



Measuring Beyond Headcount: Rethinking Success Metrics in Intercession Administration

Paul Cesarini, Online & City College, Loyola University New Orleans, US, cesarini@loyno.edu

ABSTRACT

This essay will hopefully prompt reflection and discussion among intercession administrators by helping them analyze how they measure the overall effectiveness of their January term, May term, and summer sessions.

Keywords: Summer; intercessions; headcount; SCH; NTR; May Term; January Term; Winter Sessions

How do you measure success for your intercessions (any combination of January term, May term, and summer)? For decades, intercession administrators have largely relied on a simple and familiar metric: headcount—or possibly a combination of headcount and student credit hours (SCHs). The assumption has been that higher headcount translates into higher revenue and, therefore, greater institutional success. However, as higher education undergoes seismic changes, we must ask ourselves whether this metric should still be the best primary indicator of success.

Our industry now faces not one but *two* demographic cliffs due to low birth rates during the Great Recession and looming population decline nationwide (if not worldwide) (Bauman, 2024; Klein-Collins et al., 2020). Institutions that have depended on traditional students enrolling in on-ground programs and living in residence halls can no longer assume that this is a viable long-term strategy. Additionally, the ongoing political polarization of higher education has led

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to greater scrutiny of institutional priorities and funding, making it more difficult to rely on broad-based public support or predictable student pipelines.

At the same time, the cost of higher education continues to rise, creating a perception that the return on investment of a college degree is diminishing. Many students and families are questioning whether the financial burden of higher education is justified, particularly as alternative credentials and professional/industry certifications gain traction. In this environment, intersession administrators cannot ignore the impact that these broader forces will have.

THE INCREASING LIMITATIONS OF THE HEADCOUNT METRIC

If fewer students are enrolling in higher education overall, it follows that fewer students will enroll during the intersessions. Given this, is a primary focus on boosting summer enrollment still a useful benchmark to gauge success? This is not to say that increasing headcount during these sessions no longer has merit. As intersession administrators, we all want higher numbers. They are easy to report upward and easy to explain to key stakeholders. Yet, we should also consider looking at several metrics to judge the overall effectiveness of these sessions.

Fixating on headcount or headcount and SCH alone can also obscure more meaningful indicators of financial health and student engagement. For example, an institution that aggressively recruits summer students might see a temporary enrollment spike but still struggle with retention and revenue sustainability—particularly if these students are heavily discounted. Also, a focus on raw numbers does not always automatically align with institutional priorities, such as ensuring that students make meaningful academic progress or that summer programming contributes to overall institutional financial health.

Given these challenges, it may be time for intersession administrators to adopt a broader set of metrics when assessing program success. Here are a few possibilities, however obvious they might seem:

1. Graduate vs. Undergraduate Headcount/SCH

If the per-credit tuition rate at an institution differs between graduate and undergraduate courses, with graduate courses being higher, overall headcount becomes a less relevant metric than graduate headcount—that is, having 500 MBA students over a given session paints a very different financial picture than having 450 undergraduates and 50 MBA students.

2. Average Number of Credits Taken per Student

Instead of simply counting students, institutions could examine how many credits each student takes during the summer. A lower headcount with higher per-student credit loads might indicate that these sessions are being used more strategically for degree completion, which could be a better long-term outcome than maximizing sheer volume. Drilling down even further, the average number of credits taken per student by grade level might also be useful. For example, if you notice that juniors have started taking fewer intersession courses over the past few years, identifying the underlying cause of that could lead to offering a more diverse portfolio of courses during that session.

3. Net Tuition Revenue as a Percentage of Enrolled Students at the Institutional Level

The intersessions do not operate in a vacuum; their financial impact should be considered in the context of the institution's overall revenue model. If these sessions are helping to stabilize institutional finances, that might be a more relevant measure of success than raw enrollment numbers.

4. Percentage of the Total Student Population Enrolled in Intersessions

While this metric still largely speaks to headcount, it allows for fluctuations in overall institutional enrollment to factor into intersession enrollment and presents a bigger picture to key stakeholders.

5. Retention and Persistence Rates Correlated to Intersessions

Are these courses helping students stay on track to graduate? Can we definitively link these? If students who take intersession courses are more likely to persist into the fall and eventually complete their degrees, that could be a more meaningful indicator of the program's effectiveness.

6. Modality and Utilization of Institutional Resources

Are summer sessions making efficient use of faculty, classroom space, and other institutional resources? Or are these ancillary expenses posing an unnecessary financial drain? Should more courses be offered online rather than in person? An intersession that maintains financial sustainability while ensuring that facilities are optimized may be more effective than one that simply maximizes student enrollment.

7. Student Satisfaction and Learning Outcomes

Are students finding intersession courses valuable in terms of learning, scheduling flexibility, or financial feasibility? Surveys and qualitative feedback—for both the student taking these courses and the faculty teaching them—provide deeper insights into whether these sessions are meeting student needs in a meaningful way.

MOVING THE DISCUSSION FORWARD

Shifting away from a headcount-driven model for evaluating these sessions requires a collective rethinking of what success looks like. While there are no definitive answers, it is clear that the traditional enrollment-focused approach could soon be misaligned with the realities facing many institutions. All of the metrics above should be easily accessible via a dashboard or data warehouse. If your institution does not have this information readily available, developing this infrastructure should be prioritized. Having such dashboards is absolutely critical for key stakeholders at an institution to help determine what role these sessions play in the institution's overall strategy.

As we navigate this shifting landscape caused by the demographic cliff and related factors, intersession administrators have an opportunity to rethink how success should be defined and measured. By broadening the conversation and considering alternative metrics, we can ensure the intersessions remain essential components of higher education in the coming years.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. What metrics does your institution use to gauge intersession effectiveness?
2. Why are those specific metrics used?
3. Which key stakeholders at your institution determined which metrics are used?
4. Are these key stakeholders who made this determination still employed at your institution?
5. Should any of the current metrics used be changed or otherwise adapted to better reflect broader industry trends?
6. What additional ones, if any, might more accurately represent intersession effectiveness?

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author is a member of the editorial team for *Summer Academe*, which is on a voluntary basis.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Paul Cesarini

Online & City College, Loyola University New Orleans, US

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