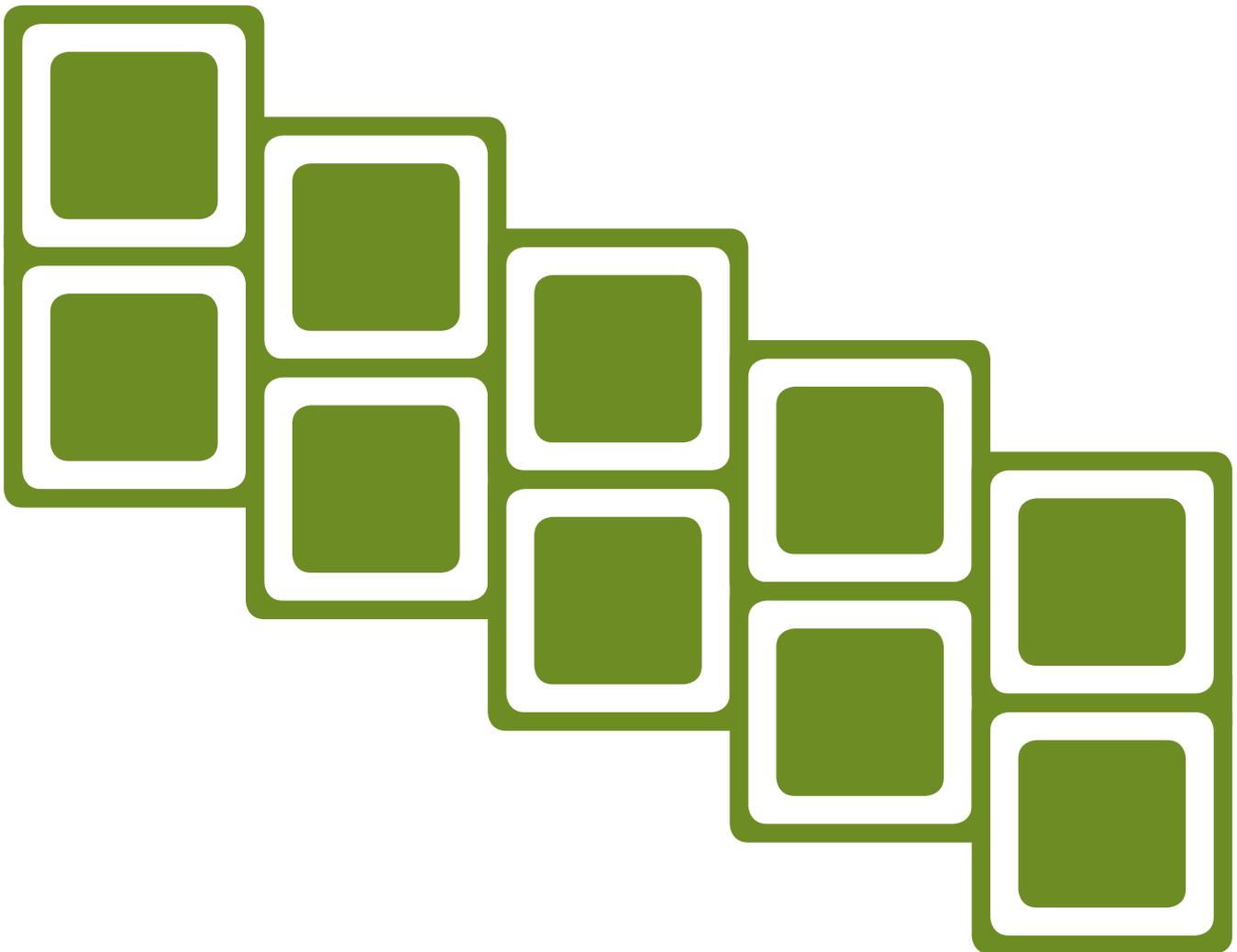


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Implementing a Successful Winter Session

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Abstract

As higher education institutions strategize opportunities to improve student access to courses, increase student retention, enhance pathways to graduation, provide additional compensation for faculty, and add new institutional revenue streams, implementing a winter session should be a primary consideration. A well planned and implemented winter session will benefit students, faculty, and the institution, and can be added to the institutional academic calendar with very little operational cost. The goal is to create a winter session that is the best fit with the institution's strategic needs and policies. Utilizing three case studies, this article gives insight into how to plan, implement, and maintain a successful winter session.

Introduction

As higher education institutions strategize opportunities to improve student access to courses, increase student retention, enhance pathways to graduation, provide additional compensation for faculty, and add new institutional revenue streams, implementing a winter session should be a primary consideration.

A well planned and implemented winter session can benefit students, faculty, and the institution and can be added to the institutional academic calendar with very little operational cost. There are numerous versions of winter sessions with varied structures and lengths. The most common winter session is a three-week January term often referred to as “J-term”; others range from two weeks to five weeks. The goal is to create a winter session that is the best fit with the institution’s strategic needs and policies. This article presents three case studies—Western Kentucky University, East Tennessee State University, and University of Massachusetts Amherst—to illustrate how to plan, implement, and maintain a successful winter session.

Western Kentucky University

Western Kentucky University (WKU) is a regional comprehensive public university with nationally ranked programs in journalism and broadcasting, folk studies, and forensics. WKU offers 16 associate degrees, baccalaureate degrees in 95 undergraduate majors and 96 minors, 74 masters and graduate certificate programs, and 3 professional doctorate degrees. In the fall of 2013, enrollment at the institution totaled 20,382, with 17,444 undergraduate and 2,938 graduate students.

In 2003, Western Kentucky University started to plan for a winter session, with the first session scheduled to begin in January 2006. WKU’s winter session is an optional, stand-alone (separate from fall and spring), three-week session that begins after January 1 and ends before the start of the spring semester. The goals are to expand course offerings for students, including international students who tend to stay on campus during the winter break; add gatekeeper courses that have high repeat rates and whose students require remediation; expand the number of travel courses, with both foreign and domestic itineraries; enhance timely degree completion for juniors and seniors; and provide year-round program schedules for adult learners. Expanding the availability of select courses such as the travel courses and addressing the needs of adult learners were inherent in the winter session structure.

Implementing winter session was an enormous undertaking for the campus at large, as it involved altering the fall and spring academic calendar by shortening those two semesters to accommodate the three-week January session. As a result, the addition of winter session affected every course, faculty member, and student at WKU. The provost appointed an exploratory committee that was initially highly skeptical but eventually agreed to a pilot proposal. This committee was followed by an implementation committee, made up of administrative and student affairs

staff, who worked for a year on details such as financial aid, class times, student services, availability of residence halls, food services, and faculty development. Focus groups and surveys of faculty and others were conducted to address concerns such as the shortening of the fall and spring semesters, as well as teaching in an intensive three-week term. Survey results indicated that faculty believed electives were the best offerings, while student surveys called for general education courses and courses within majors. The survey results encouraged faculty members to experiment with curricular offerings.

At WKU, the Division of Extended Learning and Outreach (DELO) has a strong centralized administrative support structure for outreach credit and noncredit programs. This unit is led by an associate vice president who reports to the provost and the vice president for academic affairs. Along with other credit programs, summer sessions and winter session are housed within this division in the Academic Outreach unit. A coordinator is responsible for daily operations and marketing plan development and implementation, supported by the director of academic outreach and the DELO business office and marketing staff. In addition to partnering with academic support services on campus, DELO provides student support through online chat, web inquiry forms, phone lines, and face-to-face contact. As more students take winter session courses online, the value of providing online student support services, offered through Academic Outreach, is more apparent. The support service unit supports online learning throughout the year and has become a valuable resource for distance students who need help navigating the online admissions application process, online registration, email, and the learning management system.

In 2006, WKU offered its first winter session. It was an unqualified success as student and faculty participation exceeded expectations. In all, 1,584 students enrolled, 115 faculty members taught classes, and 124 courses were offered. Enrollment in the session has continued to grow (see Figure 1), with a 21% increase from 2006 to 2007. Year three (2008) continued to be successful, with enrollment of 2,242, but the following year enrollment began to flatten, with 2,246 students enrolled in 2009. There is a direct link between fall enrollment and winter session enrollment. In 2010, WKU's fall enrollment started to flatten, which affected winter session. Enrollment in winter session dropped for three consecutive years, with 2,129 in 2010, 2,115 in 2011, and 2,047 in 2012; but it has remained at about 10% of the fall enrollment, or just above 2,000 students. Over the course of eight years, WKU's winter session gross revenue increased 220% and is expected to be close to \$2.5 million for 2015 (see Figure 3). From 2006 to 2008, credit hour production increased 46% and has since stabilized and has remained above 6,000 since 2008 (see Figure 2).

Student survey data have consistently shown that students enroll in winter session primarily to graduate sooner; this motivation is followed by a number of other reasons, including to reduce course loads during the fall or spring, to fulfill a general education requirement, to complete a prerequisite for fall or spring, or to repeat a course.

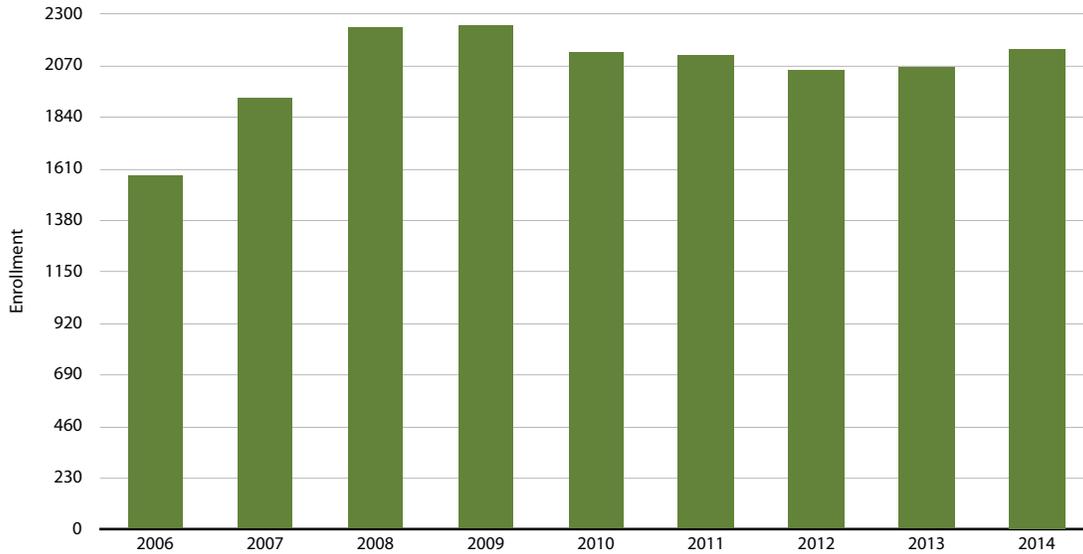


Figure 1. Winter Session Enrollment at Western Kentucky University

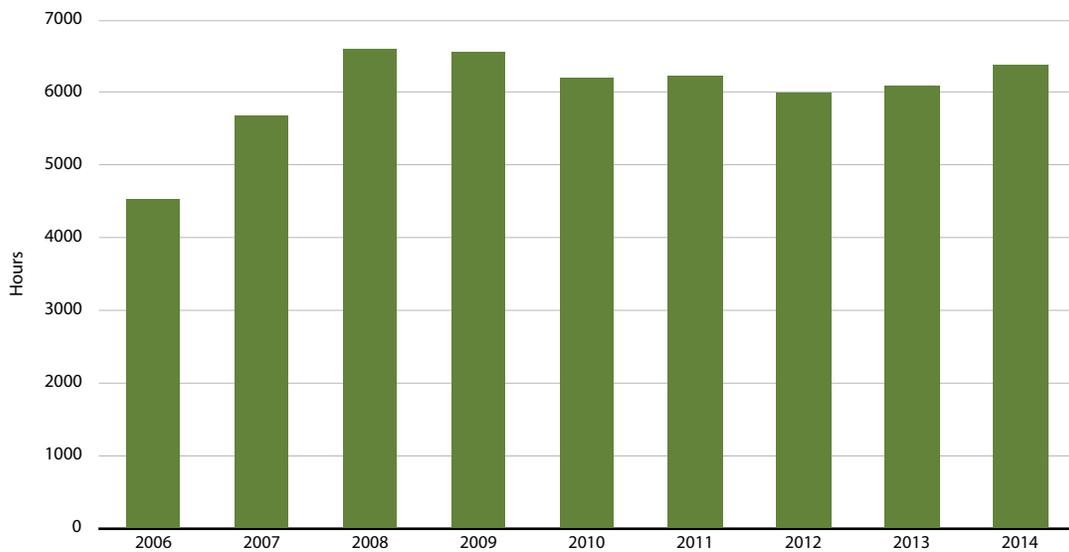


Figure 2. Winter Session Credit Hours Produced at Western Kentucky University

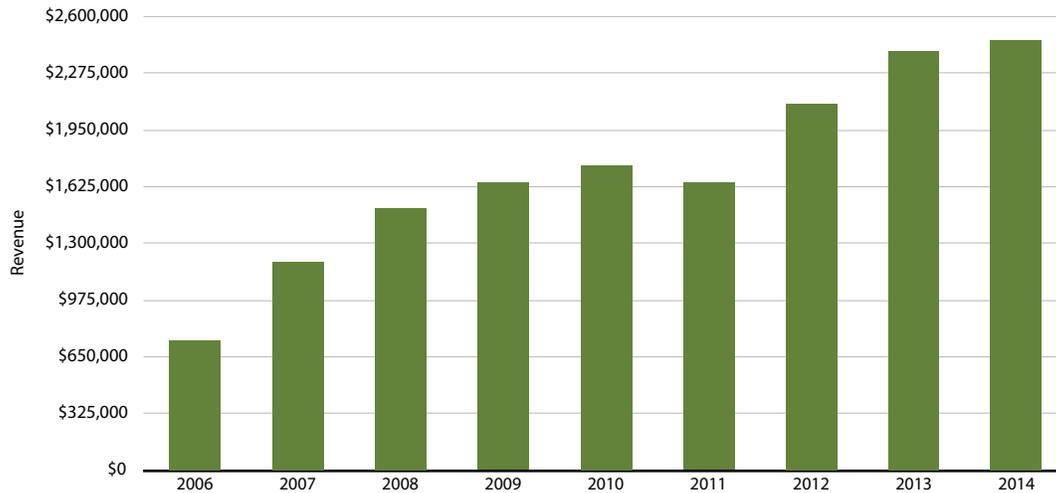


Figure 3. Winter Session Revenue at Western Kentucky University

WKU has been highly successful in growing both study abroad and study away through winter session course offerings, with study abroad posting 47% growth in 2013 over 2006. Graduate programs, particularly those offered online, have grown tremendously and have taken advantage of winter session to help adult learners, who generally take classes part-time, to make progress toward their degree. Less progress has been made by offering gatekeeper and remedial courses. WKU has not yet embraced a modular approach to offering developmental or remedial courses, and the experiments in these course offerings did not draw a significant number of students, nor did they show improved success in requisite courses to justify offering them in an intensive environment.

Compensation for faculty during winter session utilizes a prorated system based on class size. This system enables the university to offer more courses. Department heads make cancellation decisions three weeks before the start date, on the basis of college-level enrollment policies and faculty members' decisions to opt in for prorated stipends. If a faculty member decides not to teach a course with low enrollment, the course is cancelled. Enrollment is checked again after the drop date and prorated stipends are sent to payroll. Fluctuations during this time can be wide, with both increases and decreases after the previous enrollment check date. Instructors are paid \$4,500 for fully enrolled courses.

For 2014, \$20,000 was allocated to marketing winter session. The marketing strategies included a booth at freshman recruiting events, direct mail to freshman, a booth at new faculty orientation, brochures in learning centers around campus, campus digital-screen ads, newspaper online and print ads, banners around campus, transit shuttle ads, mass emails, emails to advisors, and college-specific marketing in buildings. Student responses to a survey question about marketing strategies indicated that emails, academic advisement, and the winter session website were the most effective tools.

East Tennessee State University

East Tennessee State University (ETSU) is a midsize regional institution. ETSU has 11 colleges and schools offering baccalaureate degrees in 76 programs, 56 masters and graduate certificate programs, and 11 doctorate degrees. In the fall of 2013, enrollment at the institution totaled 15,000, with 11,820 undergraduates, 2,260 graduate students, and 920 health professions students.

The initial discussion for a winter session at ETSU began in the fall of 2009. The precedent for offering courses online during a five-week session had already been established within ETSU summer sessions. The Office of Summer School (since renamed the Office of Summer and Winter Sessions) examined what peer institutions and others had done and the success that they had with their winter sessions, including their structure, length, and the number of years winter sessions had been offered. Responses to inquiries and information received from members of the North American Association of Summer Sessions (NAASS) indicated that winter session has proven to be successful in terms of student enrollment, faculty satisfaction/participation, and revenue generation.

Planning for winter session at ETSU officially started in the spring of 2010, with the first session targeted to begin in December 2011. A key to creating a winter session at ETSU was communication and collaboration across campus. The initial team involved in establishing the structure of the session was the dean of the College of Arts & Sciences, the Office of the Registrar, the Office of Financial Aid, the Office of the Bursar, and the Office of eLearning. The team recommended a self-supporting, five-week, 100% online session with a five-credit maximum. Offering the winter session as a part of the spring allowed students to use spring-term financial aid to cover its cost; but federal financial aid regulations limited the number of credit hours a student could take. The session was designed to begin immediately following fall commencement and conclude two weeks into the regular spring term. Some student support services were available throughout the session even when the university was closed for the winter holidays. A proposal was forwarded to the provost and the president, which was accepted as a pilot project. An effort was made to reach out to all ETSU units, both academic and nonacademic, which resulted in strong, campus-wide support for winter session. Students were asked a question in the annual summer session survey about their interest in winter session, and the responses were positive. The Student Government Association was also consulted, and the Faculty Senate was presented the proposal during a question-and-answer session.

After three years, winter session has successfully demonstrated that it is an important addition to the university's academic calendar. During the 2011–2012 pilot year, five colleges participated, with a total of 73 course offerings. Student enrollment was 920, credit hours produced totaled 2,675, and the gross revenue generated was \$590,849 (see Figures 4–6). Compared with the prior year's results, the results of the 2012–2013 winter session showed growth in all areas: course offerings increased by 12%, student enrollment increased by 21%, credit hours produced increased by 23%, and gross revenue totaled \$791,567, an increase of 34%. For 2013–2014 the format of the session was altered, reducing the session to four weeks. The session is still considered a part of the spring, and students continue to be eligible to use a portion of their spring-term financial aid to cover the tuition and fees for a winter session class. The results for 2013–2014 showed 1.7% growth in both credit hours (3,356 credit hours completed) and student enrollment (1,134 students enrolled), and gross revenue increased by 6.2%, to \$840,891.00.

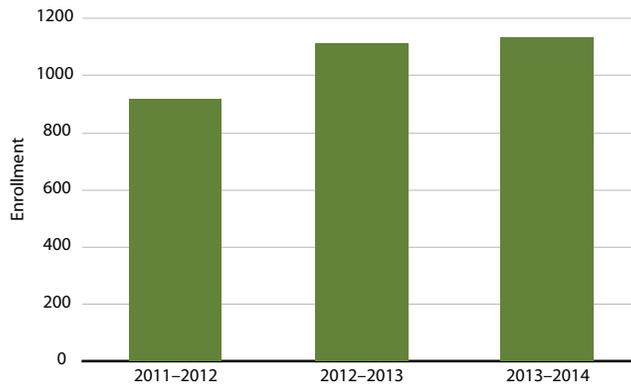


Figure 4. Winter Session Enrollment at East Tennessee State University

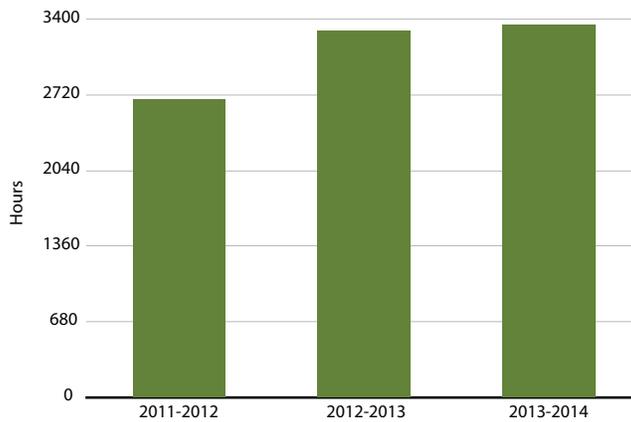


Figure 5. Winter Session Credit Hours Produced at East Tennessee State University



Figure 6. Winter Session Revenue at East Tennessee State University

Winter session is primarily taught by ETSU's regular faculty, and compensation for faculty during winter session uses the same model in place for summer sessions. Faculty members are compensated at a rate of 1/32 per credit hour of their annual salary. Department heads make cancellation decisions approximately one week before the start date, on the basis of enrollment, revenue, and costs.

For 2013–2014, \$15,000 was allocated to marketing winter session. The marketing strategies included serving hot chocolate and cookies to students at the student center, brochures and posters placed around campus, newspaper print ads, mass emails, social media, a mass mailing of brochures to all ETSU students registered for the fall term, and television and radio ads. Student responses to a survey question about marketing strategies indicated that academic advisement, emails, and the winter session website were the most effective tools.

The collaboration across campus to provide student and faculty services during winter session has also proven successful. Assistance is available throughout the session at the Office of the Registrar, the Office of eLearning, the Center for Academic Achievement Tutoring Center, the Charles C. Sherrod Library, and the Office of Information Technology faculty help desk. Student survey results from the 2012–2013 winter session showed that about one-third of respondents used one of the support options. The student survey also indicated that 13% of the students enrolled in 2012–2013 were taking winter session for the second time, and 85% of the respondents indicated that they would or might attend winter session again. Over half of the students (53%) answered that “convenience” was the primary reason for enrolling, with graduating early the second reason.

Student and faculty survey results indicate high levels of satisfaction, and it is anticipated that winter session will continue to grow through additional course offerings and enhanced student services.

University of Massachusetts Amherst

UMass Amherst, the Commonwealth's flagship campus, is a nationally ranked public research university offering a full range of undergraduate, graduate, and professional degrees. The university offers six associate degrees, baccalaureate degrees in 110 undergraduate degree programs, 74 masters programs, and 47 doctoral programs across nine schools and colleges. In fall 2013, enrollment totaled 28,518, with 22,134 undergraduate and 6,384 graduate students.

Winter session at UMass Amherst has existed since 1971 and has proven to be very successful at meeting student needs as well as campus expectations; it has become part of the overall campus culture. It is fully administered by Continuing & Professional Education (CPE), which also oversees summer sessions as well as specialized spring and fall semesters. CPE is able to leverage its entire staff to administer winter session, including program planning, instructor online training, marketing, non-degree advising and support, registration, and eLearning. UMass Amherst winter session is offered in two formats: an online session that begins at the end of the fall semester and concludes in mid-January for a total of four weeks; and a face-to-face session that is scheduled for the first two full weeks of January. Financial aid is generally not available to students enrolled in winter session.

UMass Amherst winter session continues to experience steady growth, especially for online courses. As a result, it has transitioned to become mostly an online term. Despite the decline in face-to-face enrollment, winter session remains an important academic term, producing a total of 7,045 credit hours (see Figure 8), for a value of \$3.1 million this past winter (see Figure 9).

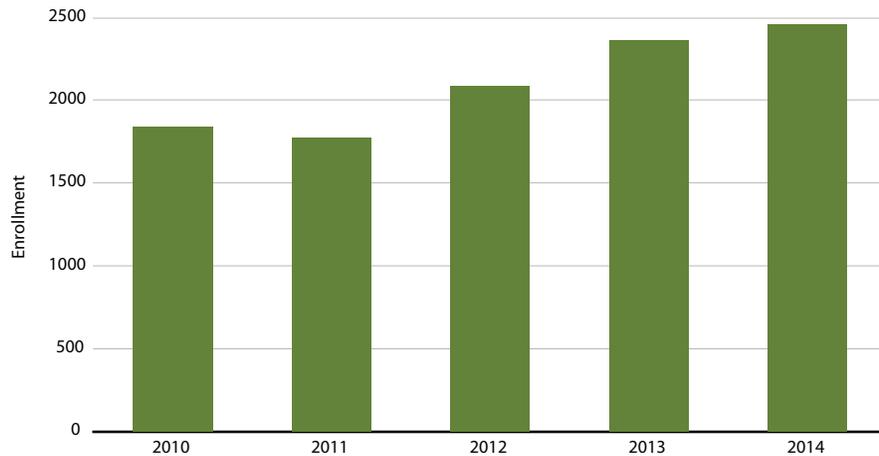


Figure 7. Winter Session Enrollment at University of Massachusetts Amherst

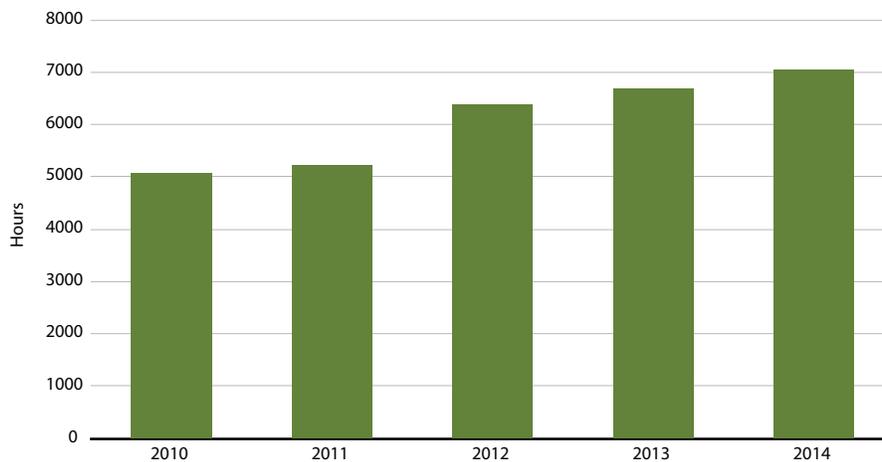


Figure 8. Winter Session Credit Hours Produced at University of Mass Amherst

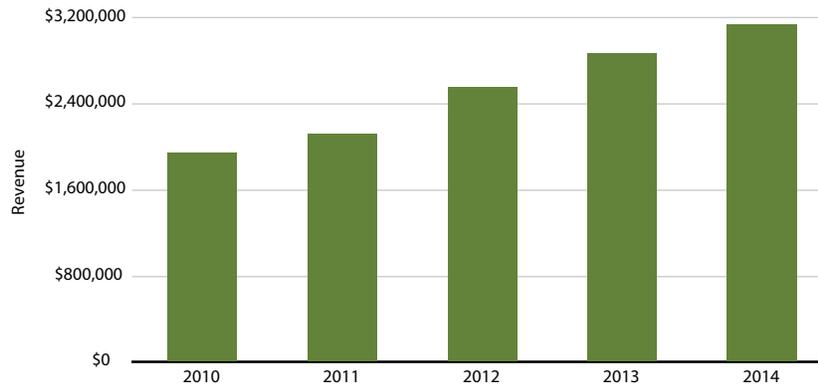


Figure 9. Winter Session Revenue at University of Massachusetts Amherst

The largest percentage of instruction for winter session is provided by graduate students (39%), followed by tenured faculty members (24%), permanent lecturers (20%), and adjuncts (17%). Compensation for tenured faculty and lecturers is determined by a formula based on academic rank, class size, and course level (undergraduate or graduate). Graduate students and adjuncts are compensated at a rate based on class size.

The majority of classes are 100- and 200-level undergraduate general education courses that have broad appeal to the student population; 90% of students enrolled are UMass Amherst undergraduates.

For 2014, approximately \$35,000 was allocated to marketing winter session. The marketing strategies are largely focused on current students, with 90% of the marketing funds directed at internal options including a winter session website, academic advisement, emails, and social media, as well as posters and other traditional print materials.

The CPE staff continues to seek and consider effective methods to enhance and improve winter session by attracting more students to a winter session course so that they can graduate on time, move ahead in their studies, or focus on just one course, thereby assuring a strong future for the program.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are important to consider when adding a winter session to an institution's academic calendar:

Benchmarking Is Important. Research what other institutions are doing and meet with key campus offices to determine what type of format is the best fit for your institution. What works for one institution will not necessarily work for another, so it is important to take the time to do the homework and become informed on the various winter session models.

Run the Numbers. Create realistic budgets that accurately reflect revenues and expenditures. Remember that online courses will have a greater return on revenue than face-to-face ones and are not affected by inclement weather.

Offer High-Demand Courses. It is highly recommended to offer lower-level general education courses that students really need.

Assure High-Quality Academic Content. Courses offered in a winter session need to have the same academic content, requirements, and standards as courses offered in the fall and spring terms.

Create Campus Buy-In. Utilize surveys, meetings, and question-and-answer sessions with all the constituents (administration, students, faculty) to gain support for implementing a winter session.

Communicate Clearly, Concisely, and Frequently. Use an inclusive and collaborative communication approach to ensure everyone is on the same page and in the know.

Prepare Students for the Rigors of the Course. Students should be advised that they will be required to complete intensive and demanding courses in a highly accelerated format.

Market Effectively. Your own institution's students will generate approximately 90% of winter session enrollment, so focus key marketing efforts on them.

Concluding Comments

The three examples of successful winter session programs described here offer value to students, faculty, and the institution. Each of the models presented varies somewhat, but the goals and objectives are the same. In an article about using the summer term to strengthen colleges and universities, Erin Bailey Dev (2005) discussed the issues that colleges are facing and the advantages of utilizing summer programming to its fullest potential. There are striking similarities between Dev's research on enhancing summer programming and the advantages of adding a winter session. Specifically, a winter session can round out the academic year, better meet student needs, add a new revenue stream, and provide additional compensation opportunities for faculty. These are important reasons—along with meeting student needs, improving graduation rates, and meeting budgetary expectations—for considering the implementation of a winter session.

References

- Dev, E. B. (2005). Strategically using the summer to strengthen colleges and universities. *Summer Academe: Journal of Higher Education*, 5, 55–70. Retrieved from Wilson Web database. (Accession No. 200500113179005)

Biographies

Sarah Harkness is the director of summer and winter sessions at East Tennessee State University. She has been with ETSU since 2007 and oversaw the development and implementation of the winter session. Sarah has been a member of the North American Association of Summer Sessions since the fall of 2007.

Elizabeth Laves has held the position of associate vice president for extended learning and outreach at Western Kentucky University since 2010, working with distance learning, summer and winter terms, contract cohort programs, conferencing, non-credit programs, study away, and faculty-led study abroad programs in a centralized administrative model of continuing higher education. Beth has been a long-time volunteer with the North American Association of Summer Sessions and the North Central Conference on Summer Schools.

Bill McClure has been the executive director of continuing and professional education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst since 2005. He is responsible for a wide variety of academic programs, credit and non-credit, graduate and undergraduate, face-to-face and online, offered throughout the year, including summer session. He is a past president of the North American Association of Summer Sessions and the New York Continuing Education Association.