

# BENEFITS OF SHORT-TERM SEQUENCED COURSES

**Memo Number:** FS22-11

**TO:** Chief Executive Officers  
Chief Business Officers  
Chief Instructional Officers

**FROM:** Lizette Navarette, Executive Vice Chancellor  
Institutional Supports and Success

**RE:** Benefits of Short-Term Sequenced Courses Leading to a Degree or Certificate

To support districts seeking strategies that engage post-traditional students and to advance goals that reduce unit accumulations, this memo provides an overview of the benefits of short-term sequenced courses that lead to a degree or certificate. Specifically, this memo summarizes current regulations and strategies that colleges may use around short-term scheduling to increase enrollment, FTES, and student success.

## **Background and Research**

California community colleges are committed to the success of our students. The last few years have been tough on our communities and students, making it harder for students to remain enrolled and succeed in achieving their educational goals. As a system, we need to look for opportunities to bring students back to our colleges while continuing to serve those who have weathered the changes of the last few years and remained enrolled.

Traditional pathways to a degree are not designed for post-traditional students such as those who delayed enrollment in college after high school, enrolled part-time, have full-time employment while enrolled in college, or students who have dependents. Across California, community colleges are serving more – not fewer – post-traditional students. This long-standing reality necessitates California’s colleges to adapt to the students who represent our new traditional. We can begin by adapting academic terms to fit their complex lives.

Numerous studies and decades of research show that shorter academic terms, such as compressed calendars or short-term 8- and 10-week classes, can translate into increased student success. Alvarez (2017), Scobey (2016) and Kasworm (2001) among others emphasize a departure from conventional semester schedule by highlighting such approaches as compressed terms, accelerated programs, structured schedules (Complete College America, 2018), flexible course delivery, and more enrollment periods. Increasing unit intensity with the objective of reducing time to completion continues to be goal for California Community Colleges but a challenge for students. A 2021 study, *The Overlooked Working Majority*, which focused on working adult learners at California’s community colleges, found that given low-unit enrollment intensity, on average, it takes an adult learner who works more than half-time two additional terms to complete a 60-unit degree. For these students, this represents a “31% increase in time and expense for completion.” A pattern of two classes at a time in an 8- or 10-week clusters can help reduce the damage done when life gets in the way for many

post-traditional. Programs like Accelerated College Education (Shasta College, 2019) have seen early success with such approaches. But shortening academic terms and courses is not enough – pathways need to be aligned to students’ end-goals. For example, Ziskin et al, (2010) found that working students must create highly structured schedules for themselves to manage their conflicting responsibilities.

### **Short-Term Courses: 5-Year Trends**

Over the last five years, California community colleges have been steadily increasing the proportion of short-term courses as a percentage of total courses. During the Fall of 2017, 14.28% of all courses offered were identified as short term courses based on Chancellor’s Office MIS data and by Fall 2021, that percentage increased to 21.5%. Table 1 in Appendix B contains statewide data showing the total number of courses offered each term and the percentage of total courses that the community college districts identified as being short-term courses.

Source: Chancellor’s Office MIS Reports

## **What are the advantages shorter courses and academic terms?**

### **Shorter Time Frame & Schedule Flexibility**

Students generally receive the same number of credits when a course is completed in 8-weeks or 10-weeks instead of 17-weeks. Some students may be able to complete more courses each semester than would be possible in a traditional 17-week course schedule, which can lead to students earning their degrees or credentials faster. Additionally, the structure allows students to take fewer classes each session rather than 4-5 classes at the same time, providing students the ability to focusing on fewer subjects at one time. Shorter academic terms also provide greater flexibility. Students don’t have to wait a full semester to re-enroll and get back on track. With the flexibility provided by late or alternative start, students have greater enrollment options throughout the year and the ability to earn the same number of credits.

### **Transition to Full-Time with Financial Aid**

Part-time students can take more courses, such as four 8-week courses, each semester to be considered full-time students with financial aid benefits. For students with more responsibilities like a job and family, focusing on two classes each session fits into their schedule better. Combined, these two benefits (greater scheduling flexibility and the ability to be considered full-time for financial aid purposes) can help a student stay on track and graduate sooner.

### **Outcomes and the SCFF Supplemental and Success Allocations**

The Student Centered Funding Formula includes three allocations. The base allocation is based largely on FTES. The supplemental allocation is based on the number of students receiving a College Promise Grant or a Pell Grant and students covered by AB 540. The student success allocation is based on outcomes including the following: the number of students earning associate degrees and credit certificates, the number of students transferring to four-year colleges, the number of students who complete transfer-level math

and English within their first year, the number of students who complete nine or more CTE units, and the number of students who have attained the regional living wage.

Research shows that short-term courses improve student success and persistence, which could lead to better outcomes in many of the categories in the student success allocation. This method of scheduling short-term courses in a clearly identified sequence is likely to lead to increases in associate degrees and credit certificates. The reason for this is that students have a clear sequence of courses to achieve these outcomes and the courses are shorter in duration. Sequenced short-term courses could also lead to increases in other student success categories, as students persist through more courses in a shorter period of time, it could lead to faster completion of the student success metrics which translates to more funding in the SCFF

Studies, including several featuring California Community Colleges, show students are more successful when they can focus their attention on fewer subjects at one time. Data shows that drop-off rates increase late into 16- and 17-week terms. With shorter courses or terms, classes meet more often each week, allowing students to spend more time with their professors in the shortened timeframe.

### **Opportunity to Bring Back Lost FTES**

Across the state, community college districts are struggling with enrollment declines. Prior to the pandemic, college enrollments were already projected to decline. Enrollment at K-12 schools has been flat for a number of years and California's population growth is at its lowest point since the 1800s<sup>1</sup>. Further, the Department of Finance released projections anticipating that K-12 student enrollment will drop by 9% by 2030 and maybe twice that in some counties. These factors combined with a global pandemic and resulting changes in the way students prefer to attend classes have worked to exacerbate the enrollment declines over the past two years.

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to many changes in our system, and colleges are doing their best to look at enrollment patterns and student demand for courses and schedule courses in a way to meet this demand. The pandemic has also caused many changes in students' lives, some which have led to students leaving our campuses (both in person and virtual) for a variety of reasons. Many for-profit colleges offer short-term sequenced courses that lead to a degree or certificate. This method of sequencing courses is beneficial because students are able to see the entire sequence up front and track their progress as they complete the courses on the list. Community colleges need to explore new ways of offering courses to meet student's needs, bring back students that have left, and attract new students. We want to encourage colleges to explore this scheduling option to increase student success and decrease the time to completion.

## **Curriculum and Course Approval**

Community Colleges are permitted to schedule courses for any length of time, as long as the course satisfies the hours and learning objectives as stated in the approved course outline of record (COR). Generally, community colleges offer the majority of their course offerings as semester length courses, however, some colleges are moving toward scheduling more short term courses and are finding that students have a greater rate of success in completing an 8-week or 10-week course compared to a semester length course. Title 5 regulations include the flexibility to schedule courses that do not align with a college's academic term. Under title 5 regulations, FTES generated in census procedure courses are reported in the period in which the census date falls, even if the course is not completed yet. FTES generated in positive attendance courses are reported in the period in which the course ends.

Once a course has an approved course outline of record (COR), it can be scheduled for any length of time as long as the total hours match the approved COR and the course meets the goals and objectives stated in the course outline of record. If a course is initially scheduled as a semester length course with an approved COR and is later compressed to an 8-week or 10-week course, no additional approval is needed.

## **Attendance Accounting Considerations**

Each course uses a single attendance accounting procedure in calculating the FTES generated in the course. The attendance accounting procedure used is based on attributes of the course (the type of course, the way it is scheduled, credit/noncredit, modality, etc.). Under the current attendance accounting rules, a short-term credit course would use either the daily census procedure (title 5 § 58003.1(c)) or the positive attendance procedure (title 5 § 58003.1(d)). A short-term course would use the daily census attendance accounting procedure if it were regularly scheduled, meaning the course meets the same number of hours on each scheduled meeting day. Short-term courses that are not regularly scheduled, meaning the course does not meet the same number of hours on each meeting day, would use the positive attendance procedure.

### **Regularly Scheduled Short Term Courses- Daily Census**

For purposes of daily census, a course is regularly scheduled if it meets the same number of hours on each scheduled meeting day. Courses are scheduled to align with the total hours listed in the Course Outline of Record. When converting a semester length course to a short term course, the college should look at the total hours, and divide that by the number of meeting days (excluding holidays) to determine the appropriate length of each class session. If scheduled appropriately, a short-term daily census course can often generate more FTES than if the same course were offered as a full semester length course. Appendix A contains an example of a 3-unit course and shows scheduling times and the FTES generated in the course if it were short-term (offered for 8 weeks) vs the same course offered as a full-term weekly census course.

### **Irregularly Scheduled Short Term Courses- Positive Attendance**

A course is irregularly scheduled if it does not meet the same number of hours on each scheduled meeting day. Short-term courses that are combined lecture and lab are often

irregularly scheduled. When scheduling these courses it is customary for the lecture portion of the class to meet each meeting day with a lab portion added to some of the meeting days. An example of this is a semester length lecture/lab course that meets on Tuesdays and Thursdays for lecture and includes a lab component on Thursdays. If a college was going to shorten this from a 16-week class to an 8-week class, the simple approach would be to double the days, so it would be lecture 4 days per week and lab 2 days per week. This scheduling pattern would require the class to use positive attendance since the class does not meet the same number of hours on each scheduled meeting day.

However, short-term courses using the positive attendance procedure are likely to generate less FTES when converted to a short-term course compared to the same course offered as a full term length course using weekly census or daily census. The reason for this is that the positive attendance procedure is a count of the exact number of hours that each student in the class is present, so the college does not generate FTES on days a student is absent or for a student who drops the course before the end of the term. The Chancellor's Office will be exploring regulation changes to address this issue.

### **Contact**

If you have questions regarding curriculum for short-term courses, please contact Raul Arambula at [rarambula@cccoco.edu](mailto:rarambula@cccoco.edu). If you have questions regarding attendance accounting for short-term courses please contact Natalie Wagner at [nwagner@cccoco.edu](mailto:nwagner@cccoco.edu).