



Achieving the Dream™

# PREPARING FOR SHORTENED ACADEMIC TERMS COLLEGE SPOTLIGHT

## Grayson College

### Replicating Success for their Students

#### THE “WHY”

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Grayson College has been part of the Achieving the Dream network since 2014 and is a current Leader College of Distinction. They are active in the network and had been watching the success of Odessa College’s 8-week terms for about 2 years. Grayson was eager to duplicate the gains they saw in student success and retention and could not think of a good reason not to try it for their students. In June 2017 Grayson took a team to visit Odessa to learn more about their experience. Many of Grayson’s academic core classes were already online in an 8-week format, so they knew they had a good start. Faculty were informed when they returned in fall 2017 that they had a year to get ready. Grayson began offering more 8-week courses in fall 2018. Though the transition was not always smooth, Grayson had a 19-year-high success rate of 81% in spring 2019.



GRAYSON  
C O L L E G E

## THE WORK

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### “Never late/so flexible”

In shorter academic terms the multiple on-ramps to enrollment are a significant benefit to students. Technically, a student is never late for admission, and enrollment and is never more than 8 weeks away from their next courses. This was a mindset shift for the college, which was on a traditional 16-week admissions cycle. Two 8-week terms gave students an opportunity to still be enrolled, no matter when they arrived at the college. Besides the benefit to student flexibility, it has also been beneficial from an enrollment management perspective.

A large majority of Grayson students have either a full-time or part-time job, and taking two classes per term worked well with their job schedules. Advisors and faculty were instrumental in proactively designing the student experience and helping students make good choices with course content and sequence each semester. The combination of having fewer courses to focus on and being able to take two courses throughout the year resulted in Grayson students' taking more courses. In fall 2018 the college saw 11% more students convert from a part-time enrollment status to a full-time enrollment status compared to the previous year. Students also appreciated that they had options if they needed to drop a class, pick it up later, and remain enrolled full-time.

### “Hundreds of little practices”

Grayson reflected that they changed many processes and practices across the college as they planned and prepared for their 8-week terms. The college had to change the number of hours a student could take per term to ensure students did not overwhelm themselves in the shorter format. Faculty workload had to change as well. In an effort to not overload the faculty, they worked together to limit faculty contract hours. Information technology was critical in helping make changes to processes, including how students changed majors, uploading documents to the registrar and financial aid, and the use of e-signatures.

The office of academic affairs also worked with IT to create a planner for students that helped plan out all courses per term, allowing students to see their path to completion. This required significant course sequencing work, which supported and aligned well with their pathways work. They are still continuously improving the curriculum processes.



Advising practices became more intentional, especially around course selection and sequence. Advisors were proactive in helping students avoid toxic course combinations (such as taking 8-week math plus 8-week science at the same time). Students' advisors helped them balance course choice so that students who were in an 8-week math course were often also registered for a college success course or another course that was not heavy a STEM course.

Finally, the financial aid office started with the end in mind and began using priority deadlines for the first time. These deadlines were not a cutoff but ensured that the student would receive their initial aid disbursement in the second week of classes if their paperwork was completed by the priority date. Students who did not meet the priority deadline still received their aid, but it was disbursed later in the term.

## G-8 Approach

Grayson discovered that every process, calendar, and due date had to be revised to plan for an 8-week implementation. In order to rethink every process and timeline, they engaged a cross-functional team in a structured process. This team included representatives from the president's office and the vice presidents of academics, student affairs, business services, and information technology. The college made use of smart sheets to track impacted policies and procedures that needed to be changed. The team had report outs on a weekly basis and met weekly to troubleshoot issues. They put student success at the center.

This cross-functional approach allowed collaborative conversations that were vital to making sure they were comprehensive in their approach to change. This systems approach highlighted that something as simple as changing a field on the student profile in the SIS can have implications for financial aid or advising that could negatively affect the student. Getting together and working collaboratively allowed the team to catch these small changes that could have a large impact on the student experience.

## Learning Environment

Even after looking at all the other colleges and learning from their mistakes, Grayson made their own new ones. Despite the expected misstep, Grayson's students rated their interaction with faculty very high on CCSSE and SENSE. Their results have been at the top end of the national ranking and exemplify how positive the faculty have made this experience for students. While the Grayson team claims there is no secret to their success, they do recognize that it's important for leadership to work collaboratively with faculty to make sure the faculty understand that mistakes are part of the process of transformation. Faculty were encouraged to try new approaches and pedagogies to improve their classes. Making space for a learning environment and ensuring there were no punitive actions when failure occurred was important to build trust in the process.



## LESSONS LEARNED

### Timing and collaboration are key early steps.

Grayson recognized a few missteps in the timing of their planning and implementation. For example, a summer visit to Odessa combined with a fall kickoff did not give faculty who were not under contract for the summer enough opportunity to provide input. Grayson's design of the timeline to launch also did not involve significant faculty input and left faculty feeling a lack of trust and concern over their ability to be ready in time. Lack of transparency and preparation can cause lack of trust and induce anxiety. All are difficult to recover from.

### Figure out what works best for your context.

Grayson did their research of other colleges who had made a transition to 8-week terms. They watched Odessa's progress and their results and used them as a model for their transformation. However, despite learning about the successes and the pitfalls of their peers, Grayson recognized that not everything they learned was going to work in their context. Grayson's program offerings are rich in CTE and health science and were different from some of their peer institutions. They had to try different processes and practices that worked for their students and their culture before they found the right fit.

