

Specialized Degree Programs: Time Compressed Class Offerings at State Universities

The availability in the number of options for current day college students may influence their decision to choose a certain school over another for that all important “university experience.” It has long been advocated by some university professors that a needed change is due in the approach of curriculum choices for present day students, to become more flexible as to when college classes convene as well as to what really constitutes the requisite amount of knowledge needed to qualify for a bachelor’s degree. With the convenience of options by “for-profit” educational institutions (i. e., National University, University of Phoenix, DeVry Institute, etc.) that offer flexible educational programs which meet the ever changing needs of many of today’s college aged students, the traditional setting of offering classes which meet three times a week for a fifteen week semester are becoming less desirable, or even less acceptable, choices. The speed at which a college student can navigate through a degree program will largely depend upon not only the number of units needed to satisfy a basic level of understanding, but on the availability of a time compressed approach as to when classes are offered (weeks per semester, class meetings per week, hours per class period).

Many of the top-tiered, non-profit private universities (Harvard, Stanford, etc.) in the United States conduct their educational system based upon a 10-week quarter system. Again, depending on the particular major chosen, many of these quarter classes cover the same amount of material which would be covered in a 15-week semester class. It is easy to deduce that a quarter-based education system offers the student more flexibility by providing either a faster pace to that coveted undergraduate degree or an increased amount of topical coverage, producing a better, highly educated student.

The bottom line is always about money. This definitely applies to higher education. This money is directly related to the number of students that pass through and, how quickly they graduate from an offering college. Again, especially considering today’s increasingly expensive college tuitions, this time compressed approach is generating a concerned notice by second and third tiered universities and colleges: Where is the “hook” to increase student enrollment?

One of the major hurdles that obscures the chance of even an ad hoc try at time compressed class offerings is directly related to the size of the institution’s enrollment. It might be much easier to reconfigure the class offerings for the curriculum at Cal Tech, where the size of the entire undergraduate student body is less 1000 students, than it might be at Arizona State University, which totals about 72,500 students on its three campuses. A special cohort approach might need to be established for selected students who are interested in a faster paced approach to their bachelor’s degree. At the Craig School of Business (CSU, Fresno), the Accelerated Bachelor’s degree in Business Administration (ABBA) program is such an approach, by providing students with the opportunity to finish their degree in almost half of the time. The students enrolled in the ABBA still need to meet all of the general education requirements (which are usually offered in a traditional, uncompressed approached), as dictated by university’s curriculum committee. For their business classes only, students meet for four hours during the evening twice a week and for

eight hours on every other Saturday. The ABBA produces a Bachelor of Science degree in general management. Specialized degree options in business are not yet available. However, this program is a start in right the direction of configuring an educational approach to meet the student's needs.

With the escalating costs to higher education, the generally financially hamstrung universities will need specialized educational constructs which will attract students to their campuses. Many, if not all, institutions of higher learning offer distance learning options. The most popular of these are the online classes. This is not a panacea to solving the problems of over-crowded classrooms or even lack of classrooms for class offerings. Sometimes a student's self-revelation epiphany comes too late with respect to online instruction. Not all students have the needed self-discipline and dedication to complete an online class. Those same students do not appreciate the rigor and self-motivating requirement to finish an online class, especially after starting the process. For example, junior college online class attrition rates are abominable, where the frequency of dropping a class directly correlates to the relatively lower tuition costs (when compared to universities). But online scheduling is not quite the same as a time compressed approach for face to face classes.

This research paper will focus on how colleges and universities of lesser stature can still appeal to and compete for high caliber students by offering specialized degree programs that promote a faster paced education from qualified instructors located in smaller, more intimately-sized classrooms. Much like an honors program which requires certain obligations from its participants, universities that offer time compressed degree programs must be able to assure its participants that such classes will never be canceled due to insufficient enrollment or the absence of a qualified instructor. Those students, who meet the requisite challenges of the self-discipline and the personal dedication and offer the necessary respect for the instructor who subjects him/herself to the rigors of teaching a time compressed class, will greatly benefit by earning a quality degree in much less time.

Although there are arguments to be made (on both sides) as to which type of institution (public vs. private; for-profit vs. non-profit, quarter-based vs. semester-based) provides the best education, a more cogent argument might be to ask (1) how much will it cost, (2) how long will it take, (3) what is the intangible value of the "name" of the institution, and (4) can the student find a job upon exiting.