



Achieving the Dream™

PREPARING FOR SHORTENED ACADEMIC TERMS COLLEGE SPOTLIGHT

Amarillo College

Big Goals for Student Success

THE “WHY”

“Quick activation for student success”

Amarillo College was inspired after a visit to Odessa College. Odessa had already made the conversion to eight-week terms and was seeing increases in student success. Amarillo’s president had set a goal of a 70% completion rate by 2020, and pursuing flexible and responsive scheduling was already part of Amarillo’s strategic plan. Amarillo College has been in the Achieving the Dream network since 2011 and is currently a Leader College of Distinction. The college is proud of their ability to quickly respond and execute change in support of student success. Their goal is to be able to pivot in six to nine months in any major change based upon data. Knowing they could do this work and understanding they had little to lose in trying, they began this journey in fall 2016 with a scale to the top 26 enrolled courses by fall 2018.



Amarillo College®

THE WORK

“Course redesign is the most overlooked area by colleges starting out (in the planning of this work).”

COURSE CONVERSION

Amarillo began academic course conversion with volunteer early adopters. They saw glimmers of hope in the outcomes from those courses and tried to increase the number of faculty participating voluntarily. The students were beginning to feel the effect having some of their courses offered in eight-weeks and some offered in 16 weeks. The courses were clashing, and they had not yet been intentional around the calendar. They realized that they needed to go beyond the small-scale coalition of the willing or abandon the transformation. They started sharing the data from the courses that had converted to eight-weeks with small groups of faculty from various programmatic areas. They included IR in these meetings and allowed the faculty time to digest, pick apart, and ask questions. Eventually leadership at the college made the decision to scale, and they started with the top 10 enrolled courses at the college. Amarillo eventually scaled to the top 26 enrolled courses, which had an impact on most of their students.



Amarillo invested a great deal in course redesign and professional learning for faculty. They worked with faculty to ensure that moving to eight-weeks was not about compressing all current content into an eight-week time frame. Instead, with the help of instructional designers, the faculty of the top 26 enrolled courses engaged in systematic course redesign. Faculty used an intentional process to examine learning outcomes and course content in order to maintain course integrity and to determine whether they were “overteaching” material that was included in the next course. Amarillo also offered a yearlong professional development for faculty with the flipped classroom structure. They engaged the instructional designers and compensated faculty to redesign their courses. Finally, Amarillo believes that this is continuous improvement work and is in the process of developing a rotating schedule, so all courses are refreshed on a cycle.

“We had to be process strong.”

FACULTY COMPENSATION PROCESSES

Piloting a few courses at the beginning revealed weaknesses in their processes that supported this type of transformational change. Areas that needed immediate attention included the business office, financial aid disbursement, and the faculty workload/compensation structure. Originally, Amarillo had a split faculty compensation model that did not pay faculty for term 2 courses until it was ensured they would run. This was causing faculty pay to fluctuate and putting unnecessary burden on their faculty members during the transition. In one semester Amarillo was able to make the adjustments to the faculty compensation structures and processes that fixed the fluctuations and returned the faculty to the original payment structure. Workload was also examined, and at Amarillo, faculty are not allowed to teach more than three courses per eight-week term to ensure quality and success. The college also increased faculty compensation in the summer term. This incentivized summer course offerings, helping students remain continuously enrolled.



INSTRUCTIONAL PROCESSES

The college was also explicit about the number and type of courses that students could take per term. For example, students typically take six hours in each term and are encouraged to take six hours in the summer; this allows the student to complete 30 hours over the course of a calendar year in a part-time format. They also have an all-in co-requisite model that is program appropriate. Students take their college-level course and their support course in eight-week terms to ensure progression and success.

FINANCIAL AID PROCESSES

Amarillo uses a single-disbursement process for financial aid for students. They understand that the two-disbursement model does not work with the students they serve and can create barriers for students who live in poverty. Advisors had to intentionally communicate with students to ensure they understood the process of using their disbursement to purchase books and materials for the full semester. They also have an emergency aid program to assist students in extreme need.

ACADEMIC SCHEDULING

Other process changes included adjusting deadlines and schedules. Amarillo had to change drop deadlines, final exam schedules, and census dates. They were also very intentional about late enrollment and prevented students from enrolling in a class that had already met once. The advising team at Amarillo created a master schedule task force to ensure that attendance patterns did not impact a student's ability to schedule a full load of classes. They identified early that most of their course offerings were available in the morning, and the afternoon had very little to offer students. They made changes to ensure that students could schedule a full load if they attended in the morning or the afternoon and adjusted evening offerings to ensure those who attended after 5 p.m. could also be full-time students.



SUPPORT SERVICES

Scheduling academic and nonacademic supports also required some attention as the college transitioned to an eight-week model. They opened a counseling center to assist students with needs and also consolidated their academic support services under one new director. Removing the academic supports from distributed academic program areas allowed the college to have a more systematic approach to offering academic supports, which included unified protocols and extended hours. They offer their own virtual tutoring, which improves access to students who may not be able to come back to campus to take advantage of in-person support.

LESSONS LEARNED

In general, Amarillo would have been more intentional about structures and processes during the planning phase. For example, piloting this type of change with a small group of classes can create scheduling and other process problems for students and for the college. Instead, they would have determined up front what classes would be converted and would have created a firmly established exceptions process.

The college also recommends making structural and process changes that will build trust and good will as quickly as possible. The college worked hard to ensure that neither the faculty nor the students carried undue burden as the college worked through the transition to eight-week terms.

Supporting faculty is critical to success. Amarillo recognized early that faculty need opportunities for professional development as they work on their curriculum. Additionally, redesign work cannot occur in a vacuum, and colleges should work to structure the schedule along with curriculum changes.

Finally, Amarillo recommends communicating with intention to current students who may struggle more with the new format. Amarillo recognized that their current students had a difficult time with the transition. Current students who are familiar with the previous format may need additional information on the benefits of the change and may need to hear it from different sources, such as faculty or other peers, across the college.

