White Paper

Evaluation of Accelerated Degree Models

Addressing Implementation Tactic Access 1.1.8
2025 Online Education Strategic Plan

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Student Services Workgroup

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Abstract

This white paper was prepared to address Tactic Access 1.1.8 within the *2025 Strategic Plan for Online Education* for the State University System of Florida. Three models were identified to accelerate graduation: (a) intersessions, (b) multiple starts, and (c) rolling enrollment. The models are described with an analysis of the advantages, issues to consider, resources required for implementation, and potential costs in delivery.

Background

The Taskforce members who proposed the *2025 Strategic Plan for Online Education* were concerned about the three issues that were included in the plan to increase distance education in Florida: (a) quality, (b) access, and (c) affordability. Although the Access 1.1.8 tactic is in the access category, the underlying theme within the tactic is to ensure quality in the delivery of distance learning. Accelerated models can potentially increase access by decreasing the time to graduation. Reduced time-to-degree allows students to accomplish educational goals in support of potential employment opportunities or career advancement. The tactic also recognized the need for additional student support in the implementation of accelerated degrees.

> **Tactic Access 1.1.8:** Provide a robust set of student support services to support the delivery of multiple, accelerated models.

This tactic was to follow the work of the Infrastructure Workgroup. The Infrastructure Workgroup identified accelerated models used by institutions in the State University System. Based upon the result of that report, the Student Services Workgroup used the information to recommend the student support services and the additional cost in implementation. See the guidance from the *Implementation Schedule and Actions Steps for Strategic Goals and Associated Tactics for the 2025 Strategic Plan for Online Education* below.

> **Guidance**: Based on report created by the Infrastructure Workgroup describing processes used by SUS institutions that have implemented multiple, accelerated terms, the Student Services Workgroup will recommend to the Implementation Committee and the Steering Committee the student support services needed to support this new delivery method, as well as their costs.

The Infrastructure Workgroup determined that accelerated terms offer students flexibility, convenience, and reduce time-to-degree. The Workgroup identified variance between the institutions in implementing accelerated models based upon the student information systems used. This document expands upon the work of the Infrastructure Workgroups on accelerated terms presented to the Steering Committee for the *SUS 2025 Strategic Plan for Online Education* on January 24, 2018.

Models for Accelerated Programs

The most common model for accelerated programs is the mini-mester, which divides the current semester into shorter sub-semesters. Intersessions are currently being implemented at two state universities in Florida. Rolling enrollment is being piloted. The following is a detailed description of the different models with an analysis of the advantages, issues to consider, support services required, and potential costs in implementation.

Intersessions:

These extremely short semesters fit between fall to spring, spring to summer, and summer to fall. The courses are frequently three-, two- or one-week intensive courses. The intersessions often do not fit the typical semester formats provided by legacy student information systems. Therefore, the institution will need to work through several background technical and processing issues to make the intersessions work. The appendix provides a list of possible impacts upon a variety of systems at the institution adopting intersession.

Advantages:

- Students can decrease time to graduation by enrolling in an additional course or courses between semesters. Students can pick up an additional 9 credit hours per year. If they used this strategy every year (gaining 27 credits), it would be possible to graduate in just over three years.
- Students can take replacement courses for ones dropped or failed during the semester and allow them to stay on target for graduation.

Issues to consider:

- Students may need to pay for the class out-of-pocket because these classes fall outside the financial aid disbursement period. However, a few schools have received special permission by the US Department of Education to include these courses into the financial disbursement.
- Students may not be able to use financial aid money to pay for books.
- The institution may need to defer payment to the following semester for tuition and fees or provide short-term loans to cover textbooks, access codes, or other instructional material costs.
- The courses that would be offered in this short class schedule need to be carefully selected based upon the instructional content to ensure the learning objectives can be accomplished during the intensive class formats.
- Because of the accelerated nature of the courses, an institution should determine the number of allowable courses students should be taking. The University of South Florida uses the following guidelines:
  - 3.33 – 4.0 GPA = Student is permitted to take two intersession courses without advisor approval
  - 2.75 – 3.32 GPA = Student is permitted to take two intersession courses with advisor approval
  - Below 2.75 GPA = Student is only permitted to take one intersession course

Resources required:

Intersessions require definite considerations in the connection of the various systems. Additional student support resource requirements are different based upon the time of the intersession. During the May and August timeframes, the institution would have staff available during the typical semester, so students have full support. Intersession in the December to January timeframe requires extra consideration if the campus closes for holiday break.

- Student Services: The institution should arrange for student support services to be available during the intersessions when the university closes. The student support units

should be aware that students might be on online taking courses during the semester breaks. Students may need access to enrollment staff for drop/adds/withdrawals, financial aid, bookstore, and library for non-digital resources. Providing a point person for student affairs and advising during intersession is one solution. (Expect about 20 calls per 1500 students.)

- Technical Support: The institution should provide help desk and password reset services for the learning management system challenges that may occur when the campus is closed. Possible solutions are available below:
  - If the institution uses an outside company to provide help desk support, the company needs to be aware of the potential help desk needs.
  - Utilize the technology support personnel that are upgrading systems during the break by forwarding help desk calls to one of their mobile phones.
  - If the institution has a different technical support system for the faculty, ensure stand-by assistance is also available to instructors.
- Instructional Design Support: Faculty should have access to instructional design support as they re-conceptualize the courses to ensure successful accomplishment of instructional objectives, retention at the institution, and completion of the degree in the intensive format.
- Other support: Teaching assistants or success coaches could be added to the courses to provide technical support for specific software programs used for the class, to encourage students, and to provide tutorial support.
- Create a handbook for faculty with guidance and information.

Possible Increased Costs:

- Technical support when campus is closed.
- Additional TAs for faculty in high DWF courses or high technical demands.
- Tutorial support as needed based upon the courses.
- Additional advising support personnel to assist with drop/withdrawals when campus is closed.
- Labor cost associated with modification to information systems.
- Instructional designer support to convert courses into the intersession format.

Multiple Start

Multiple start programs allow more opportunities for students to start classes. If a student stops out, the multiple start shortens the stop out period depending on the cause. Multiple starts also allow the students to begin taking classes closer to the decision to return or to start earning a degree. Multiple start programs provide embedded short-term courses or mini-mesters into the current semester structure. For example, mini-mesters could be five or eight weeks long allowing two to three start dates within the fall and spring sixteen-week structure. Multiple starts can be integrated within the legacy student information systems and not affect the distribution of financial aid. However, different processes and information management systems are impacted by the changes in the part of term (Banner reference) within the student information systems.

Advantages:

- This approach allows the institution to provide multiple starts within the current structure of the student support services and data management systems.

- Students can retake a class in which they may not be doing well in the first part of the semester. The immediate retake allows them to stay on target to graduation.
- Students who can handle two courses in a five-week period can reduce time to graduation by taking 18 credits rather than 12-15 credits.
- Allows students to focus on fewer courses for a shorter period, improving student outcomes and success rates.

Issues to consider:

- A communication plan needs to be developed informing students of the different deadlines for enrollment into the mini-mesters.
- An institution may experience an increase in the advisors' workload with students needing assistance at multiple different times of the semester.
- Due to the intensive nature of the courses, institutions should consider limiting the number of courses taken during a mini-mester.

Resources required:

- Student Services: Students can access the full range of online support services offered by the institutions as evaluated by the Online Student Support Scorecard.
- Technical Support: Students need full access to the technical and infrastructure support available as evaluated by the Technology and Infrastructure Scorecard.
- Instructional Design Support: Faculty should have access to instructional design support as they re-conceptualize the courses to ensure successful accomplishment of instructional objectives, retention at the institution, and completion of the degree.

Possible Additional Costs:

- Additional advising support to handle increased number of visits for consultation about schedule changes.
- Instructional designer support to modify courses into the shorter formats.
- Labor costs associated with modification to information systems.

Rolling Enrollment

This program is the most flexible allowing students to enroll any time. As students are admitted to the degree program, they can begin interacting with the course materials and earning credits. As the course is complete, the grades are submitted and recorded on the transcript. The student begins the next course. Rolling enrollment is good for degree programs that lend themselves well to a self-study type program.

Advantages:

- Students can move through the curriculum at their own pace.
- Students can act upon their decision to begin taking classes applicable to their degree.
- Students potentially shorten the time-to-degree.

Issues to Consider:

- The student information system must be flexible enough to accept individually inputted class enrollments and grades. For example, at the same time the student is enrolled they have access to the appropriate course in the learning management system. When the

course is completed, the final grades are inputted directly to the student information system from the learning management system. The grades are then processed every evening.

- Faculty may struggle in management of the courses without structured due dates. The students will be at different points within the course.
- With rolling enrollment, an institution should determine if a student should complete a course before entering another, and whether to allow enrollment in multiple courses.

Resources required:

- The registrar's office may need additional personnel to enter the individual grades if the student information is unable to link directly to the learning management system.
- Additional student support will be required to coach students through courses with unstructured due dates.
- Specific advisors are required for tracking through prerequisite courses that must be taken but may not have been entered by the registrar's office before starting the next course in the sequence.
- The institution will need to have someone on staff with the administration rights to the learning management system to grant access to courses as a student completes one courses and becomes ready for the next course.

Possible Additional Costs:

- Increased advising support as students will need guidance upon course completion.
- Additional coaching support to encourage students to complete courses.
- Increase support staff in registrar's office to manually enter grades on an individual basis.
- Increase support in enrolling students individually into courses through the learning management system.

Recommendation

Accelerated models can reduce the time-to-graduation for students. This white paper can be used by universities to identify which model to implement at the institution based upon the advantages, issues, resources, and costs. The appendix document identifies the items that should be considered in offering multiple starts. The Infrastructure Workgroup Report for January 24, 2018 also provides technical details to consider before adopting an accelerated model for degree completion.

Appendix

Items to Consider in the Establishment of Intersessions or Multiple Starts	
Faculty	- Work through faculty union concerns about faculty workload. - Determine how to input documentation in the faculty evaluation system. - Integration in the faculty payment system, which may include setting up new academic period.
Calendar	- Determine the intersession calendar dates. - Update the academic calendar. - Determine registration open date. - Determine class start date. - Determine class end date. - Determine drop/add date. - Determine withdrawal date. - Determine how to handle waitlist. - Determine when grades are due. - Determine when grades will be posted. - Determine if students will be automatically dropped for non-attendance on the first day of class.
Reporting data	- Determine attendance-tracking for reporting purposes. - Create process to submit intersession student data files to BOG. - Modify grade submission process to accept grades for intersession.
Financial	- Establish billing and tuition integration for academic term. - Create processes for distribution of financial aid. - Make payment decisions for deferred payment students if the institution decides to use this model: - Deferment of charges until the typical start of term. - Financial aid short-term advance disbursement to bridge financial aid. - Determine when to place holds for non-payment with non-deferment students. - Determine when to implement fiscal cancellation for non-deferment students.
Other	- Communicate the intersessions to the students. - Establish timeline for textbook adoption and notification for the bookstore. - Ensure students have textbooks on the first day of class (possibly electronic). - Integrate attendance information into student advising system. - Determine how student survey data about the courses will be gathered. For electronic surveys, decide on the day to send out to students.