description of our university and our current enrollment picture. Discussion of an experiment conducted in summer 2001 and results of a survey addressing this experiment conclude the paper.

Defining Summer School

As colleges and universities define summer school, the questions here are among those that must be addressed:

1. How many sessions should there be?
2. How should dates for these sessions be established?
3. Is there any flexibility in the starting and ending dates?
4. How long should classes meet each day?
5. How many days should classes meet per week?
6. How should classes be scheduled during the day?
7. How should minimum class size be determined?
8. When should the decision be made to cancel a course for low enrollment?
9. How should the faculty pay scale be established?
10. What is the most effective method of determining which specific courses will be offered?

The study reported in this paper focuses on an experiment conducted by the university that addresses questions 4, 5, and 6 above, as well as some other issues. The changes are designed to help increase enrollment.

The University and the Enrollment Challenges

Francis Marion University (FMU) is a small, public institution located on 300 acres in rural northeastern South Carolina. FMU enrolls about 3,000 undergraduate students in a variety of liberal arts, business, and education programs. In addition, about 500 graduate students are enrolled in business, education, and psychology masters programs.

Over the past 10 years, FMU has experienced a steady decline in enrollment. Undergraduate enrollment fell from 3,666 (3,277 Full Time Equivalent students (FTEs)) in fall semester 1991 to a fall enrollment of 2,795 (2,550 FTEs) in 2000. Graduate enrollments have tended to offset those drops somewhat, albeit with fewer FTEs. Fall enrollment in graduate programs for 1991 was 237 (76 FTEs) compared to 774 (252 FTEs) in 2000. Graduate enrollment peaked in 1999 at 891 (289 FTEs).

Summer school enrollment has followed the fall enrollment picture,

particularly at the undergraduate level. Undergraduate enrollment in Summer I term fell from a high in the early 1990s of 1,200 to 686 in 2001. Graduate enrollments remained fairly consistent over the same period, moving from 334 in 1992 to 337 in 2001.

A number of factors have been hypothesized for the decline in summer school enrollment. Decline in enrollments during the regular fall and spring terms has likely contributed significantly. Price-based competition from technical colleges is also a likely factor in the decline in enrollments, particularly in the lower level, general education courses. In addition, students indicate that they need to work in the summer to earn the money for the regular terms.

Summer School Task Force

It is with these enrollment declines in mind that the Summer School Task Force was formed, consisting of seasoned faculty members with a strong interest in seeing summer school prosper. It studied many of the issues discussed above mostly looking at tuition and fee structures and class schedules.

The two proposals of the Task Force that received the most support are:

- Offer students a "tri-mester" option that would give a tuition price break. Students who register for 10 or more semester hours for the entire summer — Late Spring, Summer I, and Summer II — would pay tuition comparable to that paid during the regular terms. It was determined, however, that a significant increase in enrollment would be required to offset the loss in revenues created by this tuition break. Thus, the university administration decided not to pursue this option at this time.

- Consider an alternative class meeting schedule that would better fit the needs of potential students — maybe one that would allow students to enroll in classes and work substantial hours in a summer job.

Summer School Experiment 2001

In previous summers, our university has offered three summer sessions. The Late Spring term ran for three weeks and classes met daily from 9:00 a.m. until 12:00 noon. The Summer I and Summer II terms ran for five weeks each and classes met daily (Monday through Friday) for 1.5 hours.

For summer 2001, the Late Spring term maintained the same schedule as in the past; however, the schedules for Summer I and Summer II were changed. Classes during these terms met four days per week, Monday through Thursday, for 2 hours. Science labs were scheduled in blocks that fit the 4-day schedule.

Of course the primary question associated with this schedule change is: "Will this shift have any impact on Summer School enrollment?" Although any changes in enrollment cannot be specifically tied to the new 4-day schedule, the change may help to create excitement about summer school. Also of interest is how students and faculty view this new opportunity.

Methodology

To analyze the effects of the shift to the 4-day week for summer school, a series of four surveys were conducted. Faculty who taught a class in summer 2000 and also taught the same class in summer 2001 were identified. Thirty-six faculty representing 47 courses were surveyed at the beginning of the summer term to determine their expectations for the new system. The response rate was 76%. The students in these classes were also surveyed at the beginning of the term (n = 570). The survey process was repeated near the end of the term (n = 36 faculty; n = 509 students). Pre-term and post-term results are compared below. Survey instruments were tailored to the specific respondent (faculty or student). The instruments addressed pedagogical questions and administration questions. Demographic information was gathered on the respondents for further comparisons.

Results

As stated above, faculty were surveyed at the beginning and at the end of the term. Table 1 provides average responses from faculty for both of the surveys. For tabulation purposes, the responses were scored from 5 to 1, the higher number indicating a more positive response: strongly agree (5), agree (4), neutral (3), disagree (2), or strongly disagree (1). For the initial survey, note that for each question the average response was between neutral and disagree. Generally, this indicates that faculty felt before the class began that the 4-day class schedule, the 3-day weekend, and the 110-minute class periods would not be effective for summer school.

Table 2 provides average responses from students for both of the surveys. For the students, all but one of the questions had an average

Table 1. Faculty Responses (mean and standard deviation)

Question	Faculty Response			
	First class		Last class	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
I believe that the 4-day summer school week better enhanced student learning compared to the previous 5-day schedule.	2.79	1.16	2.71	1.07
The grades earned in this class were better than last summer's grades in the same class.	2.88	0.54	3.03	0.73
The grades earned in this class were better than grades earned in the same class during a regular Fall or Spring term.	2.94	0.76	3.06	0.85
I believe that the 3-day weekend during the summer term allowed students more time to study.	2.97	1.16	2.67	1.15
I believe that the 3-day weekend during the summer term did not affect students' retention of course material	2.97	1.02	3.22	0.90
I believe the 110-minute summer class period enhanced *student learning* compared to regular term 90- or 50-minute periods.	2.42	0.90	2.49	0.98
I believe the 110-minute summer class period enhanced *student retention of course material* compared to regular term 90- or 50-minute periods.	2.39	0.86	2.66	0.97

n = 36 pre; 36 post

response between neutral and agree, with the exception having an average between agree and strongly agree. Overall, students anticipated and experienced a more favorable reaction to the new summer school schedule than did the faculty.

Referring again to Table 1, note that the faculty responses for the survey near the end of the class were not too different from the original responses. Overall, the faculty were slightly more positive toward the new schedule than they had been before the class met. The one exception where the faculty remained particularly negative was in their opinion of students' use of the 3-day weekend; i.e., the faculty does not believe that students used the 3-day weekend to study.

Overall it appears that students were slightly less favorable toward the new summer schedule after the class compared to their responses before the class, as indicated in post-class responses in Table 2. Responses before and after the class were very similar, however. On the

Table 2. Student Responses (mean and standard deviation)

Question	Student Response			
	First class		Last class	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
I believe that the 4-day summer school week better enhanced my learning compared to the previous 5-day schedule.	3.97	0.90	3.87	0.99
I believe that the grades earned in this class will be better than the grades I earned in previous summer classes.	3.48	0.76	3.42	0.93
I believe that the grades earned in this class will be better than the grades I earned in similar classes during the regular Fall and Spring term.	3.68	0.83	3.50	1.03
I believe that the 3-day weekend during the summer term allowed me more time to study.	4.16	0.79	4.10	0.84
I believe that the 3-day weekend during the summer term did not affect my ability to retain course material.	3.83	0.90	3.67	1.03
I believe the 110-minute summer class period enhanced my learning compared to regular term 90- or 50-minute periods.	3.46	0.90	3.45	1.01
I believe the 110-minute summer class period enhanced my retention of course material compared to regular term 90- or 50-minute period.	3.44	0.85	3.48	0.97

n = 570 pre; 506 post

other hand, student overall satisfaction was greater at both times compared to faculty ratings.

Many faculty and students wrote comments on both of the surveys. Indeed, the comment sections might be the most informative feedback that we received. Most faculty comments were generally negative. There was a strong negative feeling toward the 110-minute class period. Faculty felt that the long periods were very draining of their energy, especially if they had two of these classes back-to-back. Faculty felt compelled to give a break in the middle of the class. This break took up valuable class time and the start-up was also costly. Faculty believe that the 4-day week does not enhance learning.

Although not specifically related to this survey, the overwhelming sentiment expressed in students' comments was that courses in summer

cost too much. Students like Fridays off and the 3-day weekend. Most students agree, however, that the long class periods and the 4-day week required that too much material be covered in a short amount of time.

Conclusion

Overall, faculty and students remained skeptical regarding the students' ability to learn and retain material in this new summer schedule. Francis Marion University will continue to look for ways to improve summer school. The 4-day summer school schedule might attract more students with a full year of promotion. It is the overwhelming opinion from both faculty and students that the 2-hour classes were too long. It is also apparent that the pricing structure for summer school classes should be investigated especially in light of our need to grow enrollment during the summer term.