

# Summer at North American Universities and Colleges: *Impacts and Influences*

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As many summer administrators will attest, one of the great challenges to the acceptance of the summer session as a full and equal participant in the academic calendar is the persistence of hoary myths in the face of a dynamic reality. In 1985, upon the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Summer Sessions at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the author of *The American University in Summer*, Clay Schoenfeld, remarked: “Among the more enduring American news media myths is the implication that each summer every college and university takes up the campus sidewalks, so to speak, not to revive until autumn” (Schoenfeld, 1985). It is remarkable that such a myth has continued since the growth of participation in some form of summer education has proliferated throughout the country.

In 1962, there were 1,300 accredited institutions of higher education offering summer sessions. By 1993 the United States Department of Education reported in its *Institutional Characteristics Survey* that an estimated 3,027 out of a total of 3,800 American institutions of higher education were involved in summer sessions. These institutions have increasingly been joined by summer sessions at English, Scottish, Canadian, Australian, Mexican, and Caribbean universities and colleges. Whether it is called summer school, summer term, summer semester, summer session, or summer quarter, it is clear that increasing

numbers of institutions of higher education have challenged and continue to challenge the belief that activity ceases on campus during the summer.

Likewise, the belief that summer school offerings are of questionable academic quality reflects attitudes of the last century carried into the new. In 1927 the President of the University of Wisconsin stated, “six weeks was too short a time in which to produce anything of educational value” (Slichter, 1927). Schoenfeld remarked in 1991 that “some troglodyte faculty continue to insist that anything taught in a shorter time frame than three to four months is *ipso facto* shoddy” (Young and McDougall, 1991). These and other myths continue despite the existence of an increasing body of research and reports showing evidence to the contrary.

Concerns as to the academic quality of summer offerings — to the pedagogic soundness of shorter sessions — persist, despite the long and successful history of summer sessions. Annual reports of summer deans/directors consistently mention that they face challenges to academic excellence in the summer even as they are asked to meet the changing academic needs of learners in creative and innovative ways. The agenda and topics at the annual meetings of summer session associations, i.e., Association of University Summer Sessions (AUSS), North Central Conference on Summer Sessions (NCCSS), North American Association of Summer Session (NAASS) and the Western Association of Summer Session Administrators (WASSA) constantly address a recurring range of issues fueled in part by the myths surrounding summer school: the effectiveness of shorter sessions, the support of central administration for summer session, who determines the summer curricula, salary structures, revenue sharing, summer registration procedures, and keeping campus facilities open. The perennial nature of these issues lends much credence to the observation that change and acceptance of new ways of doing things in academia move with glacial speed.

The purpose of this paper is not to argue once again the case for the academic validity of summer offerings. Surely the past hundred years of this practice and the concomitant publications and presentations put those myths to rest. Indeed, summer students, whether continuing or returning professionals, report overwhelmingly in institutional surveys a high level of satisfaction with the quality of their summer education experiences (Grobsmith, 1997; Lee, 1999). Rather, the purpose is to show how the summer program, whatever its name, serves as a catalyst for change, and has significant impact and influence on both the academic institution and the community around it.

## Summer Session as a Catalyst for Change

Summer sessions are uniquely positioned to operate as a catalyst for change on campus. Precisely because they are free from some of the strictures of the rest of the academic year, summer sessions are able to offer unique opportunities for faculty, students, and institutions to transform the learning experience. A spirit of experimentalism and entrepreneurship permeates the summer session, both of which create the opportunity and incentive for colleges and universities to offer innovative curricula, and to enrich the learning experiences of students.

Summer session offers an excellent opportunity for academic experimentation and innovation. Whether the experimentation is with new topics, new courses, new programs, or new delivery mechanisms, summer session has proved to be a valuable testing ground for curricular innovation. Brown University states: "A key contribution of summer programs on the Brown campus is the academic experimentation. While this would be high risk in either the fall or spring semesters, in summer it is not only enabled, but encouraged" (Sibley, 2002). With typically smaller classes in the summer, courses that offer new methodology, completely new content or a new delivery mechanism can be attempted on a manageable scale, and the successes can be integrated into the rest of the academic year. Since change and innovation require concentrated time of both faculty and staff, summer session provides an ideal time frame in which to focus on new ways of doing things. On many campuses, the encouragement of academic experimentation during the summer includes special funding set-asides available only for piloting new courses and programs during the summer.

Innovative curricula are also fostered through the use of summer guest and visiting faculty programs. Many institutions take advantage of the fluidity of faculty schedules in the summer to bring in faculty and staff from outside the university. Faculty-in-residence and visiting and guest faculty programs in the summer allow institutions to bring world-class outside faculty to campus, thereby enriching the instructional cohort for both resident faculty and students. As the University of Colorado-Boulder attests, these opportunities not only "enhance the quality of our Summer Session, but also foster collaborative research and scholarship between our faculty and the visiting faculty" (Heinz, 2002). These outside connections and contributions can often result in permanent changes in curricula and research programs.

Academic experimentation and innovative curricula offered during summer session are important catalysts for change. Summer sessions

also act as a catalyst for change by allowing institutions to offer students enriched learning opportunities, which can transform their learning experience throughout the academic year. These enriched learning experiences can take the form of smaller and more intense classes, applied or experiential learning opportunities, and the opportunity to accelerate their progress toward completing their degree.

Despite myths questioning the academic excellence of summer school offerings, students and faculty report a perceived increase in the quality of the instructional experience during the summer session. Smaller class size, reduced faculty/student ratio, and the intensity of summer classes are frequently mentioned among the advantages of summer study. Students enjoy a degree of personal attention from both faculty and staff that is often not possible during the more hectic and populated academic terms. As the Dean of Summer Studies at Brown University reports, “Our students love the personal and intensive attention of the classes that meet with such frequency” (Sibley, 2002).

Summer session is also uniquely situated to transform learning by offering students opportunities for applied and experiential learning experiences. Many institutions use the summer session to offer students a rich array of field experiences, immersion clinical courses, internships, and apprenticeships. For many disciplines, summer is the ideal (or only) time for students to study the subject matter of their majors in the field. In the words of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, “...field experience is highly motivating for students because they can see clearly the practical application and importance of the more theoretical material in their academic year coursework. Most become highly engaged learners for the remainder of their program” (Barrows, 2002). As students, faculty, and employers will attest, field experiences are extremely important in giving students an education in the practical and applied aspects of their subject matter, and are critical in providing highly trained employees for the workforce. The knowledge and skills learned through these hands-on learning experiences are valued highly by the participants, and often deeply impact a student’s academic and professional future. Summer sessions also offer other enriched and intensive learning opportunities not normally available during the academic year such as international and service travel.

Finally, summer session gives students the opportunity to transform their learning experience by facilitating “time to degree” — assisting students in keeping on track to graduate in four years. By taking courses during summer sessions, students are able to complete degree requirements in a timely manner, and to decrease their credit load during the academic year. The benefits are twofold: decreased credit loads help

students concentrate on fewer classes, and also help reduce class size during the academic year. Both contribute to an increase in the quality of a student's academic experience.

### **Impacts and Influences of Summer Session**

Summer session exerts a significant influence — both cultural and economic — on the institution and the community around it. The cultural impact on the institution is complex, but centers around the development of a student centered mode of thinking, and the advancement of a seamless, year-round, “anytime, anywhere” learning model. Institutions offering summer sessions know that “capturing” the summer session student requires both innovative programming and processes. The unique demands on summer session require that they cater not only to “traditional” continuing degree students, but also a wide array of “non-traditional” learners with very specific expectations of service. The experiences of students, faculty and administrators indicate that institutions are able to transform their processes and policies to meet the unique needs of the summer learners. Increased responsiveness to student needs and the removal of barriers to access learning are hallmarks of the summer session. As a summer administrator from Winona State University notes, “the big change that summer programs bring is a change of attitude toward a service mentality — being customer friendly, marketing our services” (Christensen, 2002).

Summer session administrators know that policies and processes that may work well when applied to the predictable demands of a “traditional” semester populated by full-time resident students may often prove to be wholly inadequate when applied to the much more fluid and flexible sessions and students of summer. As a result, year-round institutional policies and processes have the opportunity to become more flexible and user-friendly. The removal of institutional procedural barriers — in registration, billing, student aid, record-keeping, scheduling, duration of “terms,” etc. — allow institutions to evolve toward a more accessible lifelong learning model that can accommodate a wide variety of learners. Summer session administrators state that “summer has led the way for alternative scheduling of classes in both delivery modes and time frames, and has given us the opportunity to transform learning through new forms of service and the removal of barriers” and that “the greatest impact from summer session stems from some calendar changes we’ve made. Several years ago we decided to make summer more flexible and user-friendly. We increased scheduling options, which have proven

••*Summer at North American Universities and Colleges*••

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to be very popular and enrollments have been increasing” (Christensen & Lee, 2002).

Summer session also exerts subtle but strong influence on the culture of the institution through its role in recruiting new students to the institution. Many schools use summer sessions as a way to widen their recruitment base and to attract new users to campus. In addition to continuing students, special programs during the summer session go out of their way to attract pre-college high-school students, minority and underserved students, teachers, professionals seeking continuing professional education, returning adult students, and other groups not considered “traditional” students. In the goal to attract a more ethnically diverse student population, summer session is again a catalyst for change. By making the campus more accessible to a wider variety of students, summer sessions helps to introduce new learners to the institution, and to ultimately increase the diversity of the types of students on campus.

In addition to the cultural impact, summer session has a significant economic impact on an institution. Some of this economic impact may be self-evident: an added term of tuition revenue, added compensation to instructional staff, full year employment for those providing the services of the needed infrastructure and the year-round utilization of campus facilities and staff are obvious benefits of the summer session. Other economic impacts may be less obvious, but important nevertheless. On many campuses, there is an entrepreneurial flavor to summer sessions that may not be present during the rest of the academic year. On these campuses, summer session courses are required to be self-supporting, and often utilize some form of revenue sharing to encourage departments and divisions to develop innovative programming.

Even on campuses where centralized financial support for summer sessions is available, there is a heightened sense that courses offered in summer must be demand-driven to attract students. Particularly at public institutions, this student focus and financial flexibility encourage an entrepreneurial spirit that can have a significant economic impact. The University of Oregon states, “The flexibility associated with operating the summer program using only self-generated revenues instead of state allocations and accompanying bureaucratic restrictions has resulted in both academic and financial success, effectiveness and efficiency. Courses offered in the summer are demand driven, i.e. we offer only those courses that students want and need, and we offer them at times and in formats that are convenient for students. Moreover, the ability to offer departments the opportunity to earn financial dividends or revenue sharing as a result of successfully offering summer courses

has provided them a much-needed source of revenue that simply would not otherwise be available” (Trebon, 2002).

Similarly the cultural and economic impact of summer session on the community can be substantial. The continued presence of students, faculty, and staff has a substantial impact on both the atmosphere and the economy of a campus community. The University of Oregon states, “...the foremost positive impact summer session activity has on the campus and the surrounding community is ease of access. In other words, the opportunity for non-matriculating students to come to campus in summer to take courses without going through formal admission processes is a major, positive impact...that provides an excellent outreach tool and positively impacts the campus as well as prospective students/visitors in summer” (Trebon, 2002).

Campuses that offer a substantial array of educational outreach and performing arts activities add to the vitality and cultural viability of the community during the summer session. A dynamic mix of cultural opportunities, academic courses, continuing education opportunities, conferences, institutes, seminars and clinics, bring a wide variety of people to campuses and communities. Local economies cannot help but benefit from this vitality and activity. Brown University notes, “Summer courses and programs create a thriving campus and prevent this section of our city from becoming something like a ghost town. Students are consumers in the community, visiting local restaurants, shops, and cultural events. Without this population, the summer drain of residents would be felt more severely by local merchants” (Sibley, 2002). The extent of an institution’s involvement in summer activities and the magnitude of its summer populations can mean substantial economic benefit to the businesses of the community. At the University of Wisconsin-Madison, for example, summer educational opportunities bring ca. 80,000 individuals to the community: imagine how many “bed nights” they generate in residence halls and local hotels/motels, and the outlay of money for food, both in residence and in community eateries!

While the surface has only been scratched in this paper, the experiences of many institutions have shown that many of the myths relegating summer sessions to second-class status no longer hold true. An ever-increasing body of research and reports, along with the common experience of campus and college administrators, has shown that standards of academic excellence can be met and exceeded by summer session offerings. Most importantly, summer sessions have helped move campuses forward in their transformation toward a more student-centered and life-long learning model. Long before the term “engaged university” appeared, summer session was showing responsiveness to public need

through its teacher programs and those for other professionals. Through their continued experimental and entrepreneurial spirit, summer sessions have proven themselves on many and diverse campuses to exert a wide impact and influence, to serve as a powerful catalyst for change, and to benefit the community around them both culturally and economically. Indeed, as we all know, “when the temperature goes up, the level of creativity does not go down!”

### Notes

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