Identify and Rightsize Small Class Offerings

Manage Low Enrollment and Pinpoint Resource Reallocation Opportunities

Start with best practices research

- Research Forums for presidents, provosts, chief business officers, and key academic and administrative leaders
- At the core of all we do
- Peer-tested best practices research
- Answers to the most pressing issues

Then hardwire those insights into your organization using our technology & services

Enrollment Management

Our **Enrollment Services** division provides data-driven undergraduate and graduate solutions that target qualified prospective students; build relationships throughout the search, application, and yield process; and optimize financial aid resources.

Student Success

Members of the **Student Success Collaborative** use research, consulting, and an enterprise-wide student success management system to help students persist, graduate, and succeed.

Growth and Academic Operations

Our **Academic Performance Solutions** group partners with university academic and business leaders to help make smart resource trade-offs, improve academic efficiency, and grow academic program revenues.

1.2B+
Student interactions annually

1M+
Individuals on our student success management system

1,300+
Institutions we are proud to serve

1
Goal: Make education smarter

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Introduction

Are Our Smallest Classes Small by Design?

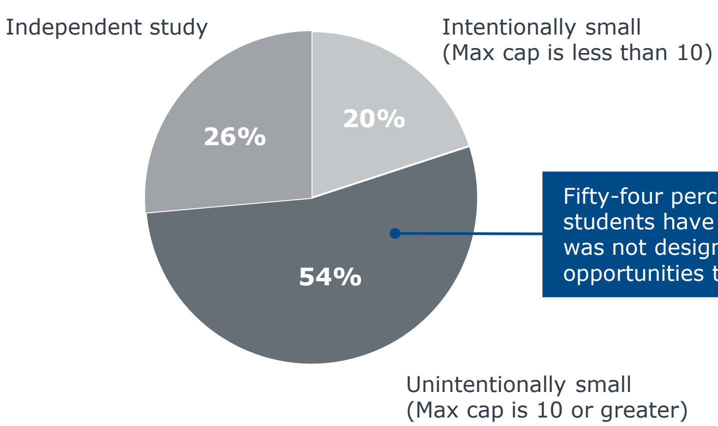
Institutions are constantly balancing the demand to meet student needs and promote success, against an imperative to make the best possible use of resources. This challenge is particularly evident when determining class sizes. With instructor salaries making up the bulk of departmental costs, small classes represent a substantial investment. There are many benefits of small classes, and institutions are rewarded in national rankings for having a greater share of classes with 20 or fewer students.[1]

An analysis of data from EAB's Academic Performance Solutions, though, shows that many small classes are not designed to be small; instead, they are a byproduct of low enrollment. This is especially true for very small classes—those with fewer than 10 students—which represent 24% of all sections, yet produce only 4% of student credit hours.

Sections with Fewer than 10 Enrolled Students[2]

AY 2017

n = 53 institutions



Fifty-four percent of sections with fewer than 10 students have low fill rates, indicating that the class was not designed to be small and there may be opportunities to reallocate instructional resources.

The proliferation of small and under-filled classes increases teaching demands on faculty without a proportional increase in SCH production. By extension, this also puts pressure on academic leaders to hire adjuncts as a way to address capacity needs in higher-demand classes. Enrollments in very small classes may also result in the section's costs exceeding its revenues. The break-even point differs among institutions, but it typically falls between six and ten students.

Institutions should carefully evaluate small classes and determine when they exist out of pedagogical necessity. This will help ensure that those investments are intentional and the best use of resources for both students and faculty. For sections that are small due to low enrollment—or where there has been an increase of independent study classes—there may be opportunities to consolidate offerings, reduce demands on faculty, and provide students with engaging alternatives.

1) Robert Morse and Eric Brooks, "Best Colleges Ranking Criteria and Weights", *U.S. News and World Report*.
2) Includes only sections of undergraduate courses with enrollment caps set at greater than zero and with greater than zero attempted student credit hours; AY 2017. Weighted averages by total attempted student credit hours at the institution (n = 53).

Source: Academic Performance Solutions data and analysis, 2018.

Small Classes Are a Necessity at Times

Only about 20% of sections with fewer than 10 students are designed to be that small. In some cases, there are recommendations from discipline-specific associations or guidelines for accreditation that dictate specific ratios. Certain nursing classes, for example, must have a maximum clinical-faculty-to-student ratio.

An institution's size and mission may also be fundamental in determining the ideal amount of investment in small classes. Across the APS collaborative, mid-sized, *teaching*-oriented institutions have a median of 24% of intentionally small classes, while mid-sized, *research*-oriented institutions have a median of 13%.[2]

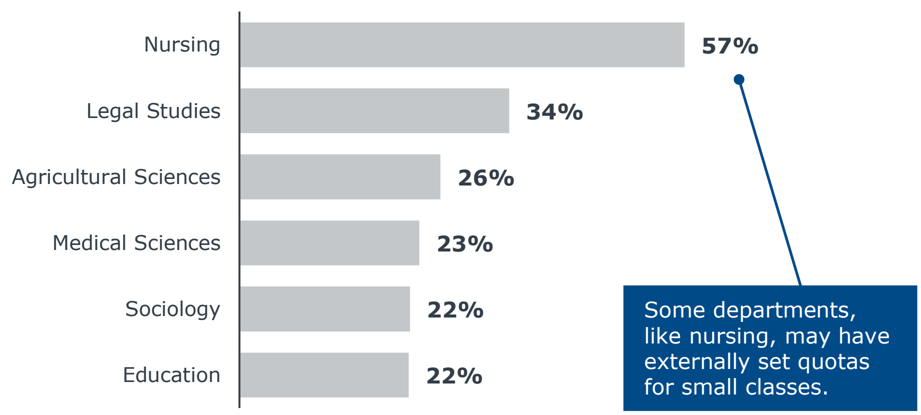
In other cases, though, the size of the class may be a result of faculty preference or a lack of clear policy and guidelines for setting maximum enrollment capacities. To ensure small classes are an intentional investment, unit leaders should review offerings each term and engage with faculty to document the pedagogical reasons for the section size. For classes that do not need to be as small, leaders should consider raising the enrollment cap to allow more students in the class.

Ensuring Intentional Investments

Share of Small Sections That Are Intentionally Small, by Department[1]

AY 2017

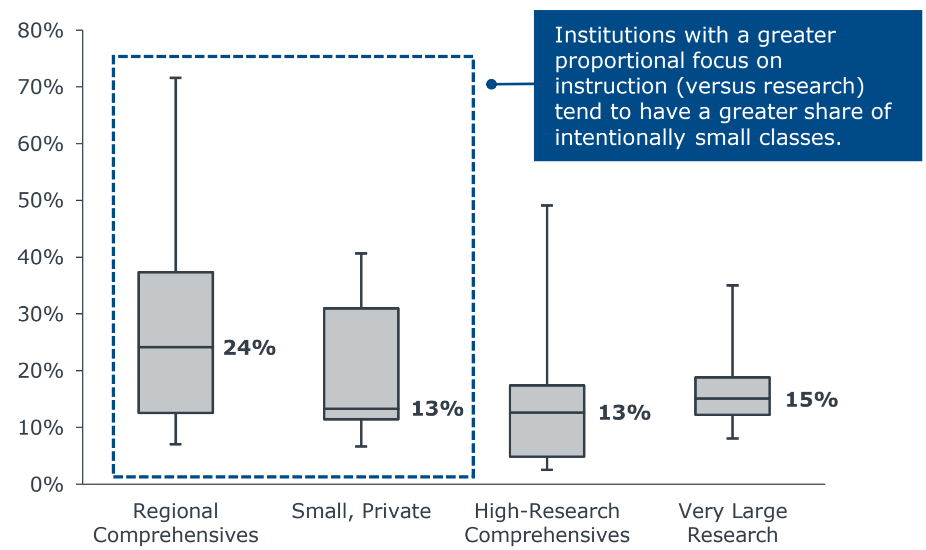
n = 53 institutions



Share of Small Sections That Are Intentionally Small, by Cohort[1,2]

AY 2017

n = 53 institutions



1) Includes only sections of undergraduate courses with enrollment caps set at greater than zero and with greater than zero attempted student credit hours; AY 2017. Weighted averages by total attempted student credit hours at the institution (n = 53).
2) APS cohorts are designed using the following variables from IPEDS: sector, basic Carnegie classification, total expenditures, and undergraduate enrollment.

Source: Academic Performance Solutions data and analysis, 2018.

Not All Small Classes Are Intended to Be Small

Managing Low-Enrollment Classes

The greatest opportunity for improving efficiency is examining the sections that have a cap of 10 or greater, but have not filled due to low enrollment. This situation accounts for 54% of very small classes, for which there are likely opportunities to shift resources toward higher-demand areas.

One source of small classes may be a new program that has just launched and does not yet have the enrollment to sustain large classes. This low demand is expected the first few years as you build a strong recruitment strategy and make investments to expand, but over time there should be anticipated growth. However, if short- or long-term growth is unlikely, curriculum review and redesign, or elimination, may warrant consideration.

If lacking student demand is the cause of low enrollment, consider curriculum review and redesign. Proliferation of low-demand classes and programs leads to underutilized capacity and higher costs.

More choices and requirements also extend time to degree and generate excess credits. Setting in place a low-enrollment policy is one option—establishing certain thresholds under which small sections may be cancelled. Avoid blanket policies, however, which fail to take into account which classes students may need in order to graduate.

Nearly all unintentionally small classes have fill rates of 75% or lower, which means there may be reallocation opportunities for those courses with more than one section taught throughout the academic year. Not all under-filled sections should be collapsed or consolidated, though. Some are scheduled to accommodate students taking co-requisites scheduled at the same time as the other sections of the course, for example. However, according to interviews with institutions that have gone through the process, the cost savings from even a small number of consolidations still merit the effort.

Addressing Low-Enrollment Classes

1 New Offering

- Initiative to grow new program, but limited number of majors

→ Monitor demand

2 Lack of Student Demand

- Course not publicized
- Instructor reputed to be ineffective
- Course too specialized

→ Consider curriculum review and redesign

3 Excess Offerings

- Number of courses offered at level exceeds need
- Course offered too frequently

→ Consolidate sections

Source: Academic Performance Solutions data and analysis, 2018. Instructional Capacity Playbook, Academic Affairs Forum, EAB.

Opportunities to Reallocate Resources

For multi-section courses, potential cost savings could arise as a result of collapsing all superfluous sections (i.e., those that can be consolidated without reducing the overall course enrollment). The same rule applies to single-section courses—though rather than collapsing two sections into one within a single semester, an institution may choose to only offer one section of a course during the academic year, as opposed to one section in each the fall and spring.

In a department-by-department breakdown, APS data reveals that nursing has the greatest share of consolidation opportunities—among courses made up entirely of unintentionally small sections—with 64%.

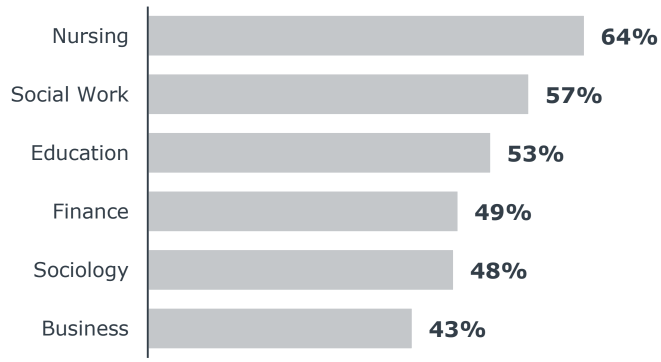
Because there is significant variation among institutions, academic leaders should regularly audit low-fill courses for consolidation opportunities. As one example, a small, private university offered three sections of a 100-level business course with an average maximum enrollment of 24 for each section. However, each section had eight or fewer students, so the course could have been consolidated into one section, allowing for reallocation of resources that were devoted to the two extra sections.

Limiting Excess Offerings

Share of Unintentionally Small Classes with Consolidation Opportunities, by Department[1,2]

AY 2017

n = 53 institutions



Consolidating Excess Course Sections

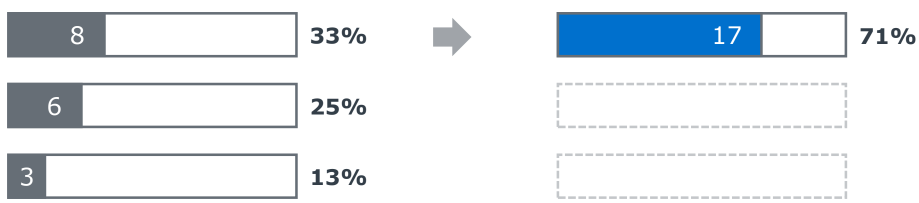
100-Level Business Course at a Small, Private University

Excess Course Capacity

Max Enrollment = 24
Seat Utilization = 24%

Consolidated Sections

Max Enrollment = 24
Seat Utilization = 71%



Potential Pitfall: Inconsistently Set Enrollment Caps

The precision of fill-rate analyses—such as this one—are highly dependent on accurately set enrollment caps. Before identifying consolidation opportunities on your campus, ensure that max caps are reliably set. Use the **Maximum Capacity Toolkit** to diagnose root causes of inconsistency and develop new policies.

1) Includes only sections of undergraduate courses with enrollment caps set at greater than zero and with greater than zero attempted student credit hours; AY 2017. Weighted averages by total attempted student credit hours at the institution (n = 53).
2) A course was deemed to be ripe for consolidation if a) it was a single-section course that could be taught during fewer semesters during the year while still remaining at or below the target fill rate of 85%, or b) it was a multi-section course with collapsible sections at a target fill rate of 85% or below.

Source: Academic Performance Solutions data and analysis, 2018.

Optimize Investment in Individual Instruction

Incentivizing Faculty to Modify Independent Studies into Group Courses

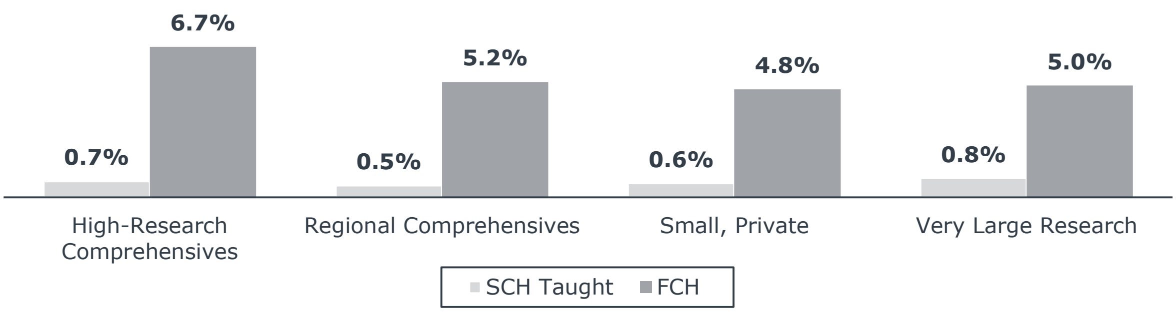
Over one-quarter of classes with fewer than 10 students are independent study, which constitutes about 5% of faculty credit hours—yet less than 1% of total student credit hours—at the average institution. As the research and service demands on faculty increase, the disproportionate impact of these courses could become unsustainable.

Independent Studies Across the APS Cohorts[1,2]

AY 2017

n = 53 institutions

0.7% of Student Credit Hours Taught → **5.5% of Faculty Credit Hours**



To rightsize investment in individual instruction, institutions may consider creating small group courses for related topics. The below example represents how an institution could consolidate three independent study courses into one small group course. Institutions should regularly review independent research topics to identify topics that are closely aligned. By combining related courses, the institution encourages students to collaborate and engage in discussions, while simultaneously reducing the instructors' course loads.

Routinizing Independent Study Reviews

Regular Reviews of Independent Research Topics

Faculty	Topic	Enrollment
Smith	Political Legacies of Founding Fathers	1
Smith	The Continental Congress	1
Smith	Women of the Revolutionary War	1

Combined Course

"Exploring Revolutionary Politics"

Course Cap = **3**

Incentives for Faculty to Consolidate Sections

- Travel gainsharing
- Release buyout

Visit EAB.com/APS for more information.

1) Includes only sections of undergraduate courses with enrollment caps set at greater than zero and with greater than zero attempted student credit hours; AY 2017. Weighted averages by total attempted student credit hours at the institution (n = 53).
2) APS cohorts are designed using the following variables from IPEDS: sector, basic Carnegie classification, total expenditures, and undergraduate enrollment.

Source: Academic Performance Solutions data and analysis, 2018.

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