



Achieving the Dream™

PREPARING FOR SHORTENED ACADEMIC TERMS COLLEGE SPOTLIGHT

Trident Technical College

Bold Strategy for Student Success

THE “WHY”

“How could we look at the data and not act?”

Trident Technical College began their journey to 7-week terms in spring 2012 after looking at their student success data. Trident Technical College’s president recognized that the college’s course success rates had been trending, in percentages, from the high 70s in 1991 to the low 60s in 2011. That time frame also coincided with a change at the college from a quarter term format to a semester format. As the leadership contemplated their mission of being a “catalyst for personal, community, and economic development by empowering individuals through education and training,” they knew they could not look at their declining success data and not act. Trident Technical College began their journey planning in fall 2012 and moved to full implementation of almost all course offerings in 7-week terms in fall 2014.



TRIDENT TECHNICAL COLLEGE

THE WORK

“I can’t lecture for nine hours.”

COURSE REDESIGN

TTC took almost two years to prepare and launch their new academic calendar. Even with so much preparation time, there were still worries that the faculty would not be ready to offer their courses in 7-week terms. Initially faculty were concerned about how they would fit everything into a shorter format. As faculty approached the conversion with a traditional lecture mindset, it became clear that being successful in this format was going to be less about a simple conversion of content into a shorter term and more about a redesign of courses, content, and competencies. Academic leaders and champions worked to share new learning strategies that could be leveraged now that they had more time with students in the classroom. To help with preparation, the dean of arts asked all instructors to teach at least one course in the shortened format. This strategy was helpful for their division, and it became clear that launching to the shortened terms was more difficult for areas that did not pilot first.



PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

When TTC was making their preparations there were not a lot of other peer institutions in the field that had made this conversion to shorter terms across an institution. And while they had not seen a college operate fully in a 7-week calendar, the faculty did have access to support in the area of best practices in course design. In preparation for redesigning courses, senior leadership set aside professional development funds for faculty to bring in experts and go to conferences—funds that would help them explore best practices in pedagogy for their courses. Faculty looked to infuse more active learning strategies, problem-based learning, and flipped classroom structures to help them meet their competencies and engage students in multiple modalities. They flexed the use of their digital platforms and materials to be sure students had everything they needed on the first day of class. Access to professional learning was a critical part in getting the faculty ready for a 7-week schedule.

EXCEPTIONS THAT MAKE SENSE

When the college began the conversion to a 7-week calendar there were very few exceptions granted to keep courses in the traditional 15-week semester. The goal was to convert as completely as possible to make all processes easier on the college and the students.

However, there were some exceptions that made sense for TTC's unique courses and programs based on the impact shorter terms would have on students in that area.

Large animal veterinary courses were exclusively field trip based, and it was too difficult to make that experience fit into two trips per week for the students. TTC's nursing clinicals moved smoothly to the 7-week schedule in 2007 (well before the



full college transition), but the health science division looked closely at all program areas to ensure students were getting sufficient exposure to different clinical experiences. They realized that respiratory therapy assistant clinicals was such a specialty area that only giving students 7 weeks to participate in clinicals was not giving them enough exposure to different patient cases, and they made the case to keep those clinicals at 15 weeks. Horticulture was one other area that tried the 7-week term but struggled to create the same hands-on experience for students in a shorter amount of time. Overall, the college centered the discipline and the student experience when making decisions about exceptions.

“If you have a process issue before the shift, it will remain an issue after.”

NONACADEMIC CHANGES

TTC realized that many of their deadlines and turnaround times would need to be adjusted during the shift to two 7-week terms. In order to begin framing what this might look like for students and the offices that serve students, TTC created and marketed a “Seat Ready” campaign as part of their rollout. Creation of the Seat Ready campaign began with the end in mind and meant that students had all onboarding and enrollment processes complete and would be ready for learning on the first day of class. Offices such as admissions, the registrar, billing, and financial aid considered the amount of time they needed to process applications, materials, and requests and drafted a timeline for students that indicated ideally what deadlines should be for students to be seat ready by the first day of class. This type of work cannot be done in isolation and requires all stakeholders to be at the table to ensure deadlines are reasonable. Actions in one office impact process in other aligned offices. To ensure a systemic approach, the VP of academic affairs convened a cross-college team weekly to ensure changes were being made collaboratively.

COMMUNICATION IS MISSION CRITICAL.

Trident recognized the importance of early, transparent communication to both internal faculty and staff and to students early in their processes. In order to ensure that students understood the impending changes, TTC created many opportunities for students to learn about the 7-week terms and to ask questions about the impact of these changes on their circumstances. Besides the Seat Ready marketing campaign, the college also held numerous listening sessions in which faculty and staff from across the college were available to answer questions.

TTC reflected that even after their robust marketing campaign and many listening sessions that were conducted across the college, they still saw a gap in student comprehension that required staff to do a lot of one-on-one sessions with students. Communicating with current students required a different approach than with new students, because the current students were accustomed to the previous processes and were more concerned about the changes to 8-week terms. It was important to make sure that students heard the information more than once and in multiple formats.



The counseling department at TTC also realized the value of communicating with students to get them ready for the 8-week transition. Counselors reported that students living with disabilities were initially anxious about this change in the schedule when it was first announced. Students were concerned that the pace would be unmanageable for them and worried about their ability to be successful. In response, the counselors worked individually with students to help them identify academic strategies and college supports that would help them manage their courses and pace. Timely communication to faculty was also important at the beginning of the semester to ensure supports and accommodations could be in place at the beginning of the term for students to be most successful.

FINANCIAL AID DECISIONS ARE CONTEXTUAL AND IMPACTFUL.

Many colleges make the decision to keep as much processing (e.g., registration or billing) on a semester schedule to be the least disruptive to both the college and the students. However, Trident Tech made the decision to disburse financial aid twice a semester based on student attendance in classes for each 7-week term. The director of financial aid recognizes that institutions need to take their own context into account before they make that decision. Each choice comes with different inherent risks, and each college needs to determine the level of financial risk they are willing or allowed to assume when disbursing aid to students. Late financial aid disbursements can be difficult for students who need their aid money for personal expenses. To help alleviate the impact, the college has been counseling students on financial wellness and options they have at the college for other forms of financial assistance.

LESSONS LEARNED

Control the narrative.

Trident Tech could not emphasize enough the power and impact of good communication practices. They recognized that missteps in communication can cause long-term trust issues that can be difficult to recover from. They also recognized that being intentional about communication will keep a college from constantly being reactive and doing damage control.

Flexibility is key.

There are many things the college planned extremely well for and some things that were impossible to plan for. For example, the college planned a timeline that would help students be ready by the first day of class. However, even the most proactive timeline can be disrupted in a dynamic system where we are dealing with human beings. For example, dropping a class or having a class get cancelled at the last minute can send a student into a panic to find a suitable course and remain financial aid eligible.

Customer service issues take the most time.

Despite their best communication efforts to students, TTC realized that there were just some times when one-on-one communication is the most effective. The Registrar encouraged everyone to “Put on your student hat” to answer their questions and know what they might be thinking. You should not only answer the question they are asking but think ahead to what they might ask or need next. This insight comes with experience.

