

**College Leadership Council
Programs and Academic Support Committee**

Committee Members

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Report and Recommendations

April 2016

Introduction

In August 2015, President Casey Crabill and the College Leadership Council charged the Programs and Academic Support Committee of the College Leadership Council to “(c)onsider the research related to academic scheduling and adult learning to provide the College with recommendations that could improve student learning through revisions to our calendar.” In the charge to the committee, it was noted that:

Our current academic calendar is built with the contract in mind, specifically, the number of days to be included. We have a loose approach to final exams, and a declining number of courses requiring them. We have traditional semesters, and a declining winter term that seems without an organizational thread or purpose. Enrollment in the summer is shrinking and, in the minds of some, cannibalizing fall enrollment in some programs. A student desiring a year-round pathway that could accelerate completion is unlikely to find one here. In short, our calendar is much like those of the 1950s and before.

As the remarks above make clear, the academic calendar – which may seem, at first glance, to be relatively independent of central concerns of the college, such as retention and completion – can have a significant effect on student success. Thus, over the course of the 2015-16 academic year, this committee has scrutinized the issue of the academic calendar. This report summarizes the committee’s activities, findings, and recommendations.

The report is organized into four sections:

- A. Summary of the Research
- B. Summary of Current Practices and Stakeholder Feedback
- C. Recommended Actions
- D. Unfinished Business

Section A summarizes our research into current practices at institutions including comparable American community colleges; nearby colleges and universities; Achieving the Dream schools; and other SUNY schools – especially common transfer institutions. Section B includes a discussion of current practices at OCC with respect to the academic calendar (and how it got that way, historically), as well as information and feedback gathered from in-person presentations to the committee, qualitative surveys of students, and informal staff surveys at various events – e.g. brown bag presentations and various Achieving the Dream/Middle States/Strategic Planning events. Section C identifies a number of possible models and strategies that the college might adopt in light of the results of sections A and B. Lastly, Section D discusses a few items of unfinished business that require attention in light of this report.

The committee received great support from colleagues across the college in completing its charge. Stakeholders have strong feelings about the calendar, but most everyone the committee came in contact with agreed that at least some changes need to be made. The hope of the committee is that this report will both explain and justify any revisions in the calendar that are ultimately deemed to be appropriate and beneficial to our students.

Section A. Summary of the Research

The committee was unable to find *any* published research specifically about the relationship between the academic calendar and student success. This gap was somewhat surprising, given the recent, focused attention on topics such as retention and completion, and the potential for the academic calendar to affect those areas. However, given that the academic

calendar is merely one piece of a complex picture, perhaps such a gap should not have been unexpected.

In the absence of such research, the committee proceeded by surveying a large number of academic calendars, especially from community colleges, nationwide. One subcommittee focused on 93 Achieving the Dream (AtD) Leader Colleges, while another looked closer to home, at other local institutions of higher learning such as Le Moyne College and Syracuse University, as well as at SUNY community colleges, and popular transfer institutions. The committee also considered the schedules of some local K-12 school districts.

Nationwide Community College Research

AtD Leader Colleges have earned this designation by exemplifying the Achieving the Dream mission. Therefore, the members of the subcommittee investigating these schools agreed that this sample would provide a good cross-section of community college calendars utilized by campuses dedicated to AtD goals. The following are observations made by this team after investigating the academic calendars of the 93 AtD Leader Colleges.

- Of the AtD Leader Colleges surveyed, 78 have a 15-16 week semester (with the 15-week schedule being the more common), while 10 are on a quarter system, and five use trimesters. Most have two 7-week summer terms, while many use multiple 5-week summer sessions.
- Many AtD Leader Colleges have at least one professional development day built into the calendar each semester (often right before the semester begins); and some have both advising days and reading/study days built into each semester (with advising days generally coming somewhere near mid-semester and the reading days generally preceding final exams). These are practices that have been implemented by OCC in past years, though some have fallen out of use.
- Most AtD Leader Colleges have no late registration for the main 15-week semesters. However, many schools accommodate those starting after the initial deadline by having an accelerated term that begins after the 15-week semester (as described in the next bullet point).

- Almost all of the AtD Leader Colleges surveyed have variations of “semesters within the semester” course offerings, with some schools having as many as five different lengths of terms within a 15 or 16-week semester. This large number was unusual, however. But most colleges have two seven- or eight-week terms within the 15-16 week semester, and some have three 5-week terms as well. The number of these “semesters within the semester” options generally corresponds to the size of the student population – i.e. the larger the population, the greater the number of options.
- As far as breaks within the semester, common fall holidays are Labor Day and Thanksgiving. Different states may/may not have Columbus Day/Fall Break and/or Veterans Day off. Common spring holidays are Martin Luther King, Jr.’s birthday (for schools beginning before that holiday), and a week-long spring break. Some states/regions/institutions have special days that celebrate religious and/or local holidays (e.g. some schools have days off around the Easter holiday).
- Academic calendars at AtD Leader Colleges were generally clear, easy-to-find on the college’s website, and easy-to-read, despite including a significant amount of relevant information. OCC’s calendar has some of these features, but lacked others (see Section C below for recommendations regarding the OCC calendar content and availability).

SUNY, Local Schools, and Popular Transfer Schools

Another subcommittee looked at schools closer to home, including other nearby community colleges, schools in the SUNY system, and popular transfer institutions. This group also considered the calendars of local K-12 school districts, including the Syracuse city schools, since some Onondaga students have school-age children. Findings here overlapped with those above:

- Lengths of 15-weeks (14 weeks of class + 1 week for finals) are more common than Onondaga’s current 16-week calendar (15 + 1). For example, Syracuse University, Le Moyne College, SUNY Oswego, and SUNY Cortland all begin a week later than OCC in the Fall 2016 semester while ending at the same time and taking equivalent breaks throughout the semester.
- Most schools considered here begin a week or so before the Labor Day holiday, though local K-12 institutions generally begin after Labor Day.
- Semester-within-semester terms were common but not universal. Both SUNY Oswego and SUNY Cortland, for example, have 7-week terms within the fall and spring semesters, while Syracuse University and Le Moyne did not. Tompkins Cortland Community College (TC3) has three 5-week sessions within the fall and

spring semesters, while Finger Lakes Community College has none.

- Professional development and student success days were common, but again not universal.
- Posted calendars were generally easy to find and read, though there are significant differences with respect to how much information is provided. Roughly speaking, there is a trade-off with respect to readability and amount of information provided.
- As noted above, most K-12 schools begin classes after Labor Day. Otherwise, fall semester college holidays line up fairly well with most local K-12 calendars – with days off around Columbus Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. *With respect to spring semesters, though, the correspondence is much less consistent.* Students in K-12 schools tend to start back very soon after the New Year’s holiday, while many local colleges begin after the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday, which is more than two weeks later. And weeklong breaks at colleges rarely line up with weeklong breaks at K-12 schools in the spring semester. For example, Syracuse City Schools took a weeklong (midwinter) break in mid-February, and take another weeklong (spring) break at the end of April. OCC’s spring break this year (shared by other local schools such as Syracuse University) was mid-March, which is approximately halfway between those two breaks.

B. Documentation of Current Practice

In addition to looking at other calendars, the committee has been investigating historically how and why things are the way they are now at OCC with respect to the calendar. The committee has considered questions such as what exactly is the current situation with the calendar? How did Onondaga come to have the practices that it has regarding the calendar? And, what sorts of constraints (e.g. legal constraints, SUNY constraints, etc.) are there regarding the calendar?

Acting Provost Jeffrey Bobbitt attended a meeting in September, 2015, and addressed issues regarding constraints on the calendar. Specifically, he explained the notion of Carnegie hours and how these relate to the number of course meetings per semester and semester lengths. While the Carnegie-hour model of scheduling gives specific numbers regarding how much time a class must meet each semester (2250 minutes per three-credit course), it nevertheless offers the

opportunity for variety. Hence the use, by institutions, of such different systems as semesters, trimesters, and quarters – not to mention the range of lengths of summer semesters, winter semesters, and semesters-within-semesters. The differences are the result of changing such variables as: class time, number of class meetings, time between classes, and frequency of class meetings.

Interestingly, some of the institutions mentioned in Section A are quite similar to OCC with respect to these variables (e.g. class length, time between classes, etc.), yet have a semester that is a week shorter. This is a result of the fact that final exams (if required to attend during finals week) can count towards the Carnegie hour requirement of 2250 minutes of seat time per three-credit course. Other non-class activities, such as the special days mentioned in Section A, can also count towards the Carnegie requirement, depending on their content and organization.

So how did OCC end up with a longer semester than is strictly necessary for meeting the Carnegie requirements? The committee raised this question throughout the course of our investigation, especially to those with institutional memory regarding changes to the calendar over the past decade. The committee discovered that calendar changes over that period have been common and contentious, and have been driven primarily by faculty concerns. One key factor in OCC's longer semester is that many faculty members, primarily in the physical sciences and mathematics, are concerned about having enough time to cover the required material in the shorter semester. Reducing the semester by one week places a significant burden on those disciplines especially, since the amount of material covered cannot be reduced.

While it may seem like the concerns of a small number of disciplines are being given disproportionate consideration, the centrality of these disciplines – especially mathematics – to most all OCC students belies this first impression. All programs at OCC have a math

requirement, and student struggles with these math requirements appear to have a significant relation to college-wide issues such as retention and completion. Thus, math and science faculty members have successfully made the case to the rest of the college that this extra week of the semester is necessary – though this agreement is by no means unanimous (which explains some of the contention surrounding the issue). Considerations that speak against the extra week include, but are not limited to: inconvenience for some students due to issues such as childcare and transportation (especially during the winter break); as well as the extra costs incurred by the college (e.g. heating buildings) for that additional week.

C. Recommended Actions

Between the fall 2015 and spring 2016 semesters, the committee developed three candidate calendars for future use at OCC. The committee decided early on that a radical shift to a trimester or quarter model was off the table. In the absence of evidence that such a radical shift would lead to improvements, it was concluded that the costs of such a shift would vastly outweigh any potential benefits. Hence, the three calendars that the committee developed all stay within the semester framework. A brief summary of their central features follows (they are for the 2018 fall semester and items in bold are either revised or new features; some features are dependent on such issues as whether or not final exam week is mandatory):

Calendar 1: (15 weeks of classes + 1 week of final exams)

<u>Time Blocks:</u>	MWF: 50 minutes TTh: 75 minutes
<u>Classes:</u>	August 22 – December 10
<u>Finals:</u>	December 11 – 17
<u>Half-Semesters:</u>	August – October October - December
<u>Special Days:</u>	Faculty Advising during On-Hand Days 2 Student Success Days in mid-October (before registration)
<u>Holidays:</u>	Labor Day (9/3), Thanksgiving: (11/21, 11/22, 11/23), No Fall Break

Calendar 2: (14 weeks of classes + 1 week of finals)

<u>Time Blocks:</u>	MWF: 55 minutes TTh: 80 minutes
<u>Classes:</u>	August 29 – December 11
<u>Finals:</u>	December 11 – 17
<u>Half-Semesters:</u>	August – October October - December
<u>Special Days:</u>	Faculty Advising during On-Hand Days 2 Student Success Days in mid-October (before registration)
<u>Holidays:</u>	Labor Day (9/3), Fall Break (10/8), Thanksgiving: (11/21, 11/22, 11/23)

Calendar 3 (13 weeks of classes + 1 week of finals)

<u>Time Blocks:</u>	MWF: 60 minutes TTh: 90 minutes
<u>Classes:</u>	September 5 – November 30
<u>Finals:</u>	December 3 – 7
<u>Half-Semesters:</u>	August – October October - December
<u>Special Days:</u>	Orientation/Advising Day on the Tuesday before classes begin 2 Student Success Days in mid-October (before registration)
<u>Holidays:</u>	Labor Day (9/3), Thanksgiving: (11/21, 11/22, 11/23), No Fall Break

While longer semesters give students more time to master the course content, they also can make scheduling more difficult and inconvenient, given the greater potential for conflict with other obligations. Shorter semesters can thus make scheduling easier, but force students to master content that much faster. So, for example, Calendar 3, above, increases class meeting times and thus reduces the semester length significantly. On this calendar, OCC would begin after Labor Day, which would no doubt be an advantage for Onondaga students who have children who do not typically begin school until after this holiday. However, it would also accelerate the pace of learning to a level that may be too fast for many OCC students, and which could in turn negatively affect retention and completion efforts.

The committee members, in evaluating the above three calendars, had mixed opinions. On a straight vote, Calendar 1 and Calendar 3 both received many votes, though those voting for Calendar 1 preferred Calendar 2 to Calendar 3 as their second choice. Given the trade-offs mentioned above, and the variety of departments and programs represented on the committee, this split is not unexpected. Our debates and differences did lead to a point of agreement, though:

Recommendation #1: The committee recommends that one of these candidate calendars should be adopted after review and feedback from college stakeholders.

Some related recommendations include:

Recommendation #2: Most all committee members agreed that the college should add Special Days designed to contribute to student success. These days, it was agreed, should be added both before and during the semester.

Recommendation #3: There was widespread agreement on adding semesters-within-semesters to our fall and spring calendars, though with some caveats to be discussed in the section on Unfinished Business below.

Recommendation #4: The committee agreed that whichever calendar is chosen, it should be instituted for a significant amount of time (3 – 5 years), since continuous change of the calendar can also make students' paths through the college more difficult and inconvenient. The committee also recommends that the calendar, once instituted, be assessed analytically (which would include keeping up with ongoing research), and changed down the road if such changes were deemed advantageous for greater student success.

Recommendation #5: The committee agreed that the calendar posted online for students should be graphically clear; easy-to-find; include concise, direct, and consistent language; include specific financial aid deadlines; and be exportable to commonly used electronic devices. A separate faculty/staff calendar could be posted and include details not directly relevant to students (e.g. faculty on-hand days).

D. Unfinished Business

There was a realization, in investigating the calendar over the past academic year, that the calendar's contribution to student success is less dependent upon when semesters begin and how many weeks they run, and more dependent on things such as the courses that are running, and the relation of those courses to programs. For example, a quick look at the General Studies program reveals that most of the courses required for that program are offered every semester (and in the summers), in many different sections, at many different times of day and evening, and in different modes of delivery (e.g. online, face-to-face, etc.). However, two of the program's required courses, GEN 152 and GEN 154, have relatively few sections, and less variety with respect to times, days, and modes of delivery. Such courses might represent, then, a bottleneck for students in the sense that trying to finish the program could be stalled due to lack of available options with respect to those courses.

It is not being suggested that General Studies actually has a bottleneck problem. The above is meant merely as an illustration of the sorts of considerations that have come to seem just as important, if not more important, than class lengths and start dates when it comes to retention and completion. Changes in the structure of the academic calendar will likely have no effect (or even a negative effect, given the energy required for any college-wide change) unless other, complementary changes are made. Some suggestions follow:

Recommendation #6: Each program should assess its course requirements with respect to questions such as number of sections available per semester, times of day/evening that the course is offered, and modes of delivery. The perspectives of a variety of kinds of students should be considered (full-time, part-time, working, parents, etc.) and potential bottlenecks in the program identified. The overarching issue in such an assessment should be: *Can different types of students get through the program quickly and efficiently, and if not, why?*

Recommendation #7: As part of the above assessment, programs should review how courses are blocked. There are a significant number of courses at OCC which do not fit into the block schedule. With respect to some of these courses, there is no doubt good reason for the divergence, and four-credit courses especially are a challenge to fit into the existing schedule. However, with other non-block courses, it is difficult to determine the reason for the divergence, and in the absence of a good reason, it is recommended that existing time blocks be respected.

Recommendation #8: As noted above, semesters-within-semesters are favored by the committee, and other stakeholders that we have been in contact with. However, Onondaga's history with such terms suggests that they be handled with care. In past years, such terms were filled without a focus on the big-picture questions noted in Recommendation #6, above. And they often ended up being taken by students not because they filled a specific program need, but rather because they were all that was left for late-registering students. Adding these terms to the fall and spring semesters, then, should only be done when program assessments are complete and courses are thus being scheduled for these terms in order to smooth students' paths through the program. This

also applies to the addition of weekend courses to the calendar, a practice the committee also recommends increasing as needed.

Recommendation #9: As noted above, the committee strongly favors adding special days to the academic calendar that would contribute to student success. However, further investigation is required regarding how best to incorporate such days. Some schools that we researched were able to include these days as part of the semester Carnegie hour requirements. This is appealing in that adding such days needn't add to the length of the semester. However, such days would then seem to reduce the time for delivery of course content. Greater consideration of how other schools handle such days is recommended before introducing them at Onondaga.

Recommendation #10: A potential solution exists with regard to the disagreement about whether the calendar should be 15 weeks + 1 week or 16 weeks. Those courses (such as math and sciences courses) that require an extra week of class time could use the 16th week (or most of it), for covering course content, while those who do not require the extra time could give their final exams during that week. In other words, the 16th week could be final exam week for some and final class week for others, depending upon the needs of the particular instructor (some of the schools we researched seemed to follow such a plan since they did not have a separate final exam week, but rather just a final day of the semester). There are a number of obstacles to this solution (especially the fact that final exams are given in longer time blocks than classes) but they seem possible to overcome. Consideration should be given to such a solution, given its potential to resolve some of the contention regarding the calendar.

In the committee's experience throughout the course of the academic year, we received good feedback from campus stakeholders including members of the faculty, administration and student body – much of which has been incorporated into the recommendations and suggestions above. There were a few suggestions the committee received but did not adopt above - though it thought them worthy of further consideration.

Recommendation #11: The following points should be given further consideration by relevant parties:

- a. Snow days: given the lost time to weather in certain semesters, the college could follow the practice of many local K-12 institutions and have extra days designated as snow days in case of excessive lost class/lab time.
- b. Weekly schedule: the committee discovered that some institutions have MWTh and TF weekly course schedules instead of the more typical MWF and TTh. One advantage of this type of schedule is that two-day-a-week courses would not have such long breaks between meetings.
- c. Child care: It is, as noted above, quite difficult to harmonize the collegiate academic calendar with K-12 institutions (especially in the spring). However, many of the scheduling problems that arise for Onondaga students who are the parents of small children could be alleviated with the greater availability and flexibility of on-campus childcare. Some parents may just need childcare during the early parts of the semester, when school schedules diverge, or during weekly breaks during the spring semester. And some parents might well be able to schedule otherwise difficult-to-schedule classes if they had access to childcare for an hour or two every other day.
- d. Final exam/graduation: The new final exam scheduling has had some early bumps, which are to be expected when adopting a new process involving so many moving parts. The sooner such bumps can be smoothed out, the better. Greater awareness of what exactly is required on the part of stakeholders (e.g. some faculty were not aware that the college shifted from an opt-in process for scheduling final exams to an opt-out process) would be helpful. And having graduation *precede* the completion of final exams can be confusing and problematic for some students.