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Using Strategic Scholarships to Increase Affordability and Accelerate Enrollment Growth

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Abstract

Since 2013, Purdue University has been implementing a series of strategies to increase summer enrollment and affordability as part of the Purdue Moves initiative. One important aspect of the plan includes dedicating a portion of new summer tuition and fees toward strategic scholarships and need-based financial aid to help students speed time to degree completion. In the past, scholarships were dedicated to Summer Start, Summer Stay, and Summer Finish. In 2018, the Advisor-Initiated Scholarship, Summer Internship Plus, and Early Start Presidential Scholarship were added to the portfolio and the application timeline for existing scholarships was revised to maximize the impact on enrollment.

Introduction

College campuses can sometimes seem like abandoned cities during the summer. This is often due to a myriad of activities that take students away from campus (e.g., study abroad, internships, jobs, and time with family). However, implementing strategic scholarship initiatives and need-based aid may help develop thriving and robust campuses during the summer. In fact, financial pressures have been identified as an important factor in the decision to complete summer coursework (Taylor, Lee, & Doane, 2001). Helping students apply for federal aid and providing need-based grants have also been shown to increase retention and the likelihood of enrolling in college (Bettinger, Long, Oreopoulos, & Sanbonmatsu, 2012; Castleman & Long, 2013).

Chandler and Weller (1995) found that the ability to use remaining scholarship dollars was an important factor for summer enrollment at a Midwestern institution. This is likely because students who attend during summer, on average, have “higher annual costs and lower family income” (Smith & Read, 2013, p. 16).

Purdue University is a public land-grant institution located in the Midwestern United States. As part of Purdue Moves, a set of strategic presidential initiatives, the Division of Summer Session strives to increase access, improve affordability, and speed time to degree completion while transforming Purdue into a year-round university. Since summer 2012, the number of undergraduates completing summer coursework has increased by 45% (see Table 1), and the institution’s four-year graduation rate has increased by 11 percentage points.

Table 1: Summer undergraduate enrollment, 2012–2018

Year	Enrollment	% Increase
2012	6,666	
2013	7,027	5.4
2014	7,905	12.5
2015	8,329	5.4
2016	8,698	4.4
2017	9,059	4.2
2018	9,698	7.1

Registration and Tuition

The timeline of summer registration plays a critical role in the scholarship distribution process. Summer courses are posted during early December and registration begins around February 1. When a student is able to register depends on a number of criteria, such as class (senior, junior, sophomore, freshman) and the number of credit hours completed (e.g., a freshman with 20 credit hours would be able to register before a freshman with only 12 hours). Open registration for all students begins in early March. Students may register for summer courses until courses begin.

To register for classes, students must enter a six-digit PIN, which is provided by their academic advisor. This strategy forces students to regularly meet with advisors, which supports timely graduation. The tuition and fee structure for summer session is detailed in Table 2.

Table 2: Summer tuition and fees

	1–5 Credits	6–9 Credits *	10+ Credits		
	Cost / credit	Flat rate	Flat rate for first 9 credits	Cost / credit over 9	
Indiana resident	\$347.85	\$2,498.00	\$2,498.00	+	\$347.85
Non-resident	\$948.30	\$7,198.50	\$7,198.50	+	\$948.30
International	\$1,018.30	\$7,698.50	\$7,698.50	+	\$1,018.30

* Six to nine credit hours are promoted as the “sweet spot.” Many students who initially enroll in six credits eventually complete nine to maximize flat-rate tuition.

Need-Based Aid

Need-based aid accounts for the majority of summer financial aid at Purdue University. For summer 2018, the Division of Summer Session dedicated \$983,000 to need-based summer aid. In addition, a message was sent from the Division of Financial Aid to all students with remaining federal Pell Grant eligibility to encourage them to complete Purdue’s summer aid application. As a result of this effort, and the federal government’s move to year-round availability for Pell Grants, Purdue undergraduate students received more than \$1,400,000 in Pell Grants.

Students access the application for summer aid through their student portal, and the Division of Financial Aid uses the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) to determine award recipients.

Early Start Presidential Scholarship

With a growing incoming class, the Early Start Presidential Scholarship was established to encourage academic-year scholarship recipients to start during summer. If students receive a scholarship for the academic year, ranging from \$4,000 to \$15,000, the Division of Summer Session will give them up to \$1,000 as an incentive to start early. One caveat is that students must complete a minimum of five credit hours in order to receive the award.

This scholarship is an important component of the overall enrollment strategy because it will help better use campus resources, reduce stress on bottleneck courses, and give students a jump-start on college life. The scholarship encouraged 49 students to register for 343 credit hours in summer 2018.

Advisor-Initiated Scholarship

Academic advisors are key stakeholders for summer enrollment growth. Traditionally, freshmen represent approximately 8% of summer enrollment and sophomores account for approximately 18%. To empower advisors and put more first-year and second-year students on track for on-time graduation, the Advisor-Initiated Scholarship was piloted in 2018. This award provides up to \$500 to students enrolled in at least three credit hours.

Academic advisors were asked to recommend up to three students, in rank order, who would benefit from completing summer courses. Advisors reported that, because they wanted to determine the best candidates for the scholarship, they talked more with first-year and second-year students about summer courses than they had in prior years.

After receiving the nominations, the Division of Summer Session selected recipients. Academic advisors were copied on each award notification, and the nomination was mentioned to the recipients. Allowing advisors to select students provided a satisfying outcome for the students, advisors, and Summer Session.

In total, 108 Advisor-Initiated Scholarships were awarded and the recipients registered for a total of 570 credit hours; 44 of the recipients registered for 207 credit hours after receiving the scholarship offer.

Summer Stay Scholarship

The Summer Stay Scholarship is intended to help students get ahead in their plan of study while completing a 140-hour on-campus summer research or internship experience. Students are awarded up to \$2,500 toward tuition and fees not covered by other gift aid.

In 2018, faculty offered 61 unique research projects and staff provided 17 individual internship opportunities. The Division of Summer Session matches students with faculty/staff mentors.

The application cycle opens in January and runs through early April. While 108 scholarships were offered in 2018, the application process is highly competitive; more than 600 applications were received. For summer 2018, the minimum GPA requirement was adjusted from 3.00 to 2.00 to help support students in the murky middle. Priority is given to students who might not otherwise register for summer courses due to financial difficulty.

All participants are required to complete nine credit hours over the summer. The 108 Summer Stay Scholarship recipients accounted for 1,010 credit hours. Of the 2018 cohort, 57 students registered for 597 credit hours after receiving the scholarship offer.

Summer Internship Plus Scholarship

Internships have been identified as an important college experiential learning activity (Kuh, 2008). Highlighting this significance, the Gallup-Purdue Index (2014) found that students who complete internships are more likely to earn full-time employment and more likely to be engaged at work than students who did not participate in internships during college.

The Summer Internship Plus Scholarship was created to encourage undergraduate students to complete online coursework alongside a meaningful summer internship experience. The scholarship provides up to \$1,000 toward tuition and requires that students enroll in at least six credit hours; internship credits count toward the minimum requirement.

In 2018, the Summer Internship Plus Scholarship was awarded to 20 students who registered for a total of 146 credit hours. Of this pilot group, 19 students registered for 137 credit hours after receiving the scholarship offer.

Summer Finish Scholarship

From 2012 to 2016, as the initial surge of students who benefited from expanded summer options cycled through, the number of summer graduates at Purdue increased. However, the number of summer graduates is expected to decline as time to degree completion is reduced as a result of taking summer courses earlier in one's college career (see Table 3). Thus, the Summer Finish Scholarship was created in 2017 to encourage undergraduate students to finish their degree in August rather than waiting until December.

Table 3: Summer graduates compared to year-round total

Summer graduates	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Undergraduate	440	479	473	490	501	439
Professional	2	2	7	6	4	0
Graduate	580	633	635	704	761	762
Total	1,022	1,114	1,115	1,200	1,266	1,201
Year-round total	9,605	9,307	9,587	9,808	9,709	10,036

This award gives recipients up to \$1,000 toward tuition and fees for finishing their degrees in summer. For 2018, the application deadline was extended from February until early April to give students the opportunity to register for fall courses before the awards were released.

Once senior registration was complete, staff from the Division of Summer Session evaluated transcripts and reached out to students to encourage them to graduate earlier. As a result, 11 students who were registered for December graduation finished in August 2018.

An additional 31 students wanted to graduate during summer but lacked financial means to complete their degree early. They were also awarded a scholarship by the Division of Financial Aid. These 42 students completed a total of 253 credit hours.

Students and advisors provided valuable feedback to improve the program for 2019. For example, there were many more students who would have liked to graduate during summer, but they didn't know about this opportunity. Some courses are not traditionally offered during summer, so students would have had to complete those courses during the regular academic year; advising and marketing occurred too late.

For 2019, the opportunity was marketed to seniors in early October, prior to spring registration. A list of Purdue's 250+ guaranteed summer courses was also shared with advisors in time to assist with spring and summer planning.

Summary

Collectively, Purdue's strategic scholarships increased affordability and helped speed time to graduation for 327 students who enrolled in 2,322 credit hours during summer 2018. This includes 180 students who registered for 1,350 credit hours after receiving a scholarship offer. The awards (\$437,500 in scholarships) helped generate just over \$1,181,000 in tuition and fees. After accounting for the cost of instruction for the 2,322 credit hours, approximately \$350,000 was returned to the general fund.

Application at Other Institutions

Experiences at Purdue University have highlighted several key factors that may be beneficial to other institutions looking to develop a comprehensive summer scholarship strategy.

1. A well-structured scholarship plan will simultaneously increase student affordability, revenue, and enrollment.
2. Scholarships should be spread across student classifications to assist students at all levels. If scholarship dollars are limited, it may be wise to focus on students who do not typically enroll during summer but may benefit the most from financial assistance (i.e., first-year and second-year students).
3. Marketing efforts must occur year-round as students often make plans months in advance. Early communication is especially helpful while planning spring and summer classes with academic advisors during the fall semester.
4. Extending scholarship deadlines until late spring will likely increase summer enrollment as students who need financial support can more easily be identified.

To encourage enrollment growth and improve affordability, Purdue University will continue to expand summer scholarship opportunities so students can benefit from year-round coursework. If resources are available, other universities are encouraged to consider how a comprehensive scholarship strategy could be adapted to help accelerate summer enrollment growth and increase student affordability.

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Biographies

John Gipson is the director of the Division of Summer Session at Purdue University and leads a team dedicated to creating and implementing year-round enrollment initiatives in the Office of the Provost. Prior to his current role, John served in advising and recruitment positions at Purdue University and Grand Valley State University. He published his first book, *Student Involvement & Academic Outcomes: Implications for Diverse College Student Populations*, with Donald Mitchell, Krista Soria, and Elizabeth Daniele in 2015. He was a 2018 recipient of the Dr. Charles Eberly Oracle Award from the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors. John earned his PhD in educational psychology with a concentration in quantitative research methods from Purdue University.

Anne Jarrard has served as the assistant director for the Division of Summer Session at Purdue University since September of 2017. Annie oversees Summer Stay, Summer Finish, and Summer Internship Plus. Annie also provides support for all the day-to-day operations that make for a successful summer at a Big 10 university. Prior to joining the Division of Summer Session she worked as a program manager in the Office of the Provost, coordinating programs and events for faculty. She earned her bachelor of science in public health from Purdue University and her master of science in higher education from Walden University.

Elizabeth Casebeer's primary role within the Division of Summer Session is to coordinate, manage, and complete special projects and assignments related to the division's Summer Start, Early Start, and Summer College for High School Students programs. She also provides support to the director and serves as a success coach for over 200 students. She is also a liaison between the Summer Session Office and students, parents, outside agencies, and the general public. She earned her bachelor of science in psychology from Evangel University in 2015, and her master of science in education with an emphasis in school counseling from Purdue University in 2018.