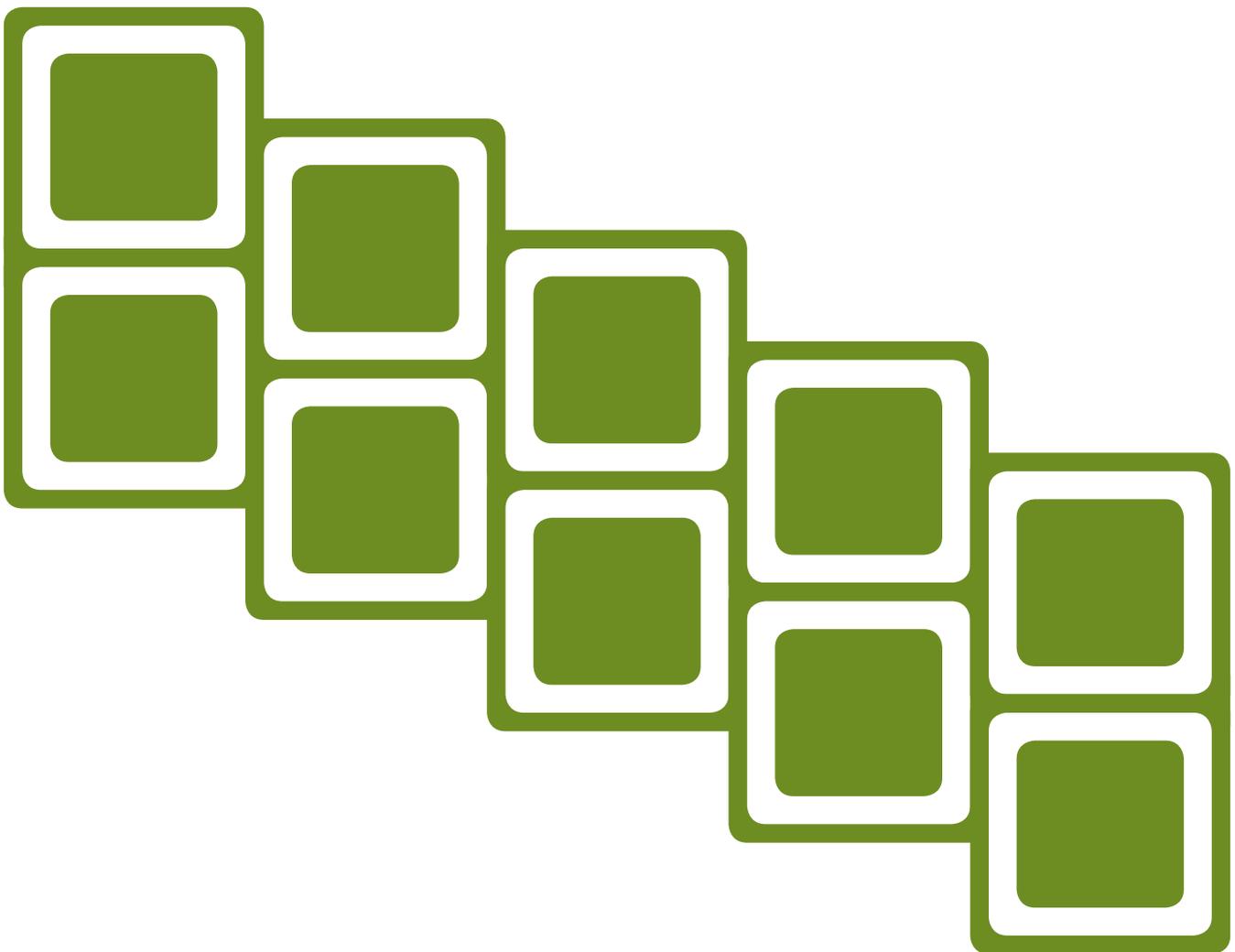


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# *Changing Student Summer Behavior: Purdue Summer Stay Scholars*

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## **Abstract**

Recent efforts by many colleges and universities to increase the on-campus component of summer enrollment is driven by a variety of motives, including better use of campus infrastructure, the benefits of smaller class sizes, targeted interventions for at-risk students, and increased opportunities for high-impact experiences such as on-campus internships and research with faculty. Purdue University is placing a high priority on increasing on-campus undergraduate summer enrollment as part of a presidential strategy. In 2016, Purdue piloted “Summer Stay Scholars,” a new initiative during the 12-week summer session that was designed to influence student behavior and attitudes related to on-campus opportunities during the summer. Summer Stay Scholars is a scholarship program that incentivizes 100–150 undergraduate students who decided not to enroll in their first summer at Purdue to remain on campus in a subsequent summer and take courses. In its first year, Summer Stay Scholars offered full coverage of tuition and fees for two or three on-campus summer courses. In addition, scholarship recipients were required to complete 140 hours in an on-campus internship or research project, designed to help students get ahead with degree completion and gain meaningful experiences that could aid them in their future careers. We hypothesized that Summer Stay Scholars would be more likely to return to campus in future summers, and that other students and faculty would become more aware of campus-based summer opportunities as a result of hearing about the experiences of Summer Stay Scholars.

## Introduction

Quiet sidewalks, empty buildings, and sunshine are a common sight on college and university campuses during the summer months. In many ways, a campus might feel somewhat like a ghost town from an old western film. This is in large part due to that fact that for many students, the summer offers an array of activities that often take students off campus, including study abroad, summer employment in a job or internship, and/or spending time at home with parents, family, and friends. Higher education in the United States has long operated on an academic calendar that has traditionally excluded the summer months or used summer for a small number of special or experimental programs. In recent years, however, increasing summer enrollment has become a priority for many institutions as a way to increase retention and graduation rates, improve time to graduation, and generate additional tuition revenue through those enrolling and the seats that open up for additional fall students (Harbor & Nemelka, 2016).

Purdue University is a state land-grant institution, and the university's flagship West Lafayette campus is in a college town in the agricultural heartland of north-central Indiana. The West Lafayette campus in recent years has had a strong focus on increasing summer enrollment. As a key part of the president's strategic emphasis on building a "year-round university" to provide students with more options and flexibility (Purdue University, n.d.), summer is seen as a way to for students to benefit from high-impact experiences (e.g., participation in summer internships, study-abroad trips, and undergraduate research) and to shorten their time to degree. In May of 2016, more than half of undergraduate students at Purdue who completed their degree in four years or less had taken summer courses, according to Purdue's Enrollment Management Analysis and Reporting division. With significant investments in new strategies and staff, total summer enrollment has increased by 21% in headcount in the past five years. However, a large part of the growth in summer enrollment at Purdue University has come from online courses (the number of online course sections in the summer has increased 180% since 2012, and 40% of the summer enrollment growth in 2016 was from online coursework). This is consistent with trends across North America (North American Association of Summer Sessions, 2015). Thus, we challenged ourselves to design and test strategies that would also increase the number of students benefitting from on-campus experiences and coursework in the summer.

In 2016, Purdue piloted "Summer Stay Scholars," a new initiative during the 12-week summer session that was designed to influence student behavior and attitudes related to on-campus opportunities in the summer. Summer Stay Scholars is a scholarship program that incentivizes 100–150 undergraduate students who passed on the opportunity to take summer courses in their freshman year to remain on campus the next summer and take courses in West Lafayette. Students who were selected to receive the scholarship received full coverage of all tuition and fees for between six and nine credit hours of summer coursework. In addition to going to class, recipients of the scholarship were required to complete 140 hours in an on-campus internship or research project designed to help students get ahead with degree completion and gain meaningful experiences that could aid them in their future careers.

## The Idea

The foundation upon which Summer Stay Scholars was built is the idea that once a student has a positive on-campus summer experience, they will be more likely to return and enroll in subsequent summer sessions, and they may influence other students who learn about their experiences. Informal research conducted at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech) and Purdue University provided some grounds for this idea. For example, in Virginia Tech's Summer Academy, a summer bridge program, 55% of students in the 2012 cohort enrolled again in summer session courses in 2013 and 43% of this same cohort enrolled in the 2014 summer session. Thus, it appeared that a positive summer experience on campus early in a student's undergraduate program might lead to enrollment in subsequent summer sessions. Similarly, focus groups of Purdue students, designed to learn more about students' summer experiences, found that roughly 80% of the participants had previously stayed on campus and taken classes during the summer, all of whom talked about how much they enjoyed summer at Purdue and would do it again. What also emerged from these focus groups was a theme that finances in particular can be a major barrier to students remaining on campus to take courses during the summer.

Students need good reasons to alter their enrollment behavior, especially when such a change runs counter to traditions, such as not taking classes during the summer. Thus, in an attempt to highlight summer opportunities and provide a robust group of students who have had a very positive on-campus summer experience, we designed a pilot program called Summer Stay Scholars. The program combined a generous financial incentive with summer courses and a high-impact experience (research or internship). We believed that students who were given opportunities to take summer courses and complete a research project or an on-campus internship, in addition to receiving a tuition waiver, would be more likely to engage in academic activities in subsequent summers and might influence other students' behavior.

## Program Specifics

The criteria for Summer Stay Scholars eligibility was strategic, given the institutional goal of increasing on-campus summer enrollment. Students must have undergraduate status and a minimum 3.0 cumulative GPA. In addition, in the 2016 program, students must have never previously taken an on-campus summer course at Purdue and had to have enrolled at the institution in spring 2015 or earlier. Thus, the scholarship was intended to incentivize students who had already had an opportunity to stay and take classes during the summer but chose not to. We wanted to see whether this new experience could change the students' attitudes and behavior regarding summer on campus. First-year students were not eligible, and we targeted second- and third-year students (rather than seniors) in the hope that a positive on-campus experience would result in these students spending additional summers on campus.

The initial response to the announcement of Purdue's Summer Stay Scholars program was very positive. Students were enthusiastic about the monetary value of the scholarship (\$2,500–7,700, depending on residency status) and the opportunity to have a hands-on, practical experience in a research or internship setting while also making progress towards degree completion. Purdue faculty and staff were invited to submit research and internship project proposals and were enthusiastic about having additional help on projects during the summer. Research and internship supervisors were not required to pay for the students' time on projects, as the students were receiving free tuition. Thus, at no cost other than time spent on supervision, the faculty and staff had access to well-qualified students who were enthusiastic and grateful for the experience.

To recruit students to apply for Summer Stay Scholars, a series of marketing emails was sent to ~11,000 students who met the program criteria (based on institutional records and databases). These students were directed to a Summer Stay Scholars website ([www.purdue.edu/summerstay](http://www.purdue.edu/summerstay)) and encouraged to submit applications, which ultimately totaled just over 400. Submitting an application required that the student upload his or her résumé and indicate their interest in specific opportunities for summer research and internships listed on the application.

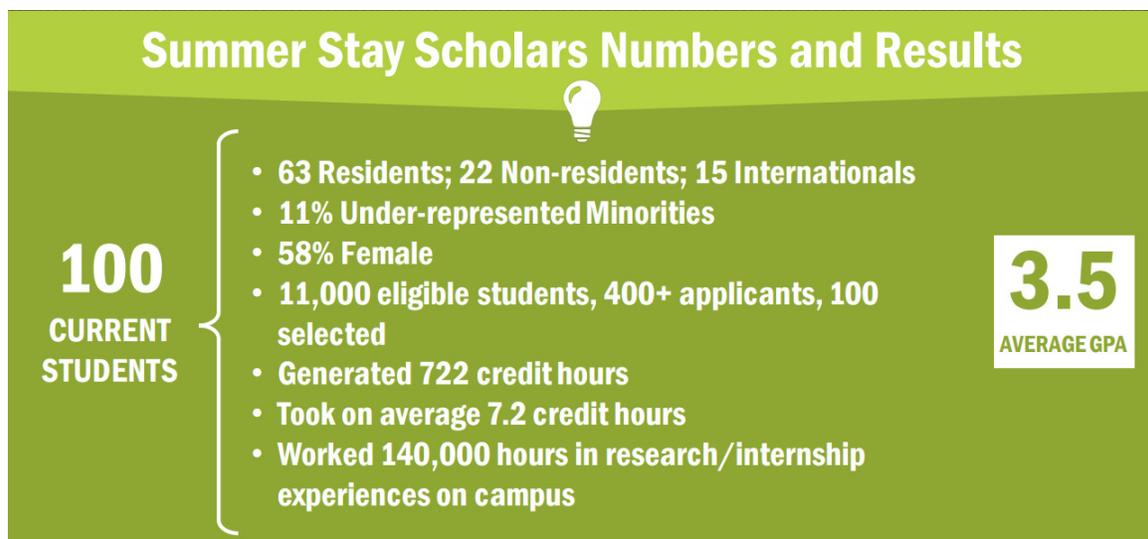
In order to get participation from faculty and staff, official letters were sent out from the Provost's Office, inviting proposals for summer research or internship opportunities appropriate for Summer Stay Scholar students. Over 180 research and internship opportunities were proposed by faculty and staff from across the campus. Student applicants were also given the option of proposing their own research or internship opportunity if they had made prior arrangements to work with a faculty member.

After the application deadline, faculty and staff were given approximately a week to review the applications and résumés of the students who had indicated an interest in their research project or internship. Faculty and staff were asked to identify their top five choices of students to work with them. Program staff then matched the students and the opportunities based on mutual interest—where students had ranked a research/internship opportunity highly and the faculty/staff member ranked the student highly. Decisions were released to students, faculty, and staff members simultaneously. Students had the opportunity to confirm their intent to accept the scholarship, and all involved were asked to confirm that they agreed to work together, based on the matches. Students and their faculty/staff supervisors were given the latitude to determine work schedules, as long as the student completed a minimum of 140 hours over the 12-week summer session in addition to taking on-campus courses.

Purdue's summer tuition model has a flat rate for between six and nine credit hours, and students were required to take a minimum of six credit hours to receive the full scholarship. Students were allowed to choose from the full range of on-campus coursework being offered in the summer; exceptions were made for an online course if the student's academic advisor confirmed that the course was needed by the student to make progress towards degree completion and that the course was only available in the summer in an online format.

## Did It Work?

The inaugural 100 Summer Stay Scholars were more likely than the undergraduate student body as a whole at Purdue's West Lafayette campus to be an Indiana resident, female, and caucasian. They also had a higher average GPA (Figure 1). These 100 students took an average of just over seven credit hours in the summer, and all worked at least 140 hours on research or in an internship on campus. Also, it is important to note that targeted email marketing was sent to the 2016 cohort reminding them of the positive aspects of their previous summer and encouraging them to consider summer enrollment and involvement in 2017 even though the stipend was only for the prior year.



**Figure 1:** Characteristics of Purdue's 2016 Summer Stay Scholars program participants

We tracked the summer 2017 behavior of the 100 students who had participated in the 2016 Summer Stay Scholars program and had had no prior involvement with Purdue in the summer session before that. We found the following:

- 30% of the students graduated from Purdue in either the fall 2016 or spring 2017 semesters.
- Of those eligible to return in summer 2017 (they had not yet graduated), 40% registered for some type of academic-related summer activity connected to Purdue, including coursework, credit-bearing research or internship experiences, and study-abroad trips. For context, only 27% of all Purdue undergraduate students took summer courses and/or studied abroad in 2016.
- Of the 40% who returned, 27% registered for credit-bearing coursework, 4% are studying abroad, and 9% are participating in a summer practical experience (i.e., internship).

- 75% of the students who returned for a second summer experience are in-state residents.
- Approximately 130 credit hours (an average of 4.5 credit hours per student) will be generated by this student group by the end of the 2017 summer session.

The impact of the first Summer Stay Scholars program has yet to be fully determined. However, results to date allow us to conclude that the initiative contributed to increasing summer enrollment and expanding the options for students to make timely progress towards completing their degrees. Moreover, it is important to note that a student who receives the Summer Stay Scholarship cannot receive it again. Thus, students who choose to return and take classes during the following summer are responsible for covering the costs of the tuition associated with the credit hours they are attempting, which means additional revenue for the institution. The impact that Summer Stay Scholars can have on student success was evident in the feedback from many of the students who participated in its inaugural year. Regarding on-time graduation, one student remarked:

Summer Stay Scholarship was an awesome opportunity. It gave me the chance to take some courses for free, which has cleared space up in my academic schedule... thus helping me graduate on time. I am thankful for this program and hope it continues on for many years to come.

Another student commented on the scholarship alleviating a financial burden, a common barrier to summer attendance, and also on the value of having an opportunity to gain research experience:

I would definitely recommend this to others because I think this is a great program and it really helped my family and I out financially. I was able to get credit while conducting research that helped me toward my goal of graduating with a degree in Aerospace engineering and gain[ing] great experience that will look really nice to companies.

Many faculty and staff members who participated as research and internship supervisors also found value in Summer Stay Scholars. Participating in these capacities provided faculty and staff with opportunities to mentor students, receive needed help on projects, and establish working relationships that in some cases persisted beyond the summer session:

It was wonderful to work with our student. She is planning a career in my field, and the opportunity to discuss her future professional plans was an important part of the experience.

Our Summer Stay Scholar was a great addition to help with summer communication needs. She fit in and contributed enough that we extended an offer for her to fill an open student communications assistant position for the rest of the year.

## Moving Forward

As with any pilot project, the first year provides lessons and insight that can be used to refine the program. The second year of Summer Stay Scholars will feature a few changes as well as some added components intended to expand the scholarship's reach and enhance students' summer experience. In 2017, the scholarship amount was set at a flat rate (\$2,500) for all students, regardless of residency status, so that it could be awarded to more students (approximately 150). Additionally, we were able to make arrangements with administrators in Purdue's University Residences to offer a full on-campus housing and dining scholarship (a \$3,000 value) to eight of the students selected as Summer Stay Scholars in 2017; this was not offered to any students in summer 2016. Another addition to the program was made to further enhance the academic focus: students were required to take a minimum of nine credit hours in total as opposed to six in the previous year, and three of those credit hours came from required and specific online courses—a one-credit professional portfolio course and a two-credit fitness and personal wellness course. We believed that the increase in minimum credit hours taken during the summer session was consistent with a rigorous scholars program. The two required online courses that all Summer Stay Scholars have to take promote a more balanced, well-rounded experience, one in which students focus on three important aspects of success: academics, work experience, and personal wellness.

With increased awareness of the Summer Stay Scholars program as a result of formal publicity about the 2016 program, as well as organic publicity as student, faculty, and staff participants talked with others in their networks, we had over 500 applicants and over 200 internships and research projects proposed for 2017. This resulted in 130 Summer Stay Scholars in 2017.

## Application at Other Institutions

As we conducted our own research to find models of comparable summer programs throughout the United States to inform the design of Summer Stay Scholars, we found that our ideas and plans had unique aspects. Our experience highlighted several key factors that we think summer session professionals at other institutions who might want to develop and implement a program similar to Purdue's Summer Stay Scholars should consider.

First, sufficient scholarship funds need to be secured if they are not already available through existing programs. A concern likely to be voiced against a program like Summer Stay Scholars is that it requires a significant amount of funding (\$400,000 in 2016 and \$375,000 in 2017) for a relatively small portion of the undergraduate student body (only 100 students in 2016 and 130 in 2017). To address this concern, the institution's highest levels of administration need to make summer enrollment and summer experiences (such as research and internship experiences) important priorities to which they allocate resources.

Second, while a full-tuition and fees scholarship and an on-campus internship or research experience is attractive to many students, it should not come as a surprise to those implementing such a program that many students may not take advantage of the offer. When asked, most responded that they were opting for alternative, more traditional summer activities (e.g., study abroad, part-time jobs, spending the summer at home with family, and taking online courses).

Finally, the marketing and promotion of this type of program requires year-round efforts to be effective. Soliciting the participation of faculty and staff to offer internships should be promoted regularly through communication from senior administrators. Advertising to students who qualify should also be emphasized, with the assistance of willing faculty and student-supporting staff, such as academic advisors, who can encourage students to apply. Merely waiting until a few months prior to the start of the summer session will likely result in a smaller applicant pool and less-qualified students.

Keeping these factors in mind, institutions that are placing a high priority on increasing on-campus summer experiences for undergraduate students can consider how Summer Stay might be adapted to their institutional context.

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## Biographies

Jacob Askeroth is an associate director of Digital Education at Purdue University and formerly held the role of assistant director of Summer Session, where he contributed to the promotion of summer enrollment strategies and initiatives, specifically Summer Stay Scholars. He is also currently pursuing a doctorate degree in learning design and technology at Purdue.

Jon Harbor is associate vice provost for Teaching and Learning at Purdue University, as well as a professor and executive director of Digital Education. He oversees summer session administration and is part of a team seeking to transform summer education at his university.

Blake Nemelka works in the dean's office of the Jon M. Huntsman School of Business at Utah State University and is a doctoral student at Purdue University, West Lafayette. Blake was the director of Summer Session at Purdue from 2015–2017. The director position was established for the first time at Purdue in April 2015. He comes from a background in enrollment management and continues to research and speak about summer enrollment strategy in all its forms.