The Low-Density University
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Scenario #9: Block Plan

As practiced by institutions such as Colorado College and Cornell College, a block plan structures the academic semester so that students take a single course over three or four weeks. Instead of having class meetings two or three times a week, block courses might meet daily for three hours. Over the length of the semester, students take a full load of three to five courses but do so consecutively (in blocks) rather than simultaneously.

One advantage of a block plan for colleges and universities is flexibility. Moving from a traditional semester to a block schedule would allow an institution to make rapid and granular decisions if a situation requires shifting from residential to remote learning. A school could plan to have the first block in the semester consist of remote courses, with plans to move subsequent blocks to campus if the public health situation permits. Blocks also make it easier to pivot from residential back to online, should a second wave of infections occur. In conditions of uncertainty, blocks could be designed for both online and face-to-face delivery, with conditions dictating the delivery method.

Another advantage of a block plan for a university attempting to manage on-campus density is its narrow focus. The pivot to remote learning in spring 2020 because of COVID-19 has proven to be a struggle for many students. Navigating online courses requires students to practice study and time-management techniques that differ from what works for face-to-face classes. A residential semester has a structure of class meetings and deadlines, a structure to which students have become acclimated. Online learning, with its mix of asynchronous and synchronous activities, requires that students be adept at setting and sticking to study and work plans that may not be tied to specific days and times.

The challenges of developing good habits for individual study and time management for online learning are compounded by students enrolling in multiple online courses. Added to the difficulties of independently and autonomously completing the work required to manage an online course schedule, many students are also dealing with challenging home situations. However the anxiety and uncertainty of the pandemic manifest themselves in the lives of students and their families, these stressors deplete the energy and resilience students need to navigate remote learning.

A block plan might prove especially beneficial to students in a time of added stress, allowing students to narrow their focus to concentrate on succeeding in a single course.
For online education, intensively participating in a single course for a relatively short time period may prove to be especially beneficial. Successful online courses are built on engagement and presence, not content or assessments. An online course community that meets frequently and exclusively will likely develop the sort of intimacy that is difficult to achieve when students’ attention is spread across four or five courses. The intensity of courses in a block plan also provides space for experimentation and even failure as the depth of the learning experience will likely allow students to find opportunities to demonstrate both strengths and mastery.

For instructors, moving to a block plan will likely provide many of the same advantages of flexibility and focus enjoyed by students. By cutting the length of time that a course meets by three-quarters, but increasing the time that the course meets by a commensurate factor of four, professors can design for an intensive learning experience. This learning experience can feature elements of hands-on coaching and collaborative group work that are difficult in a normal semester-long course. Instead of sending students off to complete work independently, courses that are normally lecture- or seminar-based can be designed to mimic the experiential learning elements of lab or studio courses.

For some faculty, the prospect of spending comparatively brief but intense sprints with their students may be appealing. From a teaching perspective, a block plan may be particularly well-adapted to sudden shifts from residential to online learning as the still fluid and unpredictable public health situation unfolds. Pivoting a single concentrated course from residential to online, or vice versa, is likely more manageable than doing the same for a number of semester-long courses.

Considerations

Despite the evident advantages of flexibility and focus that a block plan has under conditions of a pandemic, and perhaps at any time, making the change to this course structure will likely be exceedingly difficult for most institutions. Course schedules are embedded in the larger structures of the universities in which they operate. The scheduling of courses is a mind-bogglingly complex and contingent operation, dependent on optimizing for factors as diverse as classroom utilization and student distribution requirements. Colleges and universities have evolved systems, structures, rules, and software over the years to manage the complexity of course scheduling. Moving an entire institution from a semester plan to a block plan in a matter of months is exponentially more difficult to operationalize than many suggest.
Even if the student information systems and other platforms that schools depend upon can be reprogrammed for a rapid shift to a block plan (however unlikely), it is not clear that this strategy is feasible from a time and resource perspective. Schools that operate under a block schedule have had years to refine courses and the system in which the courses are embedded. The teaching and learning culture at these schools has evolved to a point of shared expectations as well as a common understanding of the benefits and limits of block scheduling. On the other side, faculty accustomed to teaching at a comparatively leisurely pace of the full fifteen-week semester may find it very difficult to redesign their courses to fit into small, more intensive blocks. In a time of already severe disruption and discontinuity, schools may need to think hard about the wisdom of imposing any additional radical change. For every advantage of a block plan, there will be an equal and opposite consequence of this new structure, many of which are impossible to predict before the plan is in motion.

Finally, it is not immediately evident how a block plan addresses the fundamental challenge we are likely to see: the need to reduce density on campus. There may be options to mitigate this problem. One possibility, for example, is to assign some of the courses in the block as residential and others as online. Under this scenario, the block plan is layered into the split curriculum that we discussed in scenario #8. This strategy allows some students to be invited to return to campus for residential blocks, while other students participate remotely in online block courses. As with any of these decisions, how to choose which students to bring to campus and which students start the semester at home is not immediately obvious. One idea is that students could self-select between residential and online blocks. Another is that only first-year students are enrolled in the first residential block during the semester, a variant of the first-year intensive scenario we discussed in scenario #4. Each of these plans has pedagogical and student life advantages but also comes at a cost of increased complexity and the challenges inherent in any change management process. Even contemplating such wholesale changes in course scheduling, design, and delivery that the block plan demands may be unrealistic at this time.