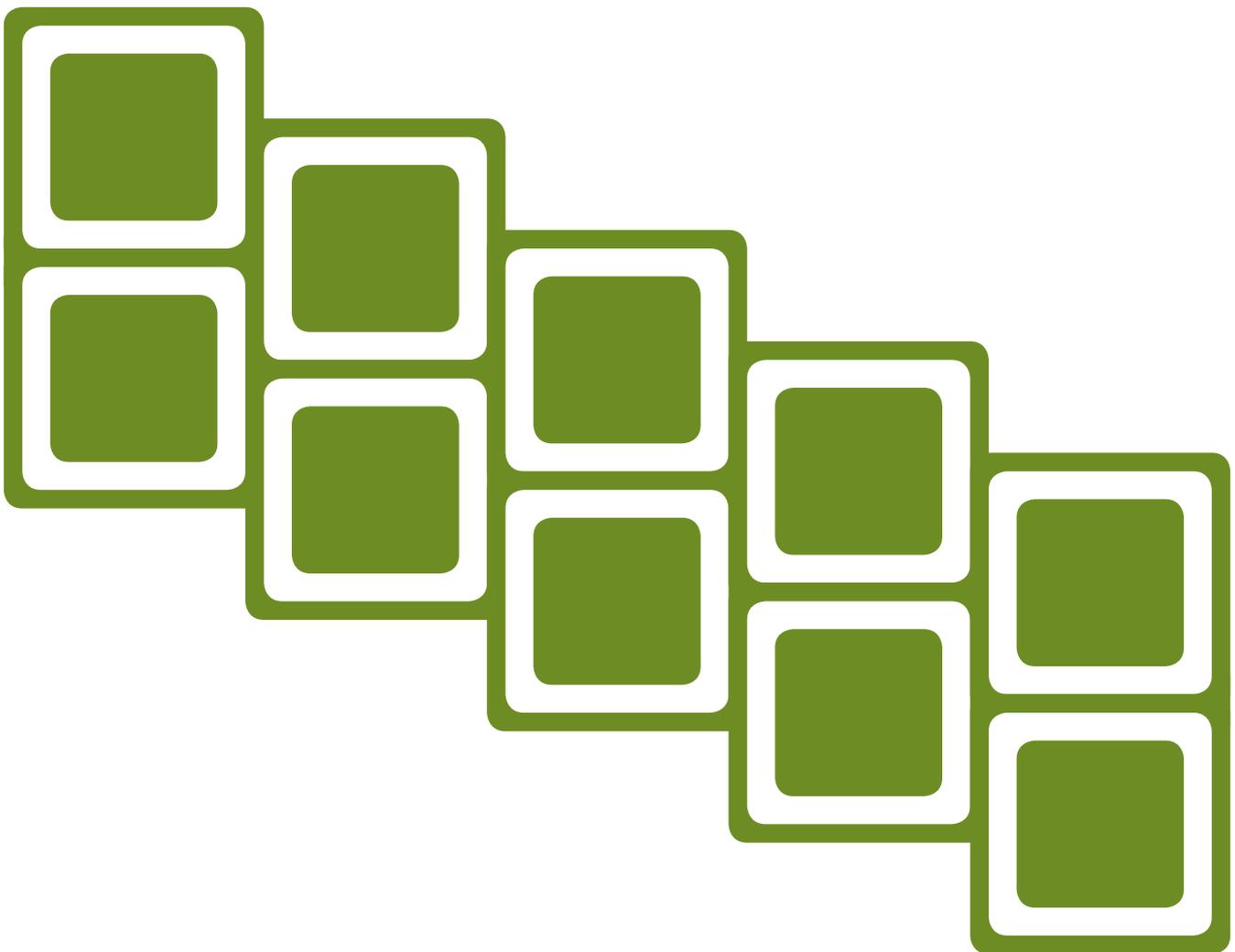


Summer Academe  
**Best Practices**

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# *Do You Want Summer School to Grow? Get to Know Your Registrar!*

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## **Abstract**

This paper addresses the emerging challenges associated with recruiting and sustaining summer enrollment. The authors present four progressive strategies for increasing enrollment and generating sustainable revenue without neglecting student needs. The strategies are intended to highlight the unique perspective of the university registrar and encourage more effective use of registrar's assets and expertise.

Across the nation, many schools have seen decreases in summer enrollment. In contrast, over the past three summers, Elon University has seen a staggering 36% increase in summer credit hours and a 35% increase in enrollment, generating approximately \$2.2 million in new revenue. Elon University is a selective, mid-sized (6,483 students), residential, private university, located in the North Carolina triad.<sup>1</sup> While the institution is renowned for its models of engaged and experiential learning, Summer College and online learning are relatively new models of student engagement. Prior to 2013, the institution's summer courses had static enrollment in summer courses that aligned with the growth of the overall student population.

How is it possible to increase summer enrollments at a medium-tiered private school where summer tuition (\$467 per credit hour) deters enrollment? Elon University does not have a college or division that oversees summer school or continuing education. Instead, Summer College at Elon is an additional role of the university registrar, who also holds the title of director of Summer College. This role involves the oversight of course recruitment, faculty contracts, marketing initiatives, and payroll.

Colleagues frequently ask, "Does the registrar's involvement in summer school really make that much of a difference?" The answer is, absolutely! For many years, Elon's Summer College growth rate was fairly flat, with small increases in enrollment attributed to increases in the overall student population. While the institution had a branded marketing campaign during these years, the summer course offerings didn't always address student needs.

Increasing summer enrollment at a private school is a daunting task. Most students come from out of state; transient students are rare, and their tuition is typically three times the cost of enrolling as a transient than enrolling at an institution in their home state. All institutions work hard to sell their brand, but our students already bear the high cost of attending an out-of-state private school. Elon students—and their parents—are well aware that classes taken at a less expensive local university or community college will, in most cases, transfer to satisfy institutional degree requirements.

To increase revenue, new initiatives were necessary to reinvigorate Elon Summer College. The first goal was to rebrand Summer College as something new to offer students. With new branding, the product also needed to change. To offer students a new product, a number of initiatives during Fall 2013 were undertaken, aimed at growing Summer College. In analyzing the success of these initiatives over the past two years, four major strategies were identified as vital in stimulating Summer College growth.

## Strategy 1: Create the Right Reports

Reporting is a key tool in identifying summer enrollment trends. Producing a five- or ten-year report of courses previously offered that includes enrollment figures in those courses and the institutional demand for each course is critical. Courses that have a history of healthy enrollment or serve as foundation course prerequisites (which may change from year to year), and/or are

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<sup>1</sup> A north central region of North Carolina that includes the cities of Greensboro, Winston-Salem, and Highpoint, which form a "triad" in the Piedmont region of the state.

taught by professors who are in high demand, constitute critical summer offerings. Directors of summer programs should never underestimate the value of reviewing sites such as Rate My Professor when recruiting faculty to teach summer courses. For faculty members who enjoy teaching in the summer but had low student enrollments, additional efforts were made to change the types of courses they offered and revise the course descriptions to help bolster student interest. Course-add data were also used to determine how quickly each summer course filled in previous years, and from those data, departments offering high-demand courses were encouraged to offer a second section of those courses.

Another way to broaden reporting for summer course planning (as well as for planning during the academic year) is to analyze growth trends by major. Many institutions have seen tremendous growth in business-related majors. Identifying and offering high-demand courses needed for majors with expanding enrollment, as well as additional core or general studies requirement courses for those with undeclared majors, is critical to increasing summer enrollment. Special attention should also be given to courses that meet dual-degree requirements, courses that could count in more than one major, and courses that serve as prerequisites to upper-level business classes. Offering these specific courses and building communication strategies that highlight their importance further encourage enrollment.

A key reporting measure is an institutional analysis of transfer data trends to identify the courses most commonly transferred back to Elon by Elon students attending other institutions during the summer. Keep in mind that degree audit reporting systems can be a barrier to knowing what students need. However, institutions can set a program to track the auditing system and dump the data into a table for institutional reporting. Reports from these data can identify those courses with the highest demand.

Finally, many institutions also use waitlisting programs, and summer program directors should request a report from the registrar that shows courses with high waitlist numbers and offer those sections during the summer.

## **Strategy 2: Eliminate Policy Barriers and Create New Policies**

In seeking ways to reduce obstacles to Elon's Summer College enrollment, policies were identified that hindered growth and therefore needed revision. Elon offers two short summer sessions, each approximately three weeks in length. When online courses were first offered, beginning in 2005, Elon permitted these courses to be taught in the first three-week summer session only. A change in policy was needed to allow faculty to teach online during both summer sessions. It was important to review and change this policy since online courses offered during the first session almost always reached maximum enrollment capacity. By adding online courses to the second three-week summer session, credit hours generated increased 123%, from 891 to 1,983 over the course of three summer sessions. Similarly, the number of students utilizing that term increased by 92%, from 279 to 537, during the same period.

Until recently, another barrier for students was that Elon permitted students to earn only one degree. Following a national trend, in Fall 2013 a new policy was implemented allowing students to pursue degrees in more than one area. Creating the two-degree policy opened a new avenue for marketing Summer College by encouraging students to take advantage of summer offerings to complete two degrees. The registrar's office promoted the new policy and marketed Summer College simultaneously by inviting students to "Add a New Angle to Your Education."



**Figure 1**  
Marketing Poster Promoting Two Degrees

Faculty financial incentives are obviously very important in recruiting instructors to teach summer internships; therefore marketing directly to faculty was another added measure taken to increase summer enrollment. Faculty earn extra compensation for supervising undergraduate research or internship hours with a student. Faculty earn one hour of equivalent faculty pay for every six hours of student research credit they supervise, and one hour for every 10 hours of internship credit supervised. Informational campaigns aimed at faculty who serve as advisers encouraged summer research and internships and increased summer credit hour production.

### **Strategy 3: Leverage Information and Provide Alternatives to Students**

One of the innovations that has had the greatest impact on Summer College growth was a change in the evaluation process concerning transfer credit. Prior to issuing a transient letter, Elon requires students to confirm with the registrar's office exactly how a course will transfer back to Elon. A new electronic system using a SharePoint workflow allows students to enter the host institution information, course description, credit hours, and a brief statement of how they plan to use the course in their degree program. A member of the registrar's office staff reviews this information and sends the student an electronic transient letter listing the exact course information and an explanation of how it will transfer.

Because reviewers approve or deny courses, there is now an opportunity to provide additional information to the student. For example, they can inform the student that the course is offered online at Elon, identify the benefits of taking the course at Elon, or explain why taking the course at Elon is a better option than taking it elsewhere (usually based on the four-credit-hour system versus the three-credit-hour system). This additional, personalized guidance, which informs students of alternative options (including the fact that Summer College tuition is approximately half regular-term tuition), encourages them to at least consider staying locally. This innovation has helped Elon keep more students, who otherwise would have enrolled elsewhere as transient students in the summer, in-house.

## **Strategy 4: Refresh Marketing Initiatives**

All colleges and universities employ standard marketing approaches such as branding summer school; offering giveaways; and disseminating emails, newsletters, and other forms of electronic and print media across campus. Yet marketing to today's college student is still challenging. Students often fail to check their email, avoid adding institutional contacts to social networking sites, or resist accepting "free" items because they don't want to be bothered by marketing rhetoric. What is an institution to do?

Paying attention to trending social network rhetoric is an important strategy. Over the last year, Summer College purchased a button maker and asked student office assistants to analyze trending phrases and synthesize the phrases with our Summer College logo. These phrases were then made into buttons and distributed in key high-traffic locations. This initiative has been extremely popular with our student body, as evidenced by the fact that we continually have to refill the "button basket" in our office and during marketing events.

Another recommended approach is to take a step back from routine marketing strategies and seek ways to embed campus culture into marketing initiatives. For example, one of Elon's unique traditions centers on a faculty member, now an Elon icon, who formerly served as Elon president. While he has long since stepped down from administration, he still teaches one section of chemistry, advises students, and serves as a campus ambassador. He has become a type of rock star on campus and is legendary throughout the Elon community. He also attends every home basketball game, and toward the end of each game the students chant his name until he stands and waves a white rally towel.

Thinking culturally, Summer College purchased 200 rally towels branded with the Summer College logo and asked him to autograph 50 of the towels. Student assistants were recruited to send tweets from our main institutional account and other high-profile Twitter accounts announcing signed towels would be given away at one of the most important home basketball games of the year. The response from the students was overwhelming; hundreds of students showed up for a chance to get one of the signed towels.

Following the success of this campaign, most of our marketing initiatives today focus on merging cultural practices with Summer College. For example, Elon's strong community-building culture includes an event called "College Coffee," held each Tuesday. The entire campus is invited to

College Coffee, and members of various campus organizations staff tables that display information about their program or organization. Summer College reserved tables and set up displays showcasing clever themes with catchy marketing merchandise that would capture the attention of the multitude of students who come to these gatherings. Also, a student assistant in our office created, directed, and produced a marketing video featuring our hockey team and a well-known senior football player. The video highlighted Elon sports and the Registrar's Office in a cute, short commercial located on our website that was played on the interactive television used for marketing in the hallway outside our office.

Marketing to parents is as important as marketing to students. Today's helicopter parents are intimately embedded in a student's decision-making process, so convincing them will often lead to convincing the student. Not to mention parents are the ones typically funding those extra tuition dollars needed for summer school. Many institutions send informational brochures, newsletters, and other reminders to parents regarding summer school, but this information may come across as little more than junk mail. So what is the most effective way to ensure the message is read and internalized by parents?

Those from Generation X will remember receiving grade reports in the mail, distinctively sealed with tear-away edges. Many registrars' offices still have the machines that created those sealed grade reports, and those machines were recently still in use at Elon. With an abundance of mailers still available, an in-depth Summer College message was created, highlighting the key information parents need to know concerning the benefits of taking summer courses at Elon, and was mailed to each student at their permanent address. The result of this effort was an immediate increase in the number of students enrolling in Summer College. In many cases it wasn't the student but the parents opening that specially sealed piece of mail, and it was a great way to use existing (if outdated) resources to increase parents' attention to our Summer College.

Finally, it is helpful to involve various areas of student affairs in marketing for summer. While the influence of a given area may differ from one institution to another, Greek life clearly plays a powerful role at Elon. As a recently appointed adviser for a campus fraternity, I quickly realized this was an untapped area that could be used to market directly to students in Greek organizations. Asking each fraternity and sorority adviser to discuss the importance of Summer College during weekly group meetings proved highly beneficial. Some of the organizations were even persuaded to wear the Summer College logo on buttons and T-shirts, with their own fraternity logo opposite, to many popular campus events held during the academic year.

## Conclusion

While it is difficult to identify a single primary catalyst for the significant growth at Elon, it is clear in looking at the history of Summer College that each of the strategies listed had an impact in increasing summer enrollment. For summer sessions to be successful, administrators must think creatively and be willing to take some chances. For many institutions, student demographics are changing. With fewer students entering higher education in general, the competition for those students has ramped up significantly. Students and parents are keenly aware of the costs associated with today's college education, so spending extra money on summer sessions must be presented so that both groups see value.

Marketing strategies must continue to evolve, paving the way for institutions to try new and innovative techniques to increase summer enrollment. Plans are currently underway to use the degree audit reporting systems to notify students that a specific course will be offered in the summer, as well as send targeted emails to students whom we know need specific courses. Additionally, for those on four-credit-hour systems, consider offering one-credit-hour courses to supplement the deficiency in credit hours that is often found in the core.

Summer online programs can be a domain to encourage faculty to develop new and unique course offerings. Perhaps encouraging faculty to develop a summer course as a sandbox for exploring new technologies and building more effective online learning platforms would also help with enrollment, especially if that professor is already popular with the students. The endorsement of online learning in higher education is now commonplace, so the impetus for innovation falls upon the university.

Finally, institutions may also consider making open records requests to other state institutions for student names and email addresses, as long as that information is touted as directory information. Outreach to these students encouraging them to diversify their educational experience may increase the number of transient students to your campus during the summer. While this may seem cost prohibitive for most, it may be surprising to learn the number of students interested in an institution based on brand and intrigued by the opportunity to diversify their educational experience during summer, especially if those students are local.

At Elon, Summer College produces a significant revenue stream on which the institution has come to rely. Spurring growth can be challenging, but leveraging the registrar's knowledge of reporting, policy, and university culture can be keys to building and sustaining summer program growth.

## Biographies

Rodney Parks is the director of Summer College and registrar at Elon University. In addition to academic advising, he is an assistant professor in the field of human services. He has published a number of articles related to unique student populations that focused on providing services to improve student retention.

Melissa Holmes, an Elon University graduate, has served in the Registrar's Office for the past 14 years. She works as an assistant registrar of technology, currently overseeing the research and implementation of new technologies and the training of campus constituents in their daily use of the student system.