Education Advisory Board | Community College Forum

Block and Cohort Scheduling

Block Scheduling and the Impact on Student Success

Custom Research Brief

Community College Forum

Michael Ray
Research Associate

Lauren Edmonds
Research Manager

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1) Executive Overview

Key Observations

Block scheduling improves semester-to-semester and year-to-year retention rates. Contacts report increases in semester-to-semester and year-to-year retention rates of students in block scheduling compared to peers with traditional schedules. Switching to a block schedule model also reduces the number of extraneous courses students take before graduation, which reduces the student debt burden.

Successful transitions to block schedules require high levels of faculty engagement. Block schedules increase the amount of contact between faculty members and students. Increased class time forces faculty members to reassess their pedagogy and curricula. The frequent and lengthy class sessions of a block schedule also require faculty members to alter the pace of lectures, discussions, and assignments. Block scheduling pedagogy places a greater emphasis on complex case-study and group assignments, rather than assessments such as quizzes and tests.

Student registration systems require manual intervention to create schedules. Registrar staff manually create schedules for student cohorts. Student success office staff develop a 'centrally recommended schedule' to discuss potential conflicts and meet with each department head that includes a proposed time for a course session. Department heads confirm the ability of the department to provide a faculty member and classroom for the proposed block time. Contacts allow block schedule participants to register for classes before administrators open enrollment for the rest of the student body.

Undeclared transfer students and students seeking to quickly complete general education courses benefit from block scheduling. Undeclared transfer students need to complete all general education requirements before they transfer to a four year institution. Block schedules expedite the completion of general education courses. Likewise, students that have completed all associate or technical degree requirements but still need to complete general education courses benefit from block scheduling.

Course scheduling software products expedite the scheduling process and minimize scheduling conflicts. Products such as Astra Schedule, Campus Manager 5.0, and Schedule25 allow administrators to schedule all campus-wide courses and identify and consolidate under-enrolled sections. These tools allow administrators to analyze course registration trends and predict future demand.

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2) Implementing Block Scheduling

Block Schedule Construction

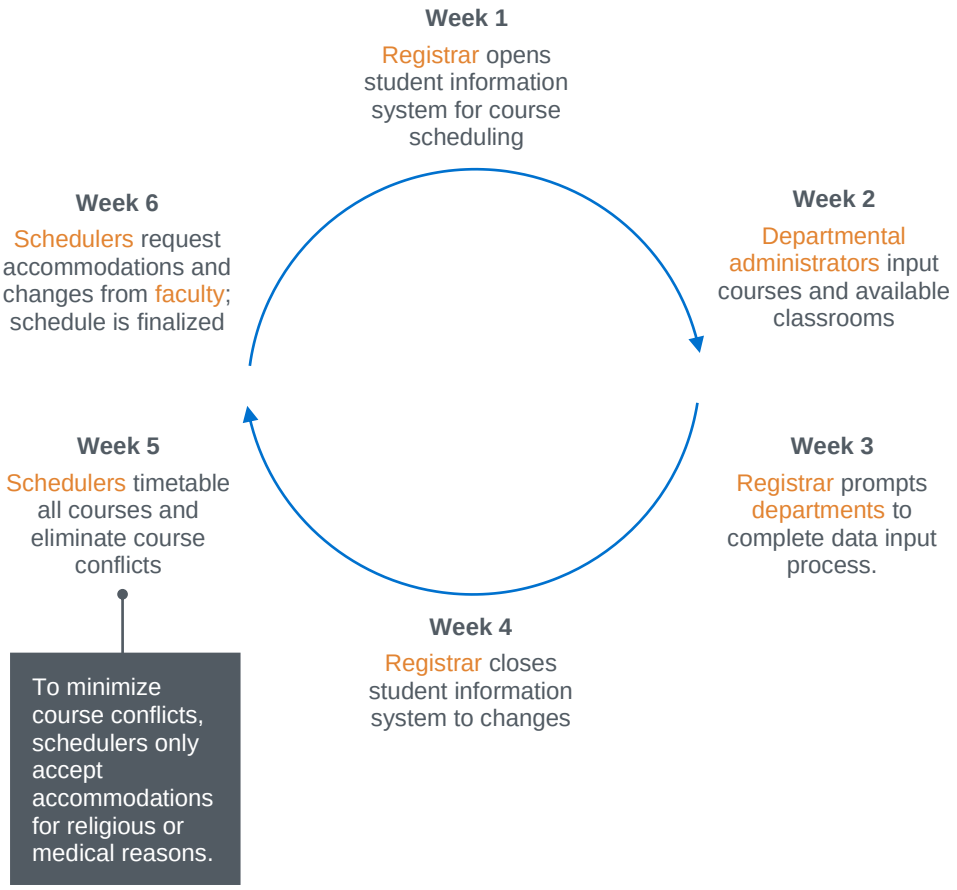
Coordinate Block Schedules with Registrar Staff, Student Success Staff, and Department Heads

Meet with registrar and student success staff to create a 'centrally recommended schedule' for block courses. Present the schedule to department heads to confirm that the time and location of the proposed block work for the faculty and facilities. Block scheduling requires more time and coordination than traditional schedules, and thus should take priority for registrar staff. Most institutions offer block courses early in the morning or in the evening to allow traditional courses in the early and late afternoon.

Courses with Laboratory Components

Administrators build additional time into courses that require a laboratory component. A traditional block course ranges between 75 to 150 minutes. Courses with lab components alternate between shorter block sessions (i.e., 75 minutes) and longer lab sessions (i.e., 150 minutes).

Course Scheduling Process



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IT Resources

Supplement Student Information Systems Such as Banner with Additional Scheduling Technology

Student information systems (e.g., Banner) require manual inputs to successfully create block schedules. Registrar staff complain that creating a single block schedule for one student requires 15 minutes of work on the back end of a student information system. Administrators supplement student information systems with additional technologies.

Scheduling Technologies

Astra Schedule	▪ Unifies entire campus schedules into one interactive graphic to prevent double-bookings

Campus Manager	▪ Provides dynamic user tracking services for real-time monitoring of schedule construction

Schedule25	▪ Optimizes the most efficient space allocations for campuses

Development Courses

Require Students to Complete Prerequisite Courses before Enrolling in Block Schedules

Administrators report difficulty creating block schedules for students with varied developmental needs (e.g., ESL students, literacy development, and long gaps between formal educational experiences). Students with developmental needs struggle to keep pace with block scheduled courses. Administrators mandate all students complete prerequisite courses before they enroll in a block course. This practice prevents students enrolled in developmental courses from enrolling in a block schedule.

"All college-prepared students are the same, but all unprepared students are unprepared in different ways."

-Forum Interview

3) Student Populations Impacted by Block Scheduling

Advantages of Block Scheduling

Improve Pedagogy Reform and Information Retention with Block Scheduling

Administrators provide anecdotal evidence of increased student comprehension in block classes compared to traditionally scheduled classes.

Faculty Classification, Workload, and Benefits

Improved Teaching

Longer class blocks give faculty more time to complete lesson plans between class sessions. Faculty report an increase in creative lessons, better collaborative projects, and greater diversity of pedagogical practices to meet the needs of different learning styles.

Improved Learning

Block scheduling allows students to focus on fewer subjects. Each subject receives greater attention, detail, and depth. Block schedules prevent the fragmentation of instructional time since students do not frequently transition to a new class.

Faster Time-to-Completion

Block scheduling limits the number of course offerings available to students. As a result, students take fewer extraneous courses that fail to satisfy program or general education requirements.

Improved Retention

Contacts report an increase in semester-to-semester retention rates after the transition to a block schedule. However, most block schedule programs require students to opt-in, creating a self-selection bias.

Transfer Students and Students Enrolled in STEM Programs Benefit More from Block Scheduling

Many institutions use block scheduling exclusively for general education courses. This allows students to complete general education requirements quickly before they begin courses that count towards a major.

Benefits and Handicaps of Block Scheduling for Various Student Populations

Benefits	Handicaps
Programs: Block schedules benefit STEM and technical degree students because the serialized nature of the courses. The limited class size and highly specific content of STEM courses also benefit from block scheduling.	**Programs:** Liberal arts programs lack a serialized course order. Liberal arts faculty encourage students take varied courses as a means of self-discovery.
Students: Students interested in transferring to four year institutions benefit from block scheduling. Students quickly complete general education requirements before they transfer to a four year institution to complete a program of study.	**Students:** Students that need additional academic support struggle with the in-depth and nuanced topic discussions.
Demographics: Working adults and non-traditional students benefit from block scheduling. Working adults can more easily arrange work and childcare schedules around the reduced number of campus visits for class.	**Demographics:** Recent high school graduates struggle to adjust to the dramatically longer course sessions. Block schedules also limit academic curiosity and exploration.

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4) Block Scheduling Outcomes

Metrics

Measure Block Schedule Impact on Student Success With Traditional Metrics

Measure student success with traditional metrics to compare the success of block schedule student cohorts to traditional schedule student cohorts. Develop metrics to evaluate:

- Student success in courses included in block schedules compared to the same courses in a traditional schedule
- Student achievement of university wide learning objectives (e.g., informational literacy, critical thinking) in block scheduled courses compared to traditional courses.

Contacts perceive block schedule as more effective for students learning, retention, and completion than traditional schedules. Student success metrics consistently demonstrate the positive impacts of block scheduling on student success and bolsters administrator confidence in block scheduling. Most administrators evaluate student success in distance education programs with the following metrics:

- Four-year graduation rate
- Time to degree completion
- Semester-to-semester retention rate
- Student debt burden
- Number of enrolled extraneous courses

Common Scheduling Challenges

Restrict Scheduling Accommodations to Minimize Inter-Departmental Scheduling Conflicts

Scheduling administrators experience difficulty when departmental leaders neglect to input course information on time. Excessive faculty accommodations (e.g., reserving instructional space before the class time) also inhibit the scheduling process as they limit the number of potential spaces available to schedule courses. Additionally, staff turnover at the departmental chair and dean levels results in a lack of familiarity with scheduling processes within academic departments.

Common Scheduling Challenges and Solutions

Challenges	Solutions
× Departmental scheduling administrators input course information late	✓ Enforce strict deadlines for input of course information
× Faculty accommodations cause excessive course conflicts that require time-consuming reconciliation	✓ Penalize tardy course submission with lowered priority on instructional space
× Staff turnover results in lack of familiarity with scheduling processes	✓ Allow faculty accommodations only for medical and religious reasons, not faculty preference
	✓ Host basic course input training sessions prior to the start of a scheduling cycle

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5) Research Methodology

Project Challenge

Leadership at a member institution approached the Forum with the following questions:

- How do contacts manage the implementation of block scheduling in addition to maintaining a traditional scheduling model?
- Who oversees the implementation of block scheduling?
- What process do contacts use to create block scheduling?
- How do contacts work across departments to create efficient schedules?
- What IT resources do contacts require to manage block scheduling?
- How do administrators schedule courses that require extended class time or laboratories?
- How do contacts include developmental courses into block schedules?
- What benefits does block scheduling offer?
- What are the disadvantages of block scheduling?
- What metrics do contacts use to measure the effectiveness of block scheduling?
- How do contacts measure the impact of block scheduling on student learning?
- How has a transition to block scheduling impacted student retention and completion rates?

Project Sources

The Forum consulted the following sources for this report:

- EAB's internal and online research libraries (eab.com)
- The Chronicle of Higher Education (http://chronicle.com)
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (http://nces.ed.gov/)

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Research Parameters

The Forum interviewed student affairs administrators.

A Guide to Institutions Profiled in this Brief

Institution	Location	Approximate Institutional Enrollment (Undergraduate/Total)	Classification
Institution A	Pacific West	1,200/ 2,300	Master's Colleges and Universities (larger programs)
Institution B	Midwest	11,100/ 15,600	Master's Colleges and Universities (larger programs)
Institution C	Northeast	19,000	Associate's--Public Urban-serving Multicampus
Institution D	Mountain West	24,000	Associate's--Public Urban-serving Multicampus
Institution E	Mountain West	30,000	Associate's--Public Urban-serving Multicampus

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

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