



ALTERNATIVE UNDERGRADUATE COURSE SCHEDULES

Prepared For Stephen F. Austin State University

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PROJECT OBJECTIVE

Stephen F. Austin State University is interested in learning about how it can offer undergraduate courses on an alternative, short-course, or mini-term schedule.



- ✓ How do higher education institutions implement course schedules for undergraduate students that differ from the traditional semester?



- ✓ What programs and services have institutions found to be most effective in implementing alternative course schedules? What challenges have they experienced?



- ✓ How do peer institutions monitor and/or evaluate the success of alternative course schedules?

METHODOLOGY



Hanover Research conducted **12 in-depth interviews** with leaders from institutions that utilize, or are preparing to utilize, undergraduate course schedules that are shorter than the traditional 16-week semester. Eleven of 12 institutions implemented their alternative schedules prior to COVID-19.

Note:

Qualitative research is exploratory and designed to add insight and a depth of understanding to a particular question or topic. Qualitative findings provide commonalities and trends but are not intended to be statistically significant or to provide generalizable conclusions.

RECOMMENDATIONS



Stephen F. Austin State University should:

- 1 Start with a pilot semester that implements mini-terms within a few volunteer departments or programs.** Stakeholders, including faculty and staff, may be skeptical of the mini-term format. A pilot among volunteers would help SFA explore the option without forcing it onto reluctant faculty.
- 2 Design the mini-terms as two seven or eight-week sessions, with an intersessional period, inside of a traditional 16-week semester.** This is the most common mini-term length found among participant institutions. Participants whose institutions include a break of a few days, or even a week, between mini-terms within the same semester report that those periods are highly appreciated among students, faculty, and staff. One participant whose institution does not include intersessional periods stated that their absence contributes to burn out among students.
- 3 Provide faculty with professional development resources that will help them reconfigure their curricula and pedagogy for shorter terms.** Several participants note that such resources were crucial to the implementation of their mini-terms – or that the lack of such resources led to frustration and missed opportunities.

KEY FINDINGS



- **Many participants cite positive outcomes of their mini-terms across multiple student success criteria.** This includes positive outcomes for retention, completion, learning/grades, and engagement. Most of the participants that did not note such outcomes have not actually assessed their mini-terms regarding such criteria.
- **For several participants, student success outcomes are the primary criteria used to evaluate the efficacy of mini-terms.** Student grades/pass rates were the most frequently cited success criteria.
 - **The other primary criterion utilized to evaluate efficacy is enrollment.** Relatedly, several participants note that the implementation of mini-terms led to increases in enrollment.
- **Mini-terms may be more suited to certain topics than others.** Several participants note that students in some types of analytical courses benefit from traditional-length terms wherein they have more time to “absorb” the content. Meanwhile, the intense immersion of mini-terms appears to benefit students in foreign language courses.

KEY FINDINGS



- **No participants stated that their institutions experienced challenges in implementing mini-terms within the learning management system.** In fact, most participants answered with a solid “no” when asked this question directly. This was true across several different systems, including Ellucian Banner.
- **The most frequently mentioned challenges of mini-terms are administrative in nature.** Mini-terms can complicate processes that depend on a student’s full-time or part-time status, such as the distribution of financial aid and veteran benefits. Faculty course load scheduling may also be difficult. Additionally, administrative processes tied to term beginnings or ends must be completed several more times per year with mini-terms.
- **Other noted challenges concern the general pacing of mini-terms, as well as complications caused by running such terms alongside traditional terms.** The accelerated pacing of mini-terms leaves little to no buffer, meaning that any interruption has a greater proportional impact. Meanwhile, multiple concurrent term lengths may cause confusion for students and additional preparatory work for faculty.

A hand is shown from the bottom left, holding a glowing white graduation cap icon. A dark green banner is positioned horizontally across the middle of the image, containing the text 'COURSE SCHEDULING DECISIONS' in white, bold, uppercase letters. The background is a dark gray gradient with faint, overlapping square patterns.

COURSE SCHEDULING DECISIONS



The first goal was, “How do we improve student success and completion?”

P9, Lone Star College

STUDENT ACCESS, PROGRESS, AND COMPLETION ARE KEY INITIATORS

Several participants mention **retention, completion, and overall enrollment** as motivating factors for implementing non-traditional terms.

The decision was based on internal data and national data regarding community college enrollment that students who were withdrawing from coursework during a 16 week semester were normally walking away at about week 10, and our theory of change...was that perhaps by condensing... to 8 weeks, we might be able to avoid students checking out.

P1, Amarillo Community College

Several participants **specifically note these goals for non-traditional** and working students.

The first goal was "How do we improve student success and completion?" because that particular campus serves our most underrepresented minority population, and that area had the lowest college-going rate of our other service areas. And so the other hand of that is identifying a structure that makes higher education more accessible. So I think it gets oversimplified to, "Oh, it's enrollment." Not really. I mean, if the 16-week structure is daunting [to] the first-generation students or the students who have to work or students who have kids, and that's who you're trying to reach, then it's about making it accessible.

P9, Lone Star College

Participants mention a few different ways that **mini-terms can positively influence a student's academic progress**:

- Students can **advance through their pre-requisite courses more quickly**, which means that they are more likely to complete their entire program. P3 notes that students "feel like they [are] accomplishing things" more quickly.
- **If a term is interrupted** and a student needs to withdraw, **they haven't lost all academic progress** for an entire 16-week semester. If the interruption occurs in session A, they can try again in session B. If the interruption occurs in session B, they've already completed session A.
- Mini-terms **accelerate the "drop-down" course cycle**. For example, a student that withdraws from calculus in Fall Session A can drop down to pre-calculus for Fall Session B, and is then ready to attempt calculus again in Spring Session A.

EIGHT-WEEK MINI-TERMS ARE THE MOST COMMON ALTERNATIVE OFFERING

In most cases, participating institutions break the traditional semester into **two seven or eight-week mini-terms**, many of which are offered **alongside traditional-length semesters or additional mini-term lengths**.

For the fall and spring semesters, we have a traditional 16-week semester, we have two 8-week semesters that run...sequentially, and then three 5-week mini-terms, again, that run sequentially. In addition to that, we introduced intersession mini-terms.

P5

Like many institutions of higher education and certainly a lot of community colleges, we have a scattering of sessions that run adjusted lengths...Programs can choose to adopt them, but they're not formalized as a full campus or a full program. And those run from 14 weeks to 12 weeks to 5 weeks to 3 weeks...the whole gamut...[T]he majority...of sections that get offered hit 16, 14, 12, and then 8.

P9, Lone Star College



Most institutions offer mini-terms **both in-person and online**.



When asked **who is primarily responsible for making decisions around new course schedules**, participants were evenly split between citing **a committee or faculty senate** and citing **a dean, provost, or member of the academic affairs office**.

MOST INSTITUTIONS INTEND TO STAY THE COURSE

Only one participant noted intentions to move away from mini-terms in the future. The rest report no such intentions, with several noting that they are in fact **pushing for more mini-terms**.

P6 notes that the decision to move away from mini-terms is primarily based on concerns about student learning.

Our pendulum is swinging in the other direction to offer most...courses back into the 16-week term. We kind of went really far into the 8-week to try to...fit in knowledge and skills for the credentials.

But the employability question is just coming as, "Do the students really have time to let that knowledge sink in over 8-week terms?" and we're just kind of feeling that [they do not].

The [courses] where we do offer them in 15 weeks, we've been slowly moving away from that. We find that the enrollments in our 8-week sections are much better than the 15-weeks.

P4

We're looking for ways to move every single class to an 8-week format.

P1, Amarillo Community College

*We didn't realize what a blessing [mini-terms] were until COVID hit. When COVID hit, we were finishing an 8-week term. We had a spring break and then we were starting the second eight weeks, and that corresponded with going to full remote learning and our eight-week schedule was perfect...**We're not going back at all.***

P11, Amarillo Community College

A hand is shown from the bottom left, holding a glowing white graduation cap icon. A dark green banner is positioned horizontally across the middle of the image, containing the text "SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES" in white, bold, uppercase letters. The background is a dark gray gradient with faint, overlapping square patterns.

SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

SUCCESSSES



In the first year of implementation...a very consistent student voice was, "Well, it's working really well for me, but I don't know if it's working for others," over and over again...And I ultimately got to the point where I told them, "The data shows you're not alone."

P9 of Lone Star College, in reference to her previous experience with mini-terms at Odessa College

INTENDED STUDENT SUCCESS IMPROVEMENTS ARE BORNE OUT

Among institutions that have assessed student success criteria regarding mini-terms, **most report notable improvements.**

Amarillo Community College is just one of the participating institutions that saw improvements in retention, completion, learning, and engagement.

It did increase enrollment and increased retention...it increased learning and increased completion significantly... Learning increased, in some cases, [by] double digits... There was one [student success criterion] that we weren't looking for and that was engagement. Our students are much more engaged in an 8-week term than they were in a 16-week term, we're much less likely to lose them.... Our gateway course success increased between 10 and 15 percent which then impacted completion. We improved our completion rate from 22 to 56 percent in four years.

P11, President of Amarillo Community College

Several participants also report **increased enrollment**, including **increased access for non-traditional and working students.**

Definitely those [later session mini-terms]...have reached a capacity that make them profitable and appropriate to run...We are able to enroll students in those courses that weren't able to start at the beginning of the traditional term. So that is successful...it definitely increases student access in our program...and that's very valuable.

P6

I think [the implementation of mini-terms] met its goal [of increasing access for adult learners]...I think our undergraduate age is still hovering around about 25 years old.

P8, Spalding University

PILOTS, INTERSESSIONS, AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT EASE IMPLEMENTATION

Several participants emphasize **the importance of intersessional periods**, with one noting that the lack of them is “brutal.”

*Most of us learned that lesson that **you do need a couple-of-day gap** between your eight-week-one and your eight-week-two to allow for [administrative processes] to happen. It gives the students a breather...which is also nice.*

P9, Lone Star College

*We hear from students that they get burnt out...**It's just brutal**, if people are finishing one class on a Sunday night, and Monday morning at 12:00 or 1:00 AM, the next one starts. **They just don't have time to breathe.***

P4

*We did it wrong...**We didn't offer any professional development.** Fundamentally, what we did is we took a 16-week semester and we just compressed it into 8 weeks, **so there weren't redesigned courses**...So what we've refined over the course of the two years of scaling [up to more mini-terms] was offering professional development on **how to redesign your courses**...There's a lot more applied learning problem-solving, more than just regurgitation of the information, and that's one of the reasons I think it's improved learning is that **it forced us to improve our pedagogy.***

P11, Amarillo Community College

Several participants note that their institutions **jumped into mini-terms without significant professional development** to help faculty adjust – **a decision they ultimately regretted.**



A pilot period can help determine whether mini-terms are the right decision for an institution and its student body.

STUDENTS APPRECIATE FLEXIBILITY AND MANAGEABILITY

*Listening to students, I know that they feel like they can attend to personal familial responsibilities by having that opportunity to just focus on one or two courses at a time and even sit out a session if necessary...**It gives them an opportunity to pivot as they need.***

P8, Spalding University

*I think for students, anecdotally, they're reporting that it is **a bit more manageable** and, in some cases, **more convenient**.*
P1, Amarillo Community College

*Student-athletes at our college, because they have practice in the afternoons...**they like the flexibility** of an 8-week course and what it gives them to be able to compete in their athletics.*
P3

Students appreciate **the flexibility that mini-terms afford** regarding working around other obligations.



P4 reported that students also appear to be more comfortable utilizing academic resources like mentoring, office hours, and technical support during mini-terms. This trend, however, could be due to the online modality of the particular mini-terms in question.

ALL APPRECIATE ABILITY TO FOCUS

Students and faculty alike report appreciating **the opportunity to “focus” by engaging in fewer courses at once.**

*So feedback from students is that they like only having to do one or two courses at a time, the way that the sessions are set up so that **they feel like they can focus** on that...What I hear faculty say most often the [benefit]... is that **they also get to focus on one or two courses at a time.***

P8, Spalding University

*I think **that's the biggest word, is focus.** So what we found the biggest challenge for us when we shifted from our old version of eight-week classes to everything being across the 15-week semester, is primarily for [nontraditional students]...to juggle life and four to five academic courses at one time, we just saw a real decline in-- well, obviously, we saw a decline in enrollment, but **we also saw our students really struggling...much more so than what we saw when we had the eight-week sessions.***

P7, whose institution is now returning to mini-terms after having switched from mini-terms to traditional semesters in the past

In fact, the ability to engage more deeply may make mini-terms **especially appropriate to certain types of courses.**

In particular, P5's institution made this discovery for foreign language courses.

*The Foreign Language Department determined that students who were able to complete both courses within one semester, **being immersed into these courses** with meeting patterns that were more frequent, **showed better academic results** for students.*

Several participants provide the simple feedback that **students and/or faculty like mini-terms.**

Students love it.** Even if they were initially concerned about it. I mean, **the survey data that we had back from students is overwhelming.

P11, Amarillo Community College

MOST PARTICIPANTS REPORT NO ISSUES WITH THE LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

Most participants answered with a **solid “no”** when asked if the LMS presented any challenges to the implementation of mini-terms. **This includes participants that use Ellucian Banner.**

Have there been any challenges with the learning management system?


No, not at all.
P6
Blackboard

No.
P3
Schoology

No.
P11
Blackboard and
Ellucian Banner

No.
P9
D2L

No, not really.
P5, whose institution uses Ellucian Banner, also notes that they were previously employed at another institution that used Banner, had even more mini-term sessions, and **likewise had no problems.**

 Two participants note that **there was some coding involved in setting up the new mini-terms in their LMS**, but they did not view that as a challenge.

*We've had to figure out how to code various things for mod because it's not set up for mod. I mean that's the backroom stuff. I **wouldn't call that a challenge.***

P12
Moodle

No [there have not been challenges]...we had to bring in a consultant and pay a consultant to actually do the coding and all of that and to organize.

P10
Ellucian Banner

CHALLENGES



*We have the faculty that just are dead set against it,
"My students don't perform as well. It's just too fast.
It's too much."*

P3

KEY CHALLENGES FOR SHORTER TERMS ARE ADMINISTRATIVE

The top challenge mentioned by participants is that mini-terms can significantly **complicate processes that depend on a student's status as full-time or part-time**, such as financial aid and veteran benefits.

*I would say the **biggest challenge is financial aid reporting**...As I understand it with federal financial aid, when a student is enrolled full-time for a semester and withdraws at any point in the semester, if at the point of withdrawal they are engaged in what amounts to a full-time load, the federal government prorates their financial aid up to the day that they withdraw and then expects the rest of the money back. If, on the other hand, a student is engaged and maybe they're enrolled in 15 credits across the semester, but at the time of withdrawal, say four weeks in, they're only taking three of their five classes, technically, **the federal government says, "Well, you were not full-time anyway. You owe us back the entire semester of financial aid."***

P7

Additional Administrative Challenges

- **Scheduling faculty course loads** for an entire semester (i.e. multiple mini-terms) can be difficult when it is unclear whether enough students will enroll in a later session mini-term course for the course to run. If a later session course does not run, a faculty member **may have taught too few credits during a given semester, leading to a contractual violation**. P2, who notes this challenge, states that their institution's policy is now that **mini-term courses cannot be included in the contractual load** calculations unless they are already made by the beginning of the first mini-term in the semester – but they still run into issues.
- Navigating more, and potentially overlapping, “starts” and “stops” can be hectic at the administrative level.

*You're dealing with staffing more times a year. You're dealing with final grades and attendance reporting and **all of those things involved in a new term...many more times a year.***

P7

CONCURRENT MINI-TERMS AND TRADITIONAL TERMS YIELD COMPLICATIONS

Several challenges emerge when mini-terms are offered alongside traditional terms.

- Scheduling of **final exams**
- Efficient utilization of **classroom space**, a challenge that one institution mitigated by requiring that **shorter mini-term courses take place online**
- Complications to student **advising**

Another [challenge] is, "While you're figuring it out, offering both," and that's tough for us right now...Trying to offer both ends up being a bit choppy and confusing...It definitely kind of confuses things for workloads and student advising, "Here are some sections that are 16 weeks here, here are some sections that are 8 weeks of the same classes. Make sure you're picking the right ones."

P6

Multiple concurrent course lengths can also cause **confusion for students and preparatory difficulty for faculty**.

Being a relatively new concept, students still don't pay attention to the fact that when they register they're registering for a mini-term...When we first started the intersession courses we had a number of students who were like, "Wait a minute. I didn't realize that I signed up for a three-week course and now it's January and I missed my whole course."

They didn't realize.

P5

If you're teaching an English 1301 composition in 16 weeks and then you're given an English 1301 in an 8-week and then you're given an online course, even though it's the same course, it's really different preps and so that makes it very, very difficult.

P2, South Texas College

THE ACCELERATED PACE IS SOMETIMES SIMPLY TOO FAST

Accelerated pacing leaves **little to no buffer** if the term is anything but perfectly executed.

If something happens - you become ill, you get strep or something like that in a six-week session...if you miss a week of class it has a greater bearing on you being able to recover in that course than if it were in a traditional semester.
P8, Spalding University

*Every day is precious.
Every minute is precious.*
P4

The **increased intensity can be overwhelming** to students and faculty alike.

*The level of engagement that is required with that is also more intensive, and so **it can also be overwhelming to [students]**...And faculty have said because students can't maintain the pace all the time, that **they have had to cut material** from their course to make sure that students really get what it is that they're trying to teach.*
P8, Spalding University

Certain topics and fields may **be ill-suited to accelerated pacing**. Specific courses mentioned by participants include:

- Some **technical courses** with large numbers of required contact hours
- Data **analysis**
- Business **analytics**
- Computer **programming**
- Math courses, though **another participant noted improvements** in students that took accelerated math courses

*We kind of save the 15-weeks for courses where students really get challenged by the content and they just need more time to absorb...**Computer programming is one that we still offer the 15-week section.***
P4

A hand is shown from the bottom left, holding a glowing white graduation cap icon. A dark green banner is positioned horizontally across the middle of the cap. The background is dark grey with faint, overlapping square patterns.

EVALUATION AND ADVICE



We're not going back at all.

P11, President of Amarillo Community College

ENROLLMENT AND STUDENT SUCCESS DETERMINE SCHEDULE EFFICACY

Some participants judge the efficacy of a course schedule as **a matter of supply and demand** – if students keep enrolling, that means the schedule is a success and will continue to be offered.

*Some colleges have said you need to go all or nothing, and we just don't agree with that philosophy. Forcing kids to take it and being a major shift. **If enrollment continues to grow, we'll continue to offer them. If they don't, then we'll quit after we're done. As long as we're offering what our customers want...If they want them, we'll offer them.***

P3

*I think in the place where we've used this the most, it **really has been a question of enrollment.***

P10, University of North Carolina - Charlotte

Others look more to **student success criteria**. Specific criteria mentioned by participants for the evaluation of schedule efficacy include **completion and withdrawal rates**, but the most common criterion is **pass rate**.

The first and foremost criteria...is student success or being successful in a course...It was 14 [week sessions] was pretty good, 12 was still okay, 10 was really crappy, 8 was less crappy, 6 was a little bit better, and 4 was almost the same as 14...So it was like an inverted bell curve...a bimodal distribution of grades.

P2, South Texas College

*If the curriculum requires that there's a little bit more intensity or that we have found in the implementation that students aren't able to grasp the materials in the six-week session format, **we have extended that period.***

P8, Spalding University

INTERVIEWEES RECOMMEND EXTENSIVE PLANNING AND STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT

When asked to provide advice to an institution considering the implementation of mini-terms, participants recommended **pilot sessions, faculty preparation, administrative preparation, and transitioning in coherent pieces.**

Being strategic about picking the classes that you offer [during later mini-terms], we found to be pretty helpful [in the event that a student stops a course during the first mini-term].

P4

Be really, really confident that you've got someone solid in your financial aid office who understands the implications of shorter terms for federal financial aid.

P7

Educate the faculty, and then have them implement it properly as far as why we're doing [mini-terms], what we're looking for, how we're trying to get there. And then maybe show them better data of success, failures...giving them those data points so they can see for themselves what happens.

P3

*For us, what helped is that we didn't come in and say, "We're doing it." We came in and said, "We want to try this. Here's a school that did it. Here is the success they had. What faculty want to jump in and try it?"...Once we had the data from that first eight-week pilot, it became clear that we had to scale this...**So start it with volunteers, find your champions. But then when your data comes back, you can't be afraid of the naysaying voices because your students are worth more than worrying about people that are mad about it, and your students are going to love it.***

P11, Amarillo Community College

*Having worked with other institutions...the single biggest advice I would have is **do it in coherent pieces.** So do an entire campus, do an entire program, do an entire set of programs, don't piecemeal, you will not get the same impact...**Scattering is not desirable.***

P9, Lone Star College

Involve as many people as possible in the conversation before making a decision.

P12, Beloit College

A hand is shown from the bottom left, holding a glowing white graduation cap icon. The cap is positioned above a dark green horizontal bar. The background is dark grey with faint, overlapping square patterns.

APPENDIX

PARTICIPANTS

Participant #	Name	Title	Institution	Institution Type
1	Robert Austin	Vice President of Enrollment Management	Amarillo Community College	Community College
2	Brett Millan	Special Assistant to the Vice President for Academic Affairs	South Texas College	Community College
3	Anonymous	--	--	Community College
4	Anonymous	--	--	Private 4-year
5	Anonymous	--	--	Public 4-year
6	Anonymous	--	--	Community College
7	Anonymous	--	--	Private 4-year
8	Tomarra Adams	Dean of Undergraduate Education	Spalding University	Public 4-year
9	Valerie Jones	Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs	Lone Star College	Community College
10	Joan Lorden	Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs	University of North Carolina - Charlotte	Public 4-year
11	Russell Lowery-Hart	President	Amarillo Community College	Community College
12	Yaffa Grossman*	Associate Dean of Curriculum and Associate Registrar	Beloit College	Private 4-year

*This participant also stated: "We've done a number of conversations directly with institutions who've been thinking about this or have made the change but wanted to talk about it...I'm happy to talk directly with [SFA]."




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