

Focus on Administration

**Summer Session as an Incubator:
A Case Study of One University's Success**

Sharon F. Alexander

*Dean, Continuing Education and Summer Programs
University of Montana*

Introduction

The divergent pathways of higher education are moving closer together as we approach the next century. With this merger, many changes are occurring. Summer session, once thought of as a time set apart from the "academic year," less rigorous and of slower pace, is currently being heralded by administrators as a term in which regular students can complete graduation requirements in a more timely fashion and, perhaps more importantly, an entrepreneurial hotbed where significant revenues can be generated to cover diminishing state funding.

This paper describes a case study (Merriam, 1988) of one public university's experiment of adding self-support summer courses to more traditional state-supported courses to determine if it is economically, socially and academically feasible to do so. It will examine the successful model that has emerged and is now being used as a foundation for program development in a number of different areas. The question being asked in this case study is: Can summer sessions be used as an incubator for innovative program ideas which could be implemented during the academic year or in different venues? The idea of summer sessions acting as incubators for academic year programs is not a new one; but the fact that it has been so successful at a relatively small, rural institution indicates that it may hold promise for others.

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The Problem

The University of Montana is one of two universities within the fourth largest state in the union, Montana. The population, just over 800,000 persons, makes it a rural or frontier state. A comprehensive, public institution offering graduate and undergraduate degrees, The University of Montana has 9,500 full-time students during the academic year. It prides itself on having a strong undergraduate, liberal arts focus and points to a record 26 Rhodes scholars, three in the past four years, to substantiate this claim. Until the summer of 1993, the institution had a traditional state-supported summer session, however, like most higher education institutions in the United States, The University of Montana has received less and less support from the state government and is increasingly relying on tuition increases and innovative ways of raising operating funds.

During Academic year, 1992-93, The University of Montana phased in a semester system, with 1992 being the last summer on quarters. It was predicted that a large number of students would want the opportunity to complete their degrees prior to semester conversion, therefore extra, one-time-only state funding was granted that enabled additional courses to be offered. This increased the full-time enrollment by a factor of 50.16. The first summer semester, 1993, there were three well-documented confounding factors: the loss of the onetime-only funding; the implementation of a revised University Teachers' Union contract which removed the ceiling from summer salaries; and the first summer on semesters which cut the number of courses offered by one-third. These factors had the net effect of significantly decreasing the number of courses that could be offered with state funds. This drop in course offerings coincided with mounting pressure to provide more access to courses for students, the idea being that this would enable them to graduate in a timely fashion. This dilemma was of serious concern to the institution's administration.

In review, The University of Montana was faced with static funding sources, increased costs due to salary negotiations, and pressure from legislators to provide sufficient additional courses to enable students to graduate. The question asked was: Can we build a model of course and program delivery that will enable us to meet the needs of the students and pay the required instructional stipends without investing any additional state monies?

Discussion of the Problem and its Resolution

Although it was unprecedented, and existing policy and practice

mitigated against it, a plan to use self-support courses to supplement the state-supported courses was devised by academic and administrative personnel. To enable this to happen, an enrollment management task force was identified that included representatives from the following offices: admissions; registrar; budget; controller; financial aid; institutional research; BANNER student records; computer information systems; and continuing education and summer programs. This group worked arduously at defining the barriers and eventually designed ways of resolving them, so that self-support courses could be initiated within the existing system. This required a reinterpretation and/or change in numerous policies and procedures. One major consideration was designing a pathway through the computer system which affected all aspects of course and program delivery, including admissions, registration, scheduling, publishing fee-bills for students, paying instructors, etc. While the planning was very complex and fraught with emotion, by registration time students could enroll in either state or self-supported courses, or both, without being aware of the difference. During this labor-intensive but accelerated process, these student support providers became an integral part of the change process. Although initially reluctant, they agreed to change many years of tradition and practice, and their agreement to work on the project ensured success.

Concurrent with developing the administrative systems, it was necessary to work with the academic units to determine what courses would be offered, by which professors, at which times, etc. From the outset, it was expected that the number of courses and the number of enrolled students would be quite modest. The initial plan was to phase in the implementation to enable the experiment to be successful. By the end of the first summer (1993), however, statistics proved that the experiment was a greater success than had been predicted, especially through the budgeting process. The self-supporting courses had met the goals of providing students with additional courses which gave them the opportunity to complete degrees, enabled students to enroll in enrichment courses, and brought students to campus who might not ordinarily be there. The plan had exceeded financial and enrollment projections, and evaluation studies indicated that students and faculty were satisfied with the results.

During the second summer (1994), planning was much easier as was marketing and administration. Faculty liked the idea of being able to teach what they wanted and to receive the union negotiated salary, regardless of whether they were teaching a state or selfsupported course. Department chairs and deans liked the flexibility of being able

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to offer a much wider range of courses, especially those which they knew were of great interest to continuing students, *i.e.*, those students who were using summer as a third semester. Having this kind of flexibility in planning also enabled department chairs and deans to visualize the entire year and to plot courses over a longer range of time. University senior administration liked the idea of enabling students to complete their degrees in a more timely fashion, thus silencing the critics. Of course, for the continuing education and summer programs office, while it took a great amount of pre-planning and collaboration, the rewards were great. For the first summer (1993), \$125,000 in tuition revenue was budgeted; the actual was \$276,000. By the second summer, 1994, the actual amount of tuition revenue collected was \$674,000; expenses totaled \$490,000, leaving a residual of \$184,000 to be used in a variety of ways on and off campus.

This success led to institutionalized or standardized planning procedures for the summer of 1995. One of the associated problems with the model was the need to keep the numbers of self-support courses below, or at least in balance with, state-supported courses to enable administrators to gauge the impact on general fund revenue. The use of self-support courses in summer session has provided evidence to members of the institution, both academic and administrative, that they can play a major role in assuring that students can persist to graduation in a timely manner. Self-support course offerings can continue to expand, especially if the drastic funding cutbacks from the state continue.

Outcomes

The model developed for using self-support courses in summer was a success, and the president, the provost, and the fiscal affairs vice president quickly perceived that it was a useful opportunity for the institution to reach out into the state without having to rely on diminishing state funds. Concurrent with the pressure to provide more access to courses for on-campus students to graduate, a similar kind of expectation was emerging in regards to off-campus programs, particularly graduate programs. Could The University of Montana meet its mission of providing equal access to individuals in all parts of the state through self-support programs?

Planning was immediately initiated with selected deans and faculty members to explore other applications of the model with the dean of continuing education and summer programs providing collaborative leadership. As a result, the following programs have either been developed or are in the process of being developed: self-support night school; field-based M.B.A.; field-based M.Ed.; and three field-based

Ed.D.'s. The dean of pharmacy and allied health sciences has constructed a committee to explore the possibility of developing a self-support external Pharm.D. program for practicing pharmacists in the state of Montana and beyond; and, to carry the concept a step further, in January of 1995, the president commissioned a study to determine the feasibility of shifting four state-supported field-based masters degrees into self-support programs (Alexander & Munro, 1995). While the decision has not yet been made, it is highly likely that two of the four will either be modified or shifted to self-support.

The final coup is the recent request by the fiscal vice president for a study to determine whether summer session could become totally self-supporting. For public universities in the U.S., this is the norm. However, for a school like The University of Montana which, until two years ago, was still resisting change, this represents a major shift in thinking.

Associated Problems

At The University of Montana, not all aspects of this self-support model are positive; one negative aspect is that the money generated by self-support courses can never equal that generated by state-supported courses. For state-funded courses, not only is the tuition returned to the general fund, but the state full-time-equivalent allocation is as well; this is in the neighborhood of \$4,000 per full-time student. Self-support courses can pay for themselves and still maintain a profit, but for every dollar collected through self-support, approximately one dollar and fifty cents of state funding is lost. In addition, all of the associated operating costs must come from the self-support tuition: instructional stipends, direct administrative costs, central administrative costs for continuing education and summer programs, administrative assessment to the university, marketing costs, etc. It is fiscally impossible to return the same amount of money to the general fund as with state-supported courses. One alternative choice which may be made by senior management is to set the tuition for all self-support courses at the out-of-state tuition level. This would accrue more revenue, but it might be short-sighted if it causes an enrollment decline.

Another important factor is the development of policy relating to self-supporting programs and courses. To enable controlled expansion of current programs or the development of new programs, strategic planning with academic and fiscal units must occur. A protected base of self-support funding must be guaranteed with the understanding that it would take approximately two to three years to stabilize new program development. In addition, individuals from continuing education should

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be considered an integral part of the university's enrollment management team. At the close of this case study, these issues remain unresolved at The University of Montana.

Conclusion

At the outset, the question was asked whether summer studies can be used as an incubator for innovative program ideas which could be implemented during the academic year or in different venues. Based on the case study of one institution, it appears that not only can it happen; it has. Summer can be the experimental "way station" for administrative innovations such as the introduction of telephone registration or semester conversion or faculty contract negotiations or the development and evaluation of the self-support model, as exemplified in this case study. It can be used for academic innovations which enable interdisciplinary courses to be developed, or for testing alternate delivery methods and schedules.

The experiences at The University of Montana, while not universally generalizable, can provide valuable information to those persons pursuing different or less traditional ways of conducting (not just summer) programs. The self-support courses can serve a very valuable purpose in assisting institutions of higher education to meet their missions. The major concern is the competition the self-support revenue creates for regular state funding. If such issues can be resolved, then summer can and should be the incubator for innovation within the academy.

References

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