



Achieving the Dream™

PREPARING FOR SHORTENED ACADEMIC TERMS COLLEGE SPOTLIGHT

Northeast Wisconsin Technical College

Big Jump to Close Equity Gaps

THE “WHY”

“We wanted students to start within 8-weeks”

Northeast Wisconsin Technical College has been in the Achieving the Dream network since 2010 and is both a Leader College of Distinction as well as this year’s Leah Meyer Austin award winner. They invest in high-impact practices that focus on student success, such as college success courses, mandatory orientation, and an intentional focus on developmental education. Being unsatisfied with their ability to close equity gaps the college embraced a full system reboot, the NWTC’s 8-Week Advantage was born.

NWTC launched their “8-Week Advantage” to students in fall 2020 with 50% of their programs transitioning from a 15-week semester structure to two 8-week sessions. At the heart of their transformation was student success. After looking at their data around momentum and saw that students tended to drop their courses around week 6 of the full semester, they wanted to be more proactive and offer flexibility in how students took classes at NWTC. They wanted a structure at the college where a student could start or restart their education at NWTC



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within 8-weeks. If a student needed to stop out due to personal issues they could jump back in within 8-weeks to maintain momentum. A new student would start within 8-weeks no matter when they applied to the college. They hoped that disrupting how they offered classes at a systems level would increase access to courses faster and provide more flexibility; this would help increase success with their students of color and close the equity gaps.

THE WORK

“Trying to make the huge change more manageable”

NWTC’s president announced the college’s new direction at an in-service in the fall of 2018. The college took time to develop a shared understanding surrounding the work involved and what it meant for staff, faculty, and their students. After settling into the start of the semester, executive team understood that it was time to share the work and began intentionally communicating across the college. The vice presidents of academics and student success made themselves available to their respective areas and began conducting listening sessions to get critical feedback, address questions, and be able to deliver key information to faculty, staff and students.



Within that first year, NWTC leveraged expertise in the field and engaged speakers from ATD, Amarillo College, and Odessa College to share their experiences and best practices with all stakeholders. They also engaged their new Teaching and Learning Center to start having conversations with small groups of faculty to begin to plan the course redesign process. Their implementation strategy was to try to make this huge change more manageable with a focus on redesign, steering faculty away from compression.

“8-Week Peek”

To help keep the college updated as the work progressed NWTC launched intentional communication components meant to meet the needs of the various stakeholders. The “8-Week Peek,” began with a focus on the “Why” and evolved to provide college-wide updates on the project. Through this campaign they shared internal data on their current 8-week courses, as well as, created and launched two explainer videos that focused on the internal college stakeholder and student audience. The 8-Week Peek engaged the college community through updates on decision made, work completion, and celebration of milestones.

A critical facet of launching this project and building ownership involved going to program teams and talking with faculty about what this change would look like for them. The project team continued to meet with faculty through the process, gathering feedback and sharing information. It was highly important to have faculty leadership and representation on all committees to share what they needed to ensure success for all students.

Finally, the college built a central hub site where they kept all the information and updates. They leveraged their internal portal and used their website for external-facing stakeholders. Lastly, they engaged their learning management system, student portal, and other social media platforms to provide students with updates and information on the work.

Different strategies for new and current students

As NWTC launched this transformation at the college, they realized they would need to develop different strategies for new and current students. For example, since new students did not have any experience at NWTC yet, they learned about the 8-Week Advantage through a press release that directed prospects to view the NWTC 8-Week Advantage Website. The college also communicated the changes through K-12 counselors and administrators, recruiters, and admissions advisors for new incoming high school students so students were aware before they arrived.

Current students struggled most with what moving to an 8-week calendar meant for them and why NWTC was making the change. Students learned about the new academic calendar via an e-mail that included the details of the new structure, the reasons why, and an initial timeline. The college created listening sessions for current students to allow them to learn about the transition throughout Fall/Spring '19-20 and to ask questions about their specific programs. Talking points were created to help communicate the national data on the success of this format. These emphasized that courses in 8-week sessions would have the same outcomes and the same number of hours of instruction while allowing students to focus on fewer classes at one time, which would aid in their success. Faculty were also key in helping communicate to their current students what it meant for their program.

As part of their efforts to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion within the campus community, a series of courses have been developed for faculty and staff. In addition to participating in Living Inclusively, faculty participate in a Teaching Inclusively course, and staff participate in Serving Inclusively.



New processes to accommodate 8-week Sessions

After a thorough review, NWTC decided to keep the semester structure for disbursing financial aid and for registering students. In order to obtain the highest level of assistance, students register for both sessions at the beginning of the semester. Students also have the flexibility to register for one session at a time. Many processes and procedures were identified for revision to accommodate two 8-week sessions. The admissions office opened applications every 8-weeks instead of every semester. The college created an online general orientation and welcome-day orientation for all students as part of onboarding. This online platform allowed students to onboard whenever it was convenient for them and did not require attendance on specific days and times. Program-specific orientations had both in-person and virtual orientation opportunities, depending on best fit and frequency of program kickoff through the year. The advising department adjusted communication and outreach cycles to twice each semester to accommodate the two terms. Additionally, the college is working on a pilot process to update class enrollments for students who are unable to meet prerequisites; this replaces their purge process.

LESSONS LEARNED

Culture trumps everything.

NWTC had an existing culture of student success and a culture of transformation. They credit their strong institutional culture prior to the start of the 8-Week Advantage with helping them plan and successfully implement this systemwide work.

Create opportunities for student life.

The college was determined to engage their students through co-curricular and extracurricular activities opportunities in conjunction with the shift in the academic calendar. In response, they worked with the academic programs and student services staff to schedule bi-weekly “common hours” on campus. NWTC’s “Eagle Hour” aims to increase belonging through student events such as activities, games, student senate, and speakers. In addition, to make these activities more accessible during COVID-19, NWTC offered 100% of speakers, DEI events, and activities virtually to students and staff districtwide throughout 2020-21.

