

# To Concentrate, to Intensify, or to Shorten?

*The Issue of the Short Intensive Course  
in Summer Sessions*

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## **Introduction**

No matter how long universities and colleges have been offering short intensive courses, particularly in summer sessions, and no matter how many publications there are about them, there continues to be perpetual questioning of their academic quality and effectiveness. Over the past half century, the four major summer session associations, the Association of University Summer Sessions, the North American Association of Summer Sessions, the North Central Conference on Summer Sessions, and the Western Association of Summer Session Administrators include in their meetings, almost annually, questions on how intensive courses are organized and approved, and how we show their success and student satisfaction with them. Faculty Senates at institutions across the land raise doubts about the efficacy of short courses, and, at many institutions, it is still difficult for summer session administrators charged with responding to student needs to receive approval for courses in nontraditional formats.

Since our knowledge society requires that the academy respond within newer time frames and formats and since our various learning publics expect their instructional needs and styles to be met, we need a study to provide historical background, an analysis of existing literature, a relevant

bibliography and insights into successful intensive course offerings. This should provide ammunition to both university leaders and summer session directors to strengthen their case for summer intensive courses.

## **The Study**

In 1967, renowned University of Wisconsin Professor Clay Schoenfeld surveyed the landscape of summer sessions at American universities and declared that prosperity had finally come to the idea and execution of summer courses on campuses (Schoenfeld, 1967). He saw a bright future, based on high-quality students engaged in improving course offerings and a flourishing extracurricular life on campus during the summer months.

But two-and-a-half decades later, well past the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of academic summers on the UW campus, Schoenfeld lamented that despite empirical evidence to the contrary, some “troglodyte faculty” continued to believe that any course taught in a window smaller than the typical semester was, by nature, inferior (Young & McDougall, 1991).

And today, another decade and a half beyond that writing, summer sessions still face unfounded perceptions about academic rigor. Instead of earning a place as sophisticated and innovative course offerings that can serve the needs of varying student populations, summer sessions and intensive courses overall are still sometimes viewed as the short stepchild of the academy.

This piece will review the literature on intensive courses in three areas: comparison with semester-length courses; perceptions and effects of compressed sessions; and attributes of effective intensive courses. It will then address trends that brought summer sessions to where they are today and argue where such sessions should head tomorrow. It concludes with an extensive bibliography of works in this area.

## **Intensified vs. Traditional: Data on Differences**

For as long as universities and colleges have offered short intensive courses, particularly in summer, debate has centered on their worthiness when stacked against full-semester courses. The commonsense conclusion, summed up succinctly by Wisconsin’s Charles Slichter, was “six weeks was too short a time in which to produce anything of educational value” (Slichter, 1927). But the weight of scholarly research belies Slichter’s notion.

A simple review of student performance as indicated by grade point averages showed no significant difference between the averages earned by

summer session students and those of students enrolled in a full-length term (Martin, 1997-1998). Further, the study found lower failure rates among summer-session students in language classes, supporting an immersion theory, and demanding math and science courses, supporting the idea that lighter course loads in summer help students tackle rigorous courses with focus (Martin, 1997-1998). On the contrary, Martin found support for the hypothesis that courses with heavy reading demands might be better for full-length semesters than shortened terms because failure rates increased greatly in a literature course examined (Martin, 1997-1998). A similar examination of grade point averages of students in algebra and accounting minicourses showed no significant difference against those in full-semester formats (Caskey, 1994).

In looking at an intensive three-week interim semester (mini-semester), Homeyer and Brown compared the three-week format with both a five-week summer term and a 15-week semester. The researchers addressed student attitude, knowledge and skill development and found no significant differences related to term length (Homeyer & Brown, 2002).

Research into differences looks not only at length, but also differences in subject area. A study of first-year composition courses contradicted the notion that short intensive courses would be less effective in relaying the subject matter (McLeod, Horn, & Haswell, 2005). The authors also found that students enrolling in summer courses do so strategically. For instance, some of the summer student subjects lacked confidence in their writing and scored low on standardized tests. They often enrolled in intensive sessions to immerse themselves or to complete required courses more quickly.

A study of learning in microeconomics courses showed a shorter term may actually be superior to the full semester (Van Scyoc & Gleason, 1993). After controlling for variables believed to affect learning, the authors found students in a three-week microeconomics course scored better than those in a 14-week course. The authors concluded this supports earlier data that students in short intensive courses perform as well or better than those in traditional semesters.

Scott has conducted an extensive review of intensive courses. In a report to the North American Association of Summer Sessions, she concluded that students' experience in intensive courses do indeed differ from their experiences in semester-length classes (Scott, 1994). However, she noted that the quality of those experiences depends on whether the courses exhibited specific attributes, such as instructor enthusiasm and communication skills or active, experiential and applied learning methods. If present, the attributes made summer session classes exceptional learning experiences for students. In their absence, however, intensive

courses could pale in comparison to full-term classes. Further illumination of this idea appears in Scott's focus on undergraduates enrolled in one of two sets of matched courses in both shortened and full formats. She found the most successful intensive courses can create focused, motivating, memorable and continuous learning while short courses with negative attributes, such as little classroom interaction or discussion, can become monotonous, overwhelming or stressful (Scott, 1995).

One of the principal critiques of studies examining intensive courses asserts they are largely flawed theoretically and methodologically. The breadth of the literature base citing a lack of significant differences between formats can often be dismissed on these grounds. The studies also fail to examine long-term difference. Seamon's study comparing formats attacks both fronts (Seamon, 2004). In comparing a matched pair of educational psychology courses in intensive and semester lengths, Seamon found intensive courses were a better instructional format than semester-length courses as long as the courses had equal in-class instructional time. Further, this superiority held regardless of the characteristics of the students enrolled (Seamon, 2004). However, in tracking learning retention through follow-ups, the study showed intensive courses had no advantage in long-term learning. He concluded the short courses provide a "better start," but unless learning is actively maintained, that edge fades over time (Seamon, 2004).

In reflecting on their respective teaching in summer courses, Crowe, Hyun and Kretovics weighed whether the summer session could foster academic rigor or must be relegated to "curriculum light" (Crowe, Hyun, & Kretovics, 2005). The authors defined rigor in a variety of ways but emphasized a learning process that includes challenging work, deep thinking, making and understanding connections and construction of new knowledge (Crowe, Hyun, & Kretovics, 2005). The reflection is a rare perspective in a vacuum of inquiry into how faculty balance compression of time against depth and breadth of instruction. They concluded that compressed courses should be viewed as essentially the same as courses taught in full semesters when considering both content and expectation of students. However, faculty must be conscious of necessary differences in methods of delivery and assessment. In short, course goals should not change but avenues to achieve them may differ (Crowe, Hyun, & Kretovics, 2005).

### **Perceptions and Effects of Intensive Courses**

While summer sessions are viewed as academically legitimate on most campuses (Taylor, 1988), they consistently face threats to their

image as an essential and worthy part of the academic mission of the university (Martin, 2003; Schoenfeld, 1967). Threats to their legitimacy include failure to acknowledge their place in the academic mission, lack of administrative authority and failure to recognize the pragmatic contributions of summer sessions to an institution (Taylor, 1988). These contributions include student progress toward degrees, full use of facilities, faculty employment and revenue generation (Taylor, 1988; Martin, 2003). Summer sessions also can serve as agents of change on campus, ushering in experimental approaches and serving diverse students, yet they are not always recognized as these catalysts (Martin, 2003).

Beyond institutional perceptions, however, lie key questions of how both summer session faculty and students view the endeavors of compressed course teaching. Most of the studies comparing summer sessions to full-semester courses involve examination of perceptions of intensive courses, both in rigor and in efficacy. Scott's work demonstrates patterns among students in their perception of intensive courses as rewarding experiences, given a host of necessary attributes (Scott, 1994, 1995).

Smith studied compressed courses in the context of offerings running concurrently with 15-week sessions and found that some faculty had serious doubts about whether standards were equal between compressed and semester-length courses. Overall attitudes about intensive teaching were mixed (Smith, 1988). While she found that students endorsed the offering of intensive courses, they appeared to be more motivated by the convenience of scheduling than by the academic value of the courses. Finally, she noted that non-traditional students overwhelmingly favored compressed courses (Smith, 1988).

Kretovics, Crowe and Hyun studied faculty perceptions on compressed course teaching in summer (Kretovics, Crowe, & Hyun, 2005) and later examined the curriculum characteristics in play in summer courses (Kretovics, Crowe, & Hyun, 2006). The study surveyed faculty to gauge their perceptions and practices. While noting limited generalizability, the authors concluded faculty treat compressed courses differently from semester-length classes (Kretovics, Crowe, & Hyun, 2005). Faculty adjusted many aspects of courses to accommodate the differing time frame, including texts, discussions, assignments and exams. The challenge, the authors conclude, is to make such changes with pedagogical justifications, rather than mere attention to the calendar (Kretovics, Crowe, & Hyun, 2005).

An important finding in the study centered on differences between tenured and non-tenured faculty in approaches to summer teaching. The authors found tenured professors more often changed courses in response to compressed time than did their untenured colleagues. They

surmised that untenured faculty may be more pedagogically risk averse (Kretovics, Crowe, & Hyun, 2005). Faculty also perceived a dearth of training and support for summer teaching (Kretovics, Crowe, & Hyun, 2005), and this may have added to a difference between seasoned and newer faculty.

The same authors found that faculty perceptions affect curricular characteristics of compressed courses (Kretovics, Crowe, & Hyun, 2006). The authors found a particular emphasis on organizational aspects to address the limited amount of time students have to work outside of class between class meetings. Although compressed courses have the same number of class hours as semester-length courses, the shorter time frame means students have fewer hours to study between classes. Based on the perceptions noted, the authors recommended policies limiting the number of courses students can take in the summer term and examining which types of courses ought not be taught in a compressed format (Kretovics, Crowe, & Hyun, 2006).

### **Attributes of Intensive Courses**

While the short intensive course is the progeny of the university in summer, compressed formats do not belong solely to the warm months. As colleges and universities try to grow more nimble in serving a diverse array of students, they often look to intensive courses as solutions for adult returning students and other non-traditional learners. Important attributes of compressed courses apply regardless of whether a course is being taught in summer or concurrent with semester-length courses.

Smith raised questions about the wisdom of intensive courses during the traditional semester but acknowledged the importance of these formats to students attending college while maintaining a work or family life (Smith, 1988). Collins concluded that accelerated or intensive programs for adult undergraduate students can contribute to cognitive development among students through such aspects as interactions with classmates and classroom atmosphere, among others. Certain aspects of intensive sessions, however, constrained that development (Collins, 2005). For instance, students in programs without the support of a cohort did not connect as well with the course or the institution as those who did have a cohort. Collins also noted a conflict between adult students' desire to complete a degree quickly and the need to acquire deeper knowledge.

In an examination of summer sessions and how they may be effectively marketed, DiGregorio found that smaller classes inherent to summer sessions increased out-of-classroom interaction between faculty and students. This interaction improved learning, making the intensive

courses more valuable than their larger, semester-length counterparts. This attribute prompts positive student outcomes, including better cognitive development (DiGregorio, 1997-1998).

The most far-reaching inquiry into attributes belongs to Scott. Building on earlier work identifying common themes of positive attributes (Scott, 1994), Scott concludes that instructors must exhibit the same attributes in intensive courses that make for effective teaching in standard semesters. However, she argues intensive sessions require these attributes in greater numbers and to a greater degree (Scott, 1996).

Drawing on conclusions that intensive courses bring equal, and at times superior, learning than traditional courses yield (Scott & Conrad, 1992), Scott details the attributes most common to successful compressed courses (Scott, 2003). Effective instructor characteristics include enthusiasm, knowledge, experience, communication, willingness to learn and student orientation. Successful methods included active learning, classroom discussion, experiential learning and depth over breadth. Environmental necessities centered on classroom relationships and atmosphere. And finally, effective intensive courses employed tailored evaluative methods that departed from objective exams used in traditional semesters (Scott, 2003).

## **Discussion**

In observing the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of summer teaching at Wisconsin, where Schoenfeld had so thoughtfully articulated the meaning of the American university in summer, Summer Sessions Dean Harland Samson noted a common thread that had stretched over the preceding century. He wrote, "One of the consistent ingredients in summer education since programs began in colleges and universities approximately 100 years ago is change" (Division of Summer Sessions and Inter-College Programs, 1985). He could not have been more insightful.

Changes in pedagogical approaches, social needs, fiscal realities and campus perceptions have accompanied intensive courses at each stage of their development. At times, summer sessions have responded to change reactively but at other times, they've been the catalyst for change.

Schoenfeld wrote in 1967 that summer sessions had "gradually assumed the trappings of academic respectability." But Young and McDougall saw that perceptions of the necessity of summer sessions more often reflected employment, resources and experimentation needs than a fundamental connection with the mission of higher education (Young & McDougall, 1988). They argued powerfully for integrating summer

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sessions into the central university structure and shaping policy and vision to properly encompass intensive courses.

The literature appears to show that compressed courses are not inferior to semester-length offerings and in certain situations can indeed be superior. The body of knowledge in the field also shows that intensive formats are important to students for both pragmatic reasons, especially to adult and non-traditional students, and cognitive development. Finally, high-quality teaching in shortened time frames requires attention to key attributes and a willingness to mold instructional techniques and evaluative measures to the time constraints imposed by shortened formats. Without doubt, intensive courses hold the promise of exceptional learning experiences for both students and faculty.

Paramount in ensuring that the promise is realized and that summer sessions offerings receive the same high regard as regular academic year offerings requires that Directors, Deans and summer sessions administrators make every effort to have summer courses undergo the same academic review as the curriculum of the academic year. While it is true that most summer courses receive departmental blessing, it is often the case the school/college academic planning groups such as curricula committees play little or no role. Most planning for summer occurs at least in the fall preceding the offering. Thus it is not impracticable for the summer session administrator to consult the appropriate academic bodies. At the very least, summer session administrators should have an academic advisory council representative of the academic fields of their university or college to give academic quality credibility to its summer offerings. The success of concentrated offerings has a long history and the research and published literature about them lend much evidence to the academic integrity and quality of the once regarded “shoddy” courses.

### **Note**

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