

**Focus on Research:**

**Communicating  
with the Summer  
Session Student:  
*Understanding the Timing  
and Information Patterns  
of the Decision Process***

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Colleges and universities have expended much effort in recent years to maintain and increase their summer session enrollments. Summer sessions have grown from opportunities for faculty to have summer employment to “cash cows” for many institutions (Schejbal, 1996-97). Today, some institutions have simply integrated the summer term into their operations in a manner as seamless as registering students for the Fall and Spring terms.

Institutional research has traditionally focused on demographically identifying the “typical” summer session student (Patterson et. al., 1981). More recently research has begun to explore the motivations of students who attend the summer session; and most recently, students’ satisfaction with their summer term experience. These efforts closely parallel the general stream of business research related to service industries. All of these research tracks are designed to identify new summer session students and to retain past summer session students.

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Little research to date has explored the summer session student's decision-making process. No empirical efforts have explored the media utilized by students that may influence the timing and use of such information. The purpose of the present study is to explore the student's decision to attend the summer session. Relevant research questions include: What is the timing of the decision? and where is information acquired by the student in making the decision to attend the summer session? Knowledge about the summer session student's decision-making process should provide administrators with useful information about how and where to reach the regular, as well as the potential, summer session student with a media plan designed to positively point out the merits of attending the summer session.

### • • **Background Literature** • •

#### • • *The Buying Decision Process* • •

Just as smart companies research the buying decision process involved in their product category, so should universities offering summer session classes (Dionne, 1994). Whether the organization is offering a product or a service, the consumer (student) will essentially follow the same stages in reaching a decision as to whether to attend a university's summer session. Most researchers agree that consumers go through five stages in the buying process: (1) Need recognition, (2) Information search, (3) Evaluation of alternatives, (4) Purchase decision, and (5) Post-purchase behavior (Bettman, 1979). The first two stages in the process are the focus of the present study.

Summer school researchers have determined that several factors may be important in a student's recognition of a need to attend the summer session of a college or university. Keller (1982) examined the opinions and beliefs of summer school students in an attempt to identify items that might influence prospective summer school students to attend summer sessions. Beyond the traditional academic reasons of needing the class to graduate, or evening out the student's class load, Keller also examined some non-academic reasons; for example, simply doing something constructive during the summer since there were no summer job opportunities available.

Chandler and Weller (1995) replicated and extended Keller's work into non-academic reasons for students to attend summer classes. They examined students who were taking classes in the business college during the summer term at a midwestern university. Using factor analysis they were able to identify four underlying dimensions for

students to attend summer classes, which explained 39.9 percent of the variance in their data. Their factors were labeled as: (1) academic issues, (2) the desire for independence, (3) finances, and (4) summer school academic reasons.

Henke, Lyons and Krachenberg (1993) were able to determine that many students at a commuter institution viewed the summer session as just another regular term. Due to steady employment and other issues, these students attempted to maintain balance during the entire academic year. The classes they took during the summer session allowed them to take a lighter class load, or to reposition more difficult classes during the Fall and Spring terms. Thus, they were able to keep themselves on an even pace until graduation. However, they were not adverse to extending their programs an extra semester.

Whatever the reasons, students who attend summer sessions have determined they need to take some class or classes during the summer. The next step in their decision process is to search for information about summer session offerings. While the traditional assumption would be that students would likely attend a summer session at the same institution they attend during the regular year, this may not be the case. Often students attend universities in cities far from their home towns, even though a local university may be present. The summer session may present them with a chance to enjoy a summer at home while taking needed classes for their degree program at their regular university. Similarly, graduate students often believe it is better to earn their advanced degree from a different institution than from the institution where they received their undergraduate degree. In either case, it is important for institutions to anticipate when students may recognize their need to attend the summer term and to get the appropriate information in their hands before they actually decide which institution to attend.

•• *Timing of the Student's Need Recognition* ••

Students who change their majors, or drop or fail a class, will eventually recognize that they need to pick up additional hours if they intend to graduate in four years. Whether they are freshmen or seniors will likely influence their decision as to when they might attend the summer term. A freshman will have more alternative summer sessions to select from than will a senior. As such, the freshman may wait until his or her junior or senior year before recognizing the need to attend a summer session as being urgent. When this need for additional classes becomes more urgent it will be an important factor to the student in making his summer term information search more ardent. Administra-

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tors must understand the summer session student's information search needs in attempts to reach such students.

### •• *Summer Session Information Effectiveness* ••

Most universities and summer term program directors have brochures and other media to provide students with information about summer term classes. Mailings to current regular semester students and mailings to previous summer session students are often employed. Newspapers are also a media form widely used by universities. These may include campus newspapers, local community newspapers, campus newsletters, and the traditional bulletin or schedule of summer term class offerings. As colleges and universities have augmented their marketing efforts to reach more potential students, the use of local radio and television advertising has also increased.

As students near the time when they would normally graduate in the traditional four year time span, they likely are more concerned about the need to take additional classes during the summer session. Initial heightened attention regarding the summer session class offerings may make the student more receptive to information about the summer session, as well as to comments made by others who have attended a previous summer session. As the decision to attend the summer session is made, the student will likely go into an active information search to be sure the courses needed are offered, and to look for convenient times and locations (Comm, 1989). Here, personal, commercial, and public sources of information will be sought. The relative amount and influence of each information source will vary for each student.

While media effectiveness is an important tenet of business organizations, little research has explored the effectiveness of summer session media efforts to reach students in the information search stage of the buying process. Moore (1976) earlier described the problem of universities not getting summer session materials to students in a timely manner. Today, summer session administrators need not only to get summer information to students, they must be able to evaluate the effectiveness of the various media available.

### •• *Methodology* ••

#### •• *Questionnaire Design* ••

The instrument employed in the study was based on relevant variables discussed in the literature review. The instrument had been

pre-tested during the previous summer session with modifications made to improve the design.

The instrument consisted of six sections. The initial series of questions were used as identifiers. They asked in which course the student was currently enrolled and the time frame for when the student actually made the decision to attend the summer session.

Another section of the instrument asked the respondents to indicate which media were most effective in notifying them about summer session classes. Finally, general demographic data was collected to be employed in classification purposes. Additional sections of the questionnaire were used to collect other types of data which were not included in the present analysis.

•• *Sample Design* ••

Students taking summer session classes at a large (16,000+ students) midwestern university were chosen as the population to be sampled. The institution currently utilizes the semester system with an eight-week summer session. The summer session classes typically meet for an hour and twenty minutes each day, Monday through Thursday. Night classes during the summer meet for three hours twice per week. Additional “intersession” classes of up to three weeks in length were offered between the regular semester and summer session classes. These “intersession” classes had become quite popular with students as a method of completing three credit hours in a concentrated time frame.

A stratified sampling plan was devised to ensure that students from classes offered at different times of the day (morning, afternoon, and evening), and from different levels of classes (undergraduate, graduate, etc.) were surveyed. Finally, students taking courses of various time lengths (eight-week, four-week, three-week, etc.) were also represented in the sample.

A total of 869 students from 56 different summer session classes were surveyed. Table 1 presents a demographic profile of the respondents in the study. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents were male, and over two-thirds of the respondents were single. The largest class represented by the sample were seniors (42.9 percent), followed by juniors (23.1 percent) and graduate students (17.3 percent). A majority of the students (55.4 percent) were in the traditional college student age bracket of 18 to 24 years old. Over thirty-five percent of the respondents were between the ages of 25 to 44 years old, and over ten percent were between 35 and 44 years old.

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**Table 1**  
**Demographic Profile of Respondents**

<u>Variable</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
1. Gender of respondents		
Male	541	63.4
Female	312	36.6
2. Marital status		
Married	270	31.5
Single	587	68.5
3. Current class status		
Freshman	27	3.1
Sophomore	83	9.6
Junior	201	23.1
Senior	373	42.9
Graduate student	150	17.3
Other	35	4.0
4. Age of respondent		
17 or under	26	3.0
18 to 24	481	55.4
25 to 34	215	24.7
35 to 44	93	10.7
45 and over	44	5.1
Refused	10	1.2
5. In what College is your current major?		
College of Arts and Letters	109	12.6
College of Business Administration	185	21.3
College of Education	226	26.1
College of Health and Human Services	105	12.1
College of Humanities and Public Affairs	60	6.9
College of Natural and Applied Sciences	182	21.0
6. Are you taking (or have taken) other course credits this summer, including Spring Intersession?		
Yes	590	69.2
No	263	30.8
7. Are you currently working on a degree or certificate?		
Yes	824	96.5
No	30	3.5
If "yes", at what institution?		
This university	770	93.3
Another instate institution	40	4.8
Institution in another state	15	1.8

**Table 1** (continued)

<u>Variable</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
8. Number of credit hours you carry during a regular semester		
1 to 5 hours	92	11.1
6 to 11 hours	119	14.3
12 hours or more	619	74.6
9. Total credit hours you are taking this entire summer term		
1 to 2 hours	26	3.0
3 to 6 hours	481	56.0
7 to 9 hours	215	25.0
10 hours or more	93	10.8

(Total responses may not add to 869 due to missing responses, and percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding errors).

Question 5 in Table 1 illustrates that the respondents were enrolled in programs across the six colleges of the university. The College of Education was well represented with over twenty-six percent of the respondents. The College of Humanities and Public Affairs had the lowest percent of respondents at just under seven percent. Both of these statistics are consistent with the number of class offerings by the respective colleges during the summer session.

Nearly seventy percent of the respondents were taking other classes during the summer. Over ninety-six percent were currently working on a degree or certificate, with over ninety-three percent working at their degree at the university where they were taking their summer term classes. Over 74 percent of the respondents indicated that they usually carry 12 or more hours during a regular semester. Over fifty-six percent of the respondents were taking between three to six hours, one to two classes, during the current summer term; twenty-five percent were taking between seven to nine hours.

The sample appeared to be typical of most summer programs with a large number of respondents being students who attend the same university during the regular academic year. The College of Education was well represented, likely because of graduate education students attempting to complete their advanced degrees. It was therefore concluded that the sample was representative of the summer session population for the university.

•• **Findings** ••

The results of the study will first be examined from the timing of the

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respondent's decision to attend the summer session of the university and then across related demographic variables. Finally, an analysis of the timing of summer session decisions with the effectiveness of various media used to inform the respondents about the university's summer session will be examined.

### • • *Timing of Need Recognition Decision to Attend Summer Session* • •

The respondents were first asked to indicate when they had decided to attend the university's summer session. Two hundred and seventy-nine respondents (32 percent) of the sample indicated they made their decision more than nine months ago. An even larger number of respondents, 284 (33.1 percent) had made their decision to attend the summer session from four to nine months earlier. Just over twenty percent (178 respondents, 20.8 percent) indicated that their decision had been made from two to three months previously, while only 116 respondents (13.5 percent) indicated they had made their decision to attend the summer session within the last two months. Clearly, for a majority of the respondents, the decision to attend the summer session was not made at the last minute. Students were apparently making decisions to attend the summer session throughout the academic year.

### • • *Profiles of Respondents by the Timing of Their Decisions* • •

In order to better understand the characteristics of those respondents who made their decision to attend the summer session at different times during the academic year, the timing of the respondents' decision categories were examined with various demographic variables. Tables 2 through 9 present the findings of all the contingency table analyses. It should be noted that the Chi Square statistics for all eight analyses were significant at the .05 level or better, indicating a significant relationship existed between the timing of the respondents' decision to attend the summer session and all the demographic variables.

Tables 2 and 3 respectively examine the gender and marital status of the respondents across the categories for the timing of their decisions to attend the summer sessions. Surprisingly, a larger percentage of males had decided more than nine months earlier to attend the summer session than had females. Not surprisingly, a larger proportion of married respondents had decided earlier than single respondents to attend the summer session. Given that married individuals' lives are likely more complex than the lives of unmarried individuals and their decision to attend the summer session will likely have a larger impact on other family members, they probably have to maintain longer planning horizons.



**Table 2**  
**Cross Tabulation of Gender of Respondent across the Timing of Their Decision to Attend the Summer Session**

<u>Gender</u>	<u>Timing of Decision</u>			
	<u>more than 9 months ago</u>	<u>4-9 months ago</u>	<u>2-3 months ago</u>	<u>less than 2 months ago</u>
Male	187	177	109	60
Female	86	102	65	55

Chi Square = 9.34; Significance = .02505; df = 3

**Table 3**  
**Cross Tabulation of Marital Status of Respondent across the Timing of Their Decision to Attend the Summer Session**

<u>Marital Status</u>	<u>Timing of Decision</u>			
	<u>more than 9 months ago</u>	<u>4-9 months ago</u>	<u>2-3 months ago</u>	<u>less than 2 months ago</u>
Single	164	186	139	90
Married	112	93	36	25

Chi Square = 25.75; Significance = .00001; df = 3

Tables 4 through 7 present the results of assessing the association between the respondents' decision timing to attend the summer session and their registration levels, the college of their current summer class enrollment, and whether they were currently working on a degree program or certification and if so, at what institution. As expected, seniors and graduate students (see Table 4) made their decisions to attend the summer session earlier than did juniors, sophomores, and freshmen. A graduate student's commitment to complete a degree may translate into a conscious plan to take a majority of courses during the summer session. As previously discussed, seniors and juniors are likely aware that they must take an extra course or two to graduate within four years, or "on time," which may again translate into earlier decision making.

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**Table 4**  
**Cross Tabulation of Respondents' Registration Level across the Timing of Their Decision to Attend the Summer Session**

Registration Level	Timing of Decision			
	more than 9 months ago	4-9 months ago	2-3 months ago	less than 2 months ago
Freshman	5	9	9	3
Sophomore	13	28	23	19
Junior	50	70	46	31
Senior	129	123	75	41
Graduate	75	44	12	17
Not Classified	6	10	13	5

Chi Square = 60.44; Significance = .00000; df = 15

Table 5 examines the college of the summer class being taken by the respondent across the timing of the respondents' decisions. As expected, students from the College of Education with its graduate education program had the largest proportion of respondents making the earliest summer session decisions. A large percentage of students in the College of Business indicated they had made their summer session decisions at least four months earlier. Respondents from the other colleges indicated they had made most of their decisions from two to nine months before the start of the summer session.

**Table 5**  
**Cross Tabulation of College of Summer Class Enrollment across the Timing of the Respondents' Decision to Attend the Summer Session**

College	Timing of Decision			
	more than 9 months ago	4-9 months ago	2-3 months ago	less than 2 months ago
Col. of Arts & Letters	23	43	24	17
Col. of Bus. Admin.	61	56	37	26
Col. of Education	107	62	35	20
Col. of Health & Hum. Ser.	23	41	24	16
Col. of Hum. & Public Aff.	15	20	17	8
Col. of Nat. & App. Sci.	49	62	41	29

Chi Square = 41.82; Significance = .00024; df = 15

Respondents who indicated they were currently working on a degree program or certification were more likely to have made their summer session decisions earlier than those respondents who were not working on degrees (see Table 6). Those individuals not working on degree programs may find or hear about a course at the last minute or simply decide at the last minute that the summer session would provide them with something to do. Table 7 also indicates that those respondents working on degree programs or certification at the sample institution were more likely to make their summer session decision earlier than those who regularly attend another in-state or out-of-state institution. Those respondents who regularly attend other institutions appear to be most likely to make their summer session decisions only two to three months before the start of the session.

**Table 6**  
**Cross Tabulation of Whether the Respondent Was Currently Working on a Degree Program Across the Timing of Their Decision to Attend the Summer Session**

Currently Working on a Degree Program	Timing of Decision			
	more than 9 months ago	4-9 months ago	2-3 months ago	less than 2 months ago
Yes	270	270	167	104
No	5	7	8	11

Chi Square = 15.35; Significance = .00154; df = 3

**Table 7**  
**Cross Tabulation of What Institution the Respondents Are Working on a Degree or Certification at Across the Timing of Their Decision to Attend the Summer Session**

Institution	Timing of Decision			
	more than 9 months ago	4-9 months ago	2-3 months ago	less than 2 months ago
Current Institution	265	251	149	94
Another In-State Institution	4	13	15	8
Out-of-State Institution	1	5	6	3

Chi Square = 21.14; Significance = .00173; df = 6

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Finally, Tables 8 and 9 present the associations between the timing of the summer session decision, whether the respondents were taking other courses during the summer, and the total number of summer session credit hours they were taking during the summer session. In a similar pattern, those students taking other course credits during the summer were planning their summer session decisions earlier than those students not taking other courses. Less planning for class time scheduling conflicts and work schedules might present a possible explanation for this result. Lastly, those respondents who took more hours during the summer session made their decisions to attend the session earlier than did those respondents who took lighter loads. This is consistent with the need for advanced planning to develop a workable class schedule.

**Table 8**  
**Cross Tabulation of Whether Respondents Are Taking Other Classes During the Summer Session Across the Timing of Their Decision to Attend the Summer Session**

Are Respondents Taking Other Course Credits This Summer?	Timing of Decision			
	more than <u>9 months ago</u>	4-9 months ago	2-3 months ago	less than 2 months ago
Yes	217	182	115	66
No	56	96	60	49

Chi Square = 23.77; Significance = .00003; df = 3

**Table 9**  
**Cross Tabulation of Total Credit Hours Take in Current Summer Session Across the Timing of Respondents's Decision to Attend the Summer Session**

Credit Hours Taken for Entire Summer	Timing of Decision			
	more than <u>9 months ago</u>	4-9 months ago	2-3 months ago	less than 2 months ago
1-2 hours	3	15	14	13
3-6 hours	140	170	103	71
7-9 hours	86	70	41	22
10 hours and over	44	20	9	7

Chi Square = 46.38; Significance = .00000; df = 9

•• **Media Effectiveness and the Timing of the Decision to Attend the Summer Session** ••

An examination of the respondents' decision patterns to attend the summer session and their evaluations of the effectiveness of various media about the upcoming summer session are presented in Table 10. The overall evaluations of the effectiveness of various media indicates the two most effective media are the mailings to students enrolled in the spring semester before the start of the summer term (3.68), and the traditional Summer Schedule Bulletin (3.52). Mailings to students enrolled during the previous fall semester (3.18) and mailings to students enrolled in the previous summer session (3.03) were also rated as effective. Surprisingly these two types of mailings were the only two types of media to exhibit significant differences across the four categories of summer session decision timing. Again, those respondents who made their decisions to attend the summer session more than nine months earlier did rate them as more effective than did those respondents who waited longer to make their decisions.

•• **Managerial Implications** ••

The value of institutional research to any organization cannot be underestimated as every institution of higher education will have at least slightly different student populations. While the findings of this study have specific value to the sampled institution, some generalizations may be possible.

One of the most interesting findings of this study is the recognition that students make their decision to attend summer sessions continuously throughout the academic calendar year. This also means that they recognize their need to attend the summer session and likely begin their information search before the timing of their actual decision to attend. For administrators of summer session programs, the findings mean they must attempt to reach potential summer session students year-round.

Some students clearly do not make their decision to attend the summer session until they are within a few months of starting the summer session. More research is needed to see if these patterns of late decision making can be tied to outside influences such as lack of finding summer employment or returning home for the summer from another institution and deciding to take a transferable class. Others may simply decide they need more education to advance in their fields and see the summer session as a less threatening way to get back into the classroom.

**Table 10**  
**Mean Effectiveness of Media Forms Across Respondent's**  
**Timing of Decision to Attend Summer Session**

<u>Media</u>	Timing of Decision to Attend Summer Session					<u>Overall F-Value</u> <u>Mean</u>
	more than 9 months ago	4-9 months ago	2-3 months ago	Less than 2 months ago		
Mailing to Students Enrolled in the Last Summer Session:	3.17	3.05	2.81	3.00	3.03	3.23
Mailing to Students Enrolled in Last Fall Semester:	3.35	3.27	2.85	3.04	3.18	8.07
Mailing to Students Enrolled in Last Spring Semester:	3.75	3.69	3.57	3.67	3.68	0.81
Announcement in Campus Newspaper:	2.76	2.90	2.79	2.69	2.80	1.15
Announcement in Campus Newsletter:	2.33	2.51	2.39	2.33	2.40	1.30
Announcement in City Newspaper:	2.41	2.64	2.40	2.43	2.49	2.05
Summer Schedule Bulletin:	3.58	3.59	3.42	3.39	3.52	1.43
Advertising on Local Radio:	2.67	2.84	2.80	2.70	2.75	1.19
Advertising of Local TV:	2.68	2.81	2.71	2.68	2.73	0.75
"Other" Media:	2.00	2.08	2.01	2.03	2.03	1.04
	n=278	n=284	n=178	n=116	n=856	
Scale Values: 1 = not effective; 5 = very effective						

Finally, all the respondents indicated that the traditional mailings to students enrolled in the previous spring semester and the traditional Summer Schedule Bulletin were still the most effective media to reach summer session students. Mailings to students enrolled in the previous summer session and mailings to students enrolled during the previous fall semester were also important. Thus it would appear that whenever possible, mailings to existing students may be the most effective forms of communication with the summer session student. Newspapers, radio, and television were rated as below average in effectiveness. To the administrator of summer programs, this finding means that the more personalized approach of mailings is more effective than most forms of mass media in reaching the summer session student.

Effectively reaching the summer session student is one of the goals of the summer session administrator. Good institutional research should allow those responsible for summer sessions to better understand their summer student populations and to efficiently reach potential students who are considering the summer session.

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