



Achieving the Dream™

# PREPARING FOR SHORTENED ACADEMIC TERMS COLLEGE SPOTLIGHT

## Odessa College

### An Overnight Success Several Years in the Making

#### THE “WHY”

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#### **“Decreased time to degree without increasing cost or time.”**

Odessa College began their journey in fall 2014 by converting 80% of their courses from a 16-week semester to two 8-week terms. The journey began with a conversation between the president and the faculty senate chair, focused on the significance and usefulness of a 16-week semester structure in today's higher education setting. They recognized that students experienced much more success during the shorter “flex terms” offered at the college and wondered whether they could replicate that format and outcome for all students at Odessa College.

For many students who attend Odessa, their lives revolve around the oil and gas industry. Employment security depends on the economy. The college felt that offering more flexibility in how they offered courses would provide more options to students. Their data pointed to the fact that fatigue and disruption caused by life barriers were a real issue for the momentum of their students, despite the effective programming already in place at the college. The college felt that if students took fewer courses,



they would have less to focus on at one time and would lose fewer credits if they needed to temporarily stop out. In order to try and create momentum and reduce the enrollment-to-degree duration without increasing overall time or cost, the college felt that a shift to 8-week terms would serve their students best.

## THE WORK

### Institutional investment in culture made this process easier.

Odessa College is no stranger to transformative change focused on student success. In fall 2011 the college transformed their institution through the implementation of their drop-rate improvement plan. This program explored factors that contributed to differences in drop-rates between instructors. The drop-rate improvement plan paired tracking the drop rate of individual instructors with intentional support from their Division of Teaching and Learning. When the college announced they were making yet another transformative change to an 8-week academic calendar, there was very little resistance. Instead, faculty and staff jumped in, and everyone started rowing in the same direction. Thanks to the efforts to implement the drop-rate improvement plan, they had three solid years of transforming the college culture before they made this transition. They had a strong foundation to build on and support systems in place that seemed to make the transition to shorter terms easier. They were an “overnight success several years in the making” due to the investment in their culture.

### “You must be committed to student success in a way that you look at it every day.”

Odessa College has been part of the Achieving the Dream network since 2009 and currently is a Leader College of Distinction. Odessa credits ATD with helping them transform to a data-informed institution. The college moved to an 8-week format due to their data, and the college remains on an 8-week calendar due to their data. The college feels that data helps make the case for big changes; it speaks for itself and can be used to guide decision making.

Odessa has experienced a high level of student success since 2011 with their drop-rate improvement program. They were concerned that a transition to an 8-week calendar would jeopardize the gains they made. The entire leadership team monitored student success



during the 8-week implementation and were ready to pivot in any way they needed to. They were dedicated to selecting key metrics for success and then monitoring those metrics early and often. Key metrics that Odessa measures year to year include enrollment, FTIC enrollment, course completion, course success (C or better), credentials awarded, and amount of federal funds returned for noncompletion; they were already monitoring course withdrawals through the drop-rate improvement program.

## **“Our “all-in” culture speaks to extraordinarily effective communication.”**

### **COMMUNICATION TO STUDENTS**

During the COVID-19 crisis the college leveraged all their staff to reach out to all 6,500 of their students. The students appreciated the outreach and felt they were still supported even while in a remote environment. That level of communication has made their advisors and success coaches more successful in working with students through transitions and transformations at the college. One-on-one communication with students is a key success strategy at Odessa and is part of their culture.

Outreach to students was critical during the transition to a shorter academic term, but cadence of communication was also very important. During an 8-week term, classes progress quickly and waiting to get help to a struggling student is not an option. Thanks to their drop-rate improvement program, Odessa already had different behavioral intervention protocols established between faculty and their success coaches. Odessa worked proactively with both students and faculty to ensure they understood that immediate feedback was important. Students were unable to wait to ask for help and faculty should not have to wait to flag a student for an intervention.



## INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

Odessa's collaborative and communicative culture was also evident during the course redesign process, where they saw faculty working together within and across divisions and departments. For example, when they were working on learning outcomes in the criminal justice department, faculty compared syllabi and learning outcomes for adjacent classes and realized they were teaching (or reteaching) a lot of the same content. In response, faculty came together to determine what students really needed to know to be successful in that industry, and they adjusted the courses appropriately. These conversations are vital, and a culture that encourages this type of collaboration is critical to a solid start and future success.



Another example of excellent communication was demonstrated during the redesign of Odessa's degree plans. The creation of linear pathways through each program required the collaboration and communication between success coaches and program faculty. Their goal was to leverage stackable credentials where possible and create easy-to-follow maps for students and faculty advisors. The goal of these linear plans was to intentionally pair courses for rigor and relevance to ensure students are protected from overcommitting when taking math and science or writing heavy courses. Getting just the right balance of coursework in the student plan required critical collaboration between academic affairs and student success.

While culture, collaboration, and communication helped the college make a relatively smooth transition to an 8-week academic calendar, Odessa admits they did not get everything right the first time. The college spent the first year learning about and reacting to the things they did not think of. However, their intentional communication and commitment to collaboration gave everyone the opportunity to share their concerns and considerations, which helped ease the transition.



## LESSONS LEARNED

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### Leadership is important.

Senior leadership was highly engaged with the move to 8-week terms at Odessa. Their president was involved, but they also had excellent collaboration between Academic Affairs and Student Success. They met weekly as an administrative team where everyone was kept up to date on details. When the project leads needed extra support, they had the full leadership team behind them to help. That support meant that the project leads did not have to worry about convincing someone when they needed something critical for the project. Leadership across all areas of the college was vital, and they reflected that if you do not have the president and the vice presidents working together with leaders from IR, IT, finance, financial aid, and the bookstore, it just doesn't work very well.

### Continuous on-ramps provide additional enrollment opportunities.

Odessa's structure created more off-ramps when they moved to an 8-week structure, but they also created twice as many on-ramps to course enrollment each semester. The college realized the benefit to enrollment management; they still had options available to students who arrived after the fall 1 term started that did not require a 15-week wait. For Odessa, leveraging this second on-ramp proved to be a real opportunity for enrollment growth. Two years after launching their 8-week terms, Odessa reported a 13% overall increase in enrollment. Five years after launching, Odessa reports an overall enrollment increase of 25%.

