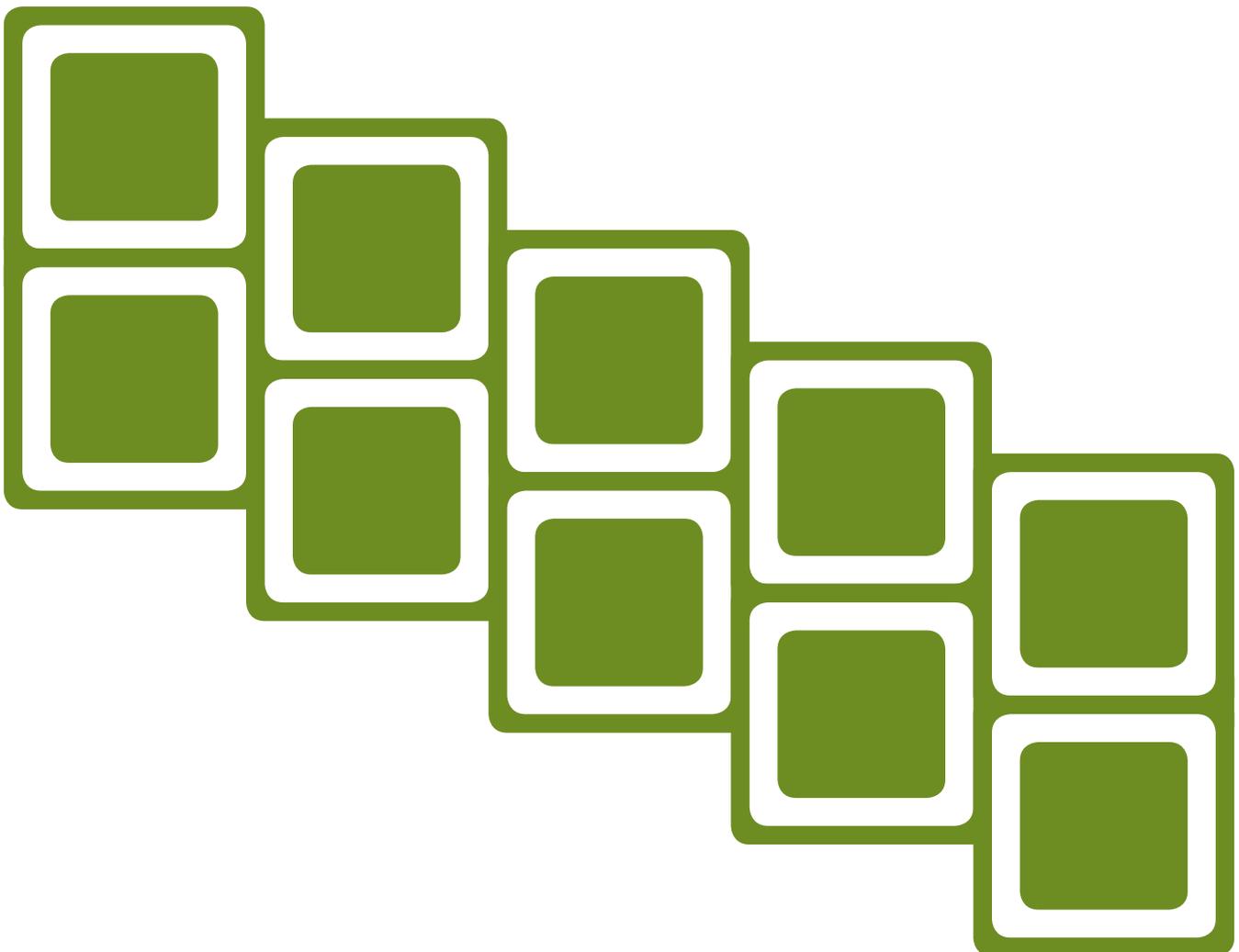


Summer Academe, Volume 7, 2013

Research Papers



Determining Summer Session Needs More Accurately Begins with Communication

Mardell A. Wilson and Danielle E. Lindsey
Illinois State University

Abstract

The literature includes various studies that address students' summer course needs and preferences, but little has been published about the types of data used and the factors influencing institutions' planning and decision-making processes for summer session. The purpose of this study was to conduct a needs assessment that would result in the development of a model to help institutions identify and acquire the necessary data to determine the summer course needs of students. The study, conducted at Illinois State University, included both quantitative historical data and qualitative data derived from focus groups with department chairpersons and advisers, who are familiar with student needs and other contributing factors that may affect summer session. The focus group data were analyzed and various themes emerged, but the results did not produce a distinct formula for addressing summer course offerings. Instead, using the needs assessment process as a theoretical framework led to the identification of a strategic communications plan that addresses core elements of summer session planning as the program's most eminent need.

Summer session administrators lack broad-based input that clearly and collaboratively defines what *core mission students* need from summer courses to aid their efforts to expedite time to degree. The term core mission students denotes those students enrolled in traditional on-campus degree programs. “Balancing the academic and financial purposes of summer sessions is critical, and not necessarily a straightforward exercise” (Doane & Pusser, 2005, p. 53). The purpose of this study was to conduct a needs assessment that would result in the development of a model to help institutions identify and acquire the necessary data to determine the summer course needs of students more accurately.

Integrating the planning of summer session into the traditional two- and four-year academic plans has become a crucial element for matriculating students, as institutions carefully consider the accessibility and affordability of higher education (Fish & Kowalik, 2009). In addition, aligning resources for summer session to the true needs of the students can be quite challenging as faculty might continue to focus on past practices that could have been based on faculty desires rather than students’ needs. However, purposeful and intentional planning can result in a situation where all parties—the students, the faculty, and the institution—ultimately benefit. Identifying the optimal summer session may actually allow for meeting the needs of students and the opportunity for creative courses and programs that enhance and/or complement the curriculum.

Although various studies (Alexander, 1997; Doane, 2003; Doane & Pusser, 2005; Fish & Kowalik, 2009; Martin, 1996; Taylor & Doane, 2003) have been conducted of students’ summer course needs and preferences, little has been published about the types of data used and the factors influencing institutions’ planning and decision-making processes for selecting summer course offerings.

Undeniably, three elements influence decisions on summer course offerings: students, faculty, and administration, both central and within the academic units. Each is important, but clearly any effort to ensure viability of the summer session must remain focused on meeting students’ needs. Although faculty may have varying agendas, their participation may or may not align with the students’ needs. The faculty’s availability, their willingness or desire to teach certain courses, and incentives for developing new courses or implementing other pedagogies (such as distance education) are all factors that affect how a summer session is populated with courses. In addition, central administration places emphases on expediting progress to degree completion, easing enrollment peaks in certain academic programs, and providing opportunities for students to enroll in courses not available during the fall/spring semesters secondary to supply and demand issues. Administrators from the individual academic units may see summer as a time to also provide unique learning opportunities for majors and possibly fulfill commitments to faculty regarding summer salaries made during recruitment without regard to demand or student needs (Doane & Pusser, 2005). The literature confirms the importance of conducting a needs assessment to develop a comprehensive yet manageable method to pair institutional data with key stakeholder information to determine a summer session that truly meets the needs of core mission students.

A needs assessment is a logical and orderly process of gathering and analyzing data, through which needs are identified and ranked in a priority order. A needs assessment can identify the gaps between what currently exists and the desired outcomes (Adelson, Manolakas, & Moore, 1985). Triangulation of needs assessment data is preferred over one single data point or type

(Lockyear, 1998). Collecting needs assessment information may include the use of surveys, objective data sources, focus groups, and interviews (Hauer & Quill, 2011). Steps in the process may consist of (1) distinguishing the purpose of the needs assessment, (2) identifying stakeholders, (3) including relevant issues to be addressed in the assessment, (4) distinguishing appropriate data sources, and (5) analyzing and prioritizing the primary need or needs (Adelson et al., 1985; DeSilets, 2007). These steps are essential to distinguishing and justifying needs and determining priorities among them (Pratt, 1980).

Research Methodology

As recommended for needs identification, two data types were collected for the assessment to provide for triangulation (Lockyear, 1998). Data collection included identifying and compiling pertinent historical information available from planning and institutional research, from enrollment managers, and from individual academic units at Illinois State University, a large, public Midwestern university. Data sources included (1) course enrollment history, (2) enrollment trends by academic unit, (3) average number of summer credit hours per student, (4) annual percentage of students who enroll in summer courses at least once before graduation, (5) departments' course waiting lists, and (6) oversubscribed courses (courses for which final enrollment was higher than the maximum enrollment set earlier).

The data sources reviewed were identified based on accessibility of the data to departments and types of data that have been identified by central administration and national organizations, such as the North American Association on Summer Sessions and the North Central Conference on Summer Sessions, as being relevant to gain a broad overview of the status of summer session and to assist with determining course needs.

The quantitative historical data were paired with information derived from focus groups with key stakeholders: advisers and department chairpersons. These stakeholders were identified as having the broadest knowledge about supply and demand for courses and about resource constraints. A purposive criterion sampling strategy was used to recruit study participants (Maxwell, 2005). To avoid bias, a graduate student trained in facilitating focus groups who was unknown to the study participants completed this phase of the data collection. Participants provided informed consent before the focus groups were initiated. The study protocol was approved for use with human subjects.

Focus groups of advisers addressed questions related to these topics: (1) how the summer schedule is currently designed, (2) the data that are used, (3) who the primary contributors are for determining summer course offerings, and (4) whether students are formally surveyed regarding their needs, and if so, whether there is a different approach for transfer students (those who attended another college or university after high school before enrolling at Illinois State) than for native students (beginning freshman students who have never attended another college or university since graduating from high school). In addition to the questions that were asked of advisers, department chairpersons were asked about these topics: (1) how and to what degree faculty input is factored into developing summer course offerings, (2) how the summer session

is viewed when recruiting and retaining faculty, (3) how the summer session is used to alleviate course demands during the regular academic year for both core mission students and students from other majors/minors needing service courses, and (4) to what extent the flexibility of the summer session allows certain courses to be designed/executed that would not normally be part of the curriculum during the regular academic year.

The focus group interviews were audio recorded and conducted in a private conference room. Focus group recordings were transcribed verbatim and reviewed for accuracy. The ideographic case study approach of interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to evaluate the focus group transcripts (Fade, 2004). The transcripts were reviewed several times to obtain an overall sense of the information. Participant responses were coded and grouped based upon similar concepts. Overarching themes were then identified within categories that emerged. Common themes and subthemes were developed and organized. An independent auditor from the university assessment office reviewed the themes to assist in confirmability.

Results

Review of the quantitative data revealed that total summer credit hour production was dependent upon funding, but it was relatively consistent over time. Figure 1 shows credit hour production from summer session 2004 through summer session 2011 as well as the funding provided from 2009 to 2011.

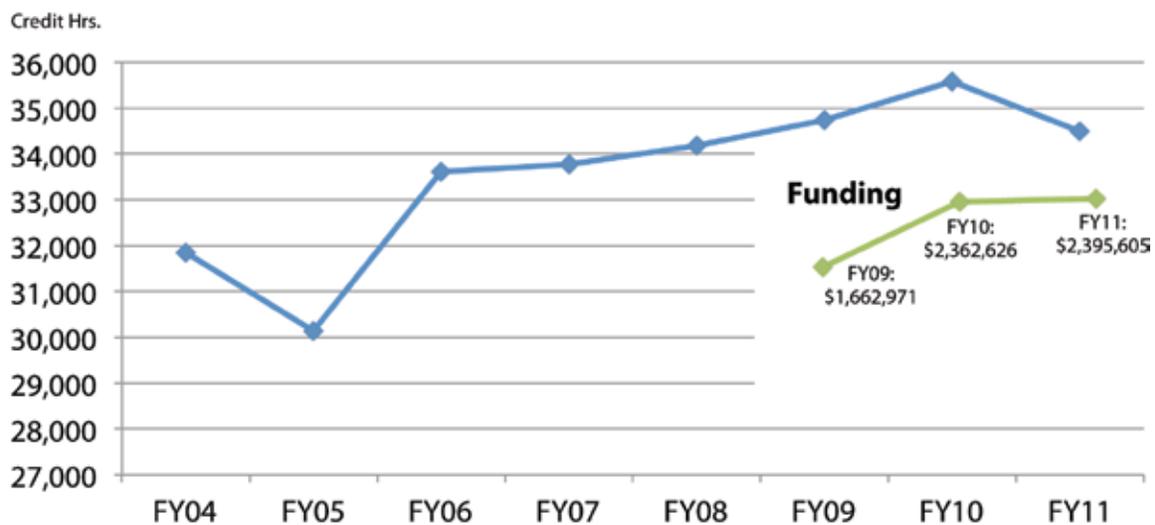


Figure 1: Credit Hour Production in Summer Session, FY04–FY11, and FY09–FY11 Funding

A permanent, dedicated summer session budget to provide for instructional expenses was established for the summer session beginning in 2006, and a consistent, slightly upward trend in credit hour production resulted. Data analysis also revealed that credit hour production has

more recently shifted from on-campus to online. There was a 21.9% increase in online credit hour production between summer 2008 and summer 2009, while total credit hour production trended only slightly upward, from 8,569 credit hours to 9,000. In addition, the average percent yield (total number of students enrolled per maximum seats available) for online courses was 86% of the total credit hours available, compared with 61% yield for on-campus courses, based upon post-advance-registration enrollment.

Each of the six objective data sources was reviewed and results were compiled. Although the actual data are very specific to Illinois State, the parameters that were captured could easily be applied to any college or university.

- **Course enrollment history**

Department chairpersons rely heavily on course enrollment history to determine future summer offerings. A review of each department's summer course offerings for the past five years was conducted as part of the needs assessment. Previous summer session enrollment should not be reviewed in isolation; there are many factors that affect course enrollment, such as curriculum changes, program enrollment (including number of native students versus transfer students), and faculty availability.

- **Enrollment trends by academic unit**

An analysis of summer enrollment trends by students' majors (by program) and minors was conducted. This review helped to identify enrollment trends for specific programs. In addition, determining which majors/programs and minors are highly represented during summer session can lead to identification of high-demand service courses (courses that are taken by students in multiple majors to satisfy requirements for their majors or minors) that have potential for high enrollment, allowing for targeted marketing.

- **Average number of summer credit hours per student**

This information, specifically about undergraduates, helps inform those involved in the scheduling process. For example, it is helpful to highlight that on average, undergraduate students enroll in six credit hours during summer; therefore, offering a wide range of course options, from general education courses to courses in majors and minors, is essential to meet students' needs. In addition, since students are taking multiple courses and often from two or three different departments, it is crucial to offer courses during the standard sessions (pre-established session lengths, dates, and times) so they are able to take courses that do not overlap.

- **Annual percentage of students who enroll in summer courses at least once before graduation**

In order to build a more complete picture of who is currently attending summer session, it is helpful to understand how many of our native freshmen (those who begin their college career at Illinois State) enroll in summer session at least once before graduation. These data could be used as baseline data to assist with determining the impact of communication strategies on students' overall awareness of summer courses, interest in them, and actual attendance.

- **Departments' course waiting lists**

The mechanisms for waiting lists vary greatly by college and department. Departments with a more structured and historical database of waiting lists would have this information as a resource when determining students' unmet needs and identifying potential summer course options. A small number of units ($n = 6$) reported that course waiting list information was used as a scheduling resource, but it was not widely relied upon among the departments.

- **Oversubscribed courses**

A review of oversubscribed courses (where the final enrollment was higher than the originally set maximum enrollment) offered during the fall and spring semesters was also conducted to identify courses that were not summer offerings at the time.

The focus group participants included 11 department chairpersons and 9 advisers. Similar themes emerged among both department chairpersons and advisers, with additional items identified by advisers. However, the two groups of stakeholders assigned different levels of importance to the themes. Among advisers, the main themes were (a) student need, (b) general education course offerings, (c) course information provided to students, and (d) additional information for students. Department chairpersons also identified (a) student need and (b) general education course offerings, but for them, these two themes were rather minor compared with the overwhelming emphasis they placed on (c) funding (appropriate dollars to offer summer instruction).

Advisers distinctly identified student need as their primary focus when considering what courses should be offered during the summer session. They indicated that student need meant not just the design and content of the course itself, but other factors such as when the course would be offered and in what format, and which potential complementary courses might be available. One adviser stated, "We try to determine which classes are going to be most popular or fit most majors within our department and then develop a schedule based around those." Another said, "I play an adviser role in letting people know when we need to offer classes and what was missed during the fall and spring, and if we had a large number of students who transferred in that are in need of a major class." Unlike advisers, department chairpersons made basic statements that students' needs were important, but unfortunately they had difficulty articulating exactly which needs should be met.

Advisers also revealed that general education was a key element of a successful summer session for their students. At the time of the study, Illinois State had a rather robust general education program, requiring students to complete 14 courses (42 credit hours) within a structured three-tiered system. There were varied responses regarding exact course needs. Nonetheless, both advisers and department chairpersons spoke to the challenge the general education program posed, especially for native students who expected to complete their degree programs in four years. A department chairperson also stated, "I make decisions about what courses are to be offered; it is a balance between trying to offer gen ed, and every program in my department has professional practice requirements, and then finally the professional courses within the major."

Although it did not emerge as a theme among department chairpersons who participated in the focus groups, advisers did identify course information for students as a primary need. They

revealed that having the information as early as possible was essential for students. In addition, advisers stressed the need for accuracy of course information, especially session start date, instructor, and course format. Furthermore, advisers expressed some concern that students could get better information about fully online courses than they could find about the blended/hybrid courses. Without this information, students may not elect to register for the course as it appears to be 100% face-to-face when actually there may be greater flexibility considering the blended/hybrid delivery.

Lastly, advisers cited additional course information for students as a relevant theme when addressing summer session. Participants noted that providing resources that address the pace of the summer session, when courses are shorter than those taught during the more traditional semester format, would be helpful. Additional resources to help locate housing options, summer employment, and community involvement were cited as important information that should be communicated to students. Specifically, one adviser noted, "A huge piece of this is the living arrangements. . . . Posting the summer schedule earlier helps."

Available funding emerged as the principal theme expressed by all the department chairpersons who participated in the focus groups. They described consistency of funding as an issue and used the focus groups as an opportunity to suggest alternative funding models. Distribution of allocated summer funds among colleges was discussed: although the summer session is managed centrally, once funds are allocated to the various colleges, the distribution varies significantly. Nevertheless, department chairpersons perceived funding to be parallel to student enrollment, although this perception is not validated by the quantitative data (see Figure 1).

Other outcomes from the focus groups that did not develop into clear themes included concerns about an increasing demand for online courses that exceeds support. In addition, there was a clear discrepancy between the two stakeholder groups' perceptions of who are the primary contributors to the determination of course offerings. While department chairpersons more often indicated that summer schedules are made through committee, advisers identified the chairpersons and individual faculty as the primary decision makers. There was also evidence of a generalized lack of communication about the empirical data, as outlined previously, that are shared with the department chairpersons each year to aid in summer session course planning. One adviser remarked, "I do most of the summer course planning along with the chair and graduate adviser. I do not know what data is sent [from the director of summer session] because I never see it." Others agreed with the statement.

Discussion and Conclusions

The original plan for this study was to triangulate the historical institutional data with the qualitative findings to determine differences and commonalities. Then a previous summer schedule would be used as a benchmark to determine gaps in recent offerings and those items clearly identified as student needs. However, data from the focus groups revealed that Illinois State was not yet prepared for this step in the needs assessment as it was designed. Instead of allowing key elements from quantitative and qualitative results to be used to identify the primary needs for

the students and/or the program, and to build a model that addresses how to better determine summer course needs, the data clearly revealed that the need of greatest priority was internal. The primary gap between what is and what is desired appeared to be the result of a breakdown in communication that essentially made the quantitative data and processes for summer course planning irrelevant in many cases.

Going by the results of the needs assessment, providing units with more detailed, objective data would be ineffective at this stage, because focus group themes revealed that current data provided were not necessarily being used or trusted. As many programs attempt to advance a student-centered summer session to address issues related to retention and matriculation, it is increasingly important that communicating the purpose, viability, and sustainability of the summer session should be a primary initiative. As established by Stufflebeam, McCormick, Brinkerhoff, and Nelson (1985), a needs assessment helps to identify things that are necessary to achieve a defensible purpose. In this case, a communication plan that helps to navigate department questions and concerns is necessary in order to defend and establish a more strategic planning process for the summer session course offerings. The communication plan itself should be based upon the primary themes that were established through the needs assessment process and upon their impact on the overall goal of the summer session.

Figure 2 illustrates how the essential themes identified in this study are connected to the goal of delivering a summer session that retains students' needs as the primary focus. However, the themes themselves require consistent, transparent messaging to help achieve the goal. Such a communication plan may help to eliminate the myths, concerns, and inaccuracies about the primary elements, which were identified in this study as funding, enrollment trends, information access, and strategic scheduling. For example, summer session was funded at the time of the study through a designated budget allocation that had received increases equivalent to the annual merit raise for the whole campus, and it continues to be funded this way. The fact that department chairpersons remained distracted by various elements tied to funding points to the need to repeat the message often and through multiple methods. Another example relates to information access. Although information on the various student housing options, including weekly contracts in the residence halls, is provided on the summer session website and through other print materials, advisers' comments revealed students' lack of awareness of the options available. Such unawareness may influence advisers' recommendations to students and lead to miscommunication by advisers, ultimately inhibiting students' choices related to summer courses. However, because needs are not static once they are identified and as they are addressed, determining a systematic needs assessment process is imperative to validate that necessary changes have been successful and to identify what new needs emerge for continuous program improvement (Hauer & Quill, 2011).

The needs that emerged from this study did not provide a distinct formula for addressing summer course offerings. Instead, using the needs assessment process as a theoretical framework revealed that a strategic communication plan that addresses core elements related to summer session planning was the program's most eminent need. As in a needs assessment plan, identifying stakeholders who influence summer session as well as those impacted by it must be considered as a communication plan is devised and evaluated. Identifying which messages are absent or

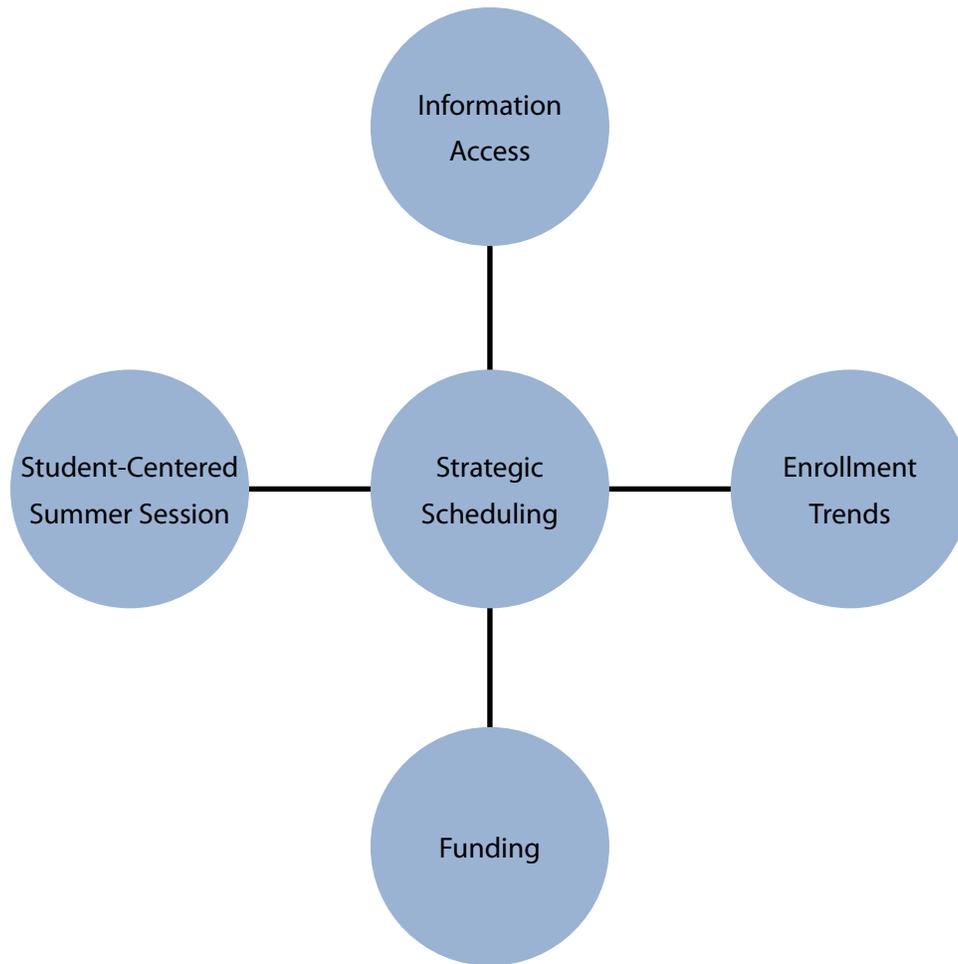


Figure 2: Essential Communication Themes

misrepresented, determining which stakeholders are influenced by the information, and developing an intentional communication strategy that insures not only that the information, often quantitative in nature, is provided but that stakeholders can apply the knowledge accurately will establish the foundation to more accurately determine summer course needs based upon the goal of the program.

Future studies should consider exploring how a systematic, strategic needs assessment process that assesses needs previously identified addresses what Benesch (1996), Deutch (2003), and West (1994) have sought to investigate regarding the conceptualization of needs as one holistic construct identifying the difference between what is and what is desired. From this study the development and implementation of a strategic communication plan and subsequent needs assessment would help to identify whether the gap between what is and what is desired has narrowed, and which new needs have emerged as primary. Examining summer scheduling decisions both before

and after the implementation of the strategic communication plan would help to validate the needs and processes used to address these decisions. Lastly, engaging individual departments in a needs assessment process that includes elements recommended by Adelson et al. (1985) and DeSilets (2007) might allow units to identify the needs of their students relating to summer sessions and to validate their summer course offerings.

References

- Adelson, R., Manolakas, D., & Moore, D. (1985). Assessing educational needs. In R. Adelson, F. S. Watkins, & R. M. Caplan (Eds.), *Continuing education for the health professional: Educational and administrative methods*. Rockville, MD: Aspen Systems Corporations.
- Alexander, S. F. (1997). Summer session as an incubator: A case study of one university's success. *Summer Academe, 1*, 51–56.
- Benesch, S. (1996). Needs analysis and curriculum development in EAP: An example of a critical approach. *TESOL Quarterly, 30*, 723–738.
- DeSilets, L. D. (2007). Needs assessments: An array of possibilities. *Journal of Continuing Education in Nursing, 38*, 107–114.
- Deutch, Y. (2003). Needs analysis for academic legal English courses in Israel: A model of sitting priorities. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes, 2*, 125–146.
- Doane, D. J. (2003). *Internationalization and the US universities: Emerging strategies for summer sessions* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Virginia.
- Doane, D. J., & Pusser, B. (2005). Entrepreneurial organization at the academic core: The case of summer sessions. *New Directions for Higher Education, 129*, 43–54.
- Fade, S. (2004). Using interpretative phenomenological analysis for public health information and dietetic research: A practical guide. *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society, 63*(4), 647–653.
- Fish, D. M., & Kowalik, T. F. (2009). Institutional marketing approaches, student decision points, and motivational factors affecting student decisions to participate in summer session and attend a particular institution. *Summer Academe, 6*, 7–36.
- Hauer, J., & Quill, T. (2011). Educational needs assessment, development of learning objectives, and choosing a teaching approach. *Journal of Palliative Medicine, 14*(4), 503–508.
- Lockyear, J. (1998). Needs assessment: Lessons learned. *Journal of Continuing Education in the Health Professions, 18*, 190–192.
- Martin, H. (1996). Summer sessions: The centrality of their purpose to the academy's mission. *Summer Academe, 1*, 7–12.
- Maxwell, J. (2005). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pratt, D. (1980). *Curriculum design and development*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Stufflebeam, D. L., McCormick, C. H., Brinkerhoff, R. O., & Nelson, C. O. (1985). *Conducting educational needs assessments*. Boston: Kluwer-Nijhoff.

Taylor, A. L., & Doane, D. J. (2003). Motivations to graduate in less than four years and summer session attendance. *Summer Academe*, 4, 7–30.

West, R. (1994). Needs analysis in language teaching. *Language Teaching*, 27(1), 1–19.

Biographies

Mardell A. Wilson is associate vice president for academic fiscal management at Illinois State University and directs the summer session. Wilson has also served as assistant provost and director of university assessment. She is a professor in the Department of Family and Consumer Sciences, in the area of foods, nutrition, and dietetics.

Danielle E. Lindsey is the director of academic services at Illinois State University. She provides coordination of marketing and communication for the provost's office and serves as associate director of summer session. Lindsey has oversight responsibility for contract and full-cost-recovery courses and directs first-year experience initiatives for the provost.