Designing for Success: How Chattanooga State Community College Supports Students in Seven-Week Terms

Context and Rationale

Chattanooga State Community College's transition to seven-week academic terms emerged at the intersection of persistent student outcome gaps and the operational disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. College leaders were particularly concerned about low retention and course success rates among Pell-eligible students and those experiencing poverty. These challenges highlighted the structural limitations of the traditional 15-week calendar, in which life events often derailed student progress before momentum could be reestablished.

Scope and Design Decisions

Chattanooga State began offering seven-week courses in fall 2021, positioning these shortened terms as a preferred, but not universal, delivery model. Leaders intentionally avoided a one-size-fits-all approach, recognizing that disciplinary context matters.

CHATTANOOGA STATE
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

COLLEGE PROFILE

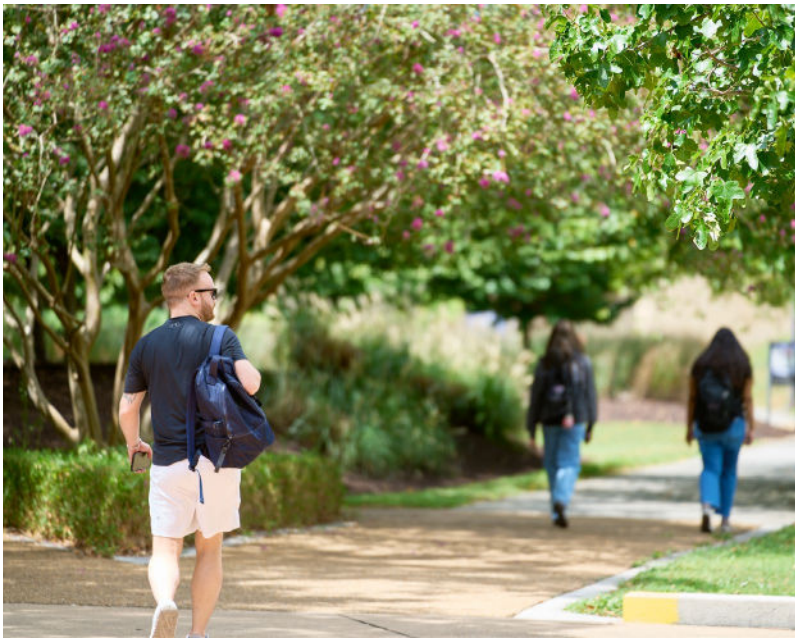
Classification: Two-year, mid-size, urban

Total undergraduate enrollment fall 2023: 6,601

Faculty union: No

What changed:

- A significant portion of the academic schedule shifted to seven-week terms.
- Most high-enrollment, gateway, and general education courses moved to the shortened format.
- Academic planning prioritized more frequent entry points and clearer momentum pathways.



What deliberately did not change:

- Certain disciplines — including fine arts, advanced STEM, and dual enrollment — remained in 15-week formats due to pedagogical and accreditation needs.
- Academic rigor and learning outcomes were preserved through intentional course redesign rather than content compression.

Today, roughly two-thirds of courses are offered in a seven-week format, and most of the top 20 courses by enrollment have transitioned to a shortened format. While implementation varies by discipline, Chattanooga State considers seven-week terms a core component of its academic model moving forward.

Leadership and Cross-Functional Coordination

The transition was jointly championed by the vice presidents of academic affairs and student affairs, signaling early on that this was not an academic-only reform. A cross-functional task force was established to guide implementation, bringing together leaders from academic affairs, student services, faculty, institutional research, marketing and communications, and information technology.

This structure ensured that decisions about curriculum, advising, systems, and messaging were coordinated rather than siloed. One leader reflected on the urgency of the shift: *"We didn't have to be sold on it, we had to be told on it — and then we moved accordingly."* That clarity of direction, paired with cross-functional accountability, enabled the college to adapt quickly as the model scaled.

Instructional and Student Support Implications

The pace of seven-week terms required fundamental changes in how instruction and student support were delivered. Faculty were asked to redesign courses to prioritize depth over breadth, emphasizing essential outcomes, integrated learning experiences, and carefully scaffolded assignments.

To support this shift, the Teaching and Learning Center launched a four-week faculty academy funded through pandemic relief dollars. The academy was:

- Voluntary and open to full-time and adjunct faculty
- Focused on backward design, content curation, and assignment scaffolding
- Supported by stipends to encourage participation

Faculty redesigned courses across disciplines. In science courses, lecture and lab components were integrated to create immersive learning experiences. In psychology and business, instructors adopted open educational resources (OER) and embedded high-impact practices tailored to the compressed timeline. Initially skeptical faculty became advocates after observing improvements in student engagement and outcomes.

Student-facing staff also adjusted their practices. The college adopted a front-loaded, proactive support model to help students start strong and stay on track, including:

- Ensuring access to textbooks and materials before the first day of each term
- Shifting from reactive to proactive advising
- Coordinating support between professional advisors and faculty mentors

Operational and Systems Alignment

Scaling shortened terms required rapid operational adjustments. Student-facing departments had to adapt to a faster academic cadence, including:

- Collaborative master course scheduling that eased the move to full-year advising and registration
- More frequent and timely updates to the student information system (SIS)
- Revisions to financial aid disbursement schedules
- Advising redesign to account for new sequencing and term patterns

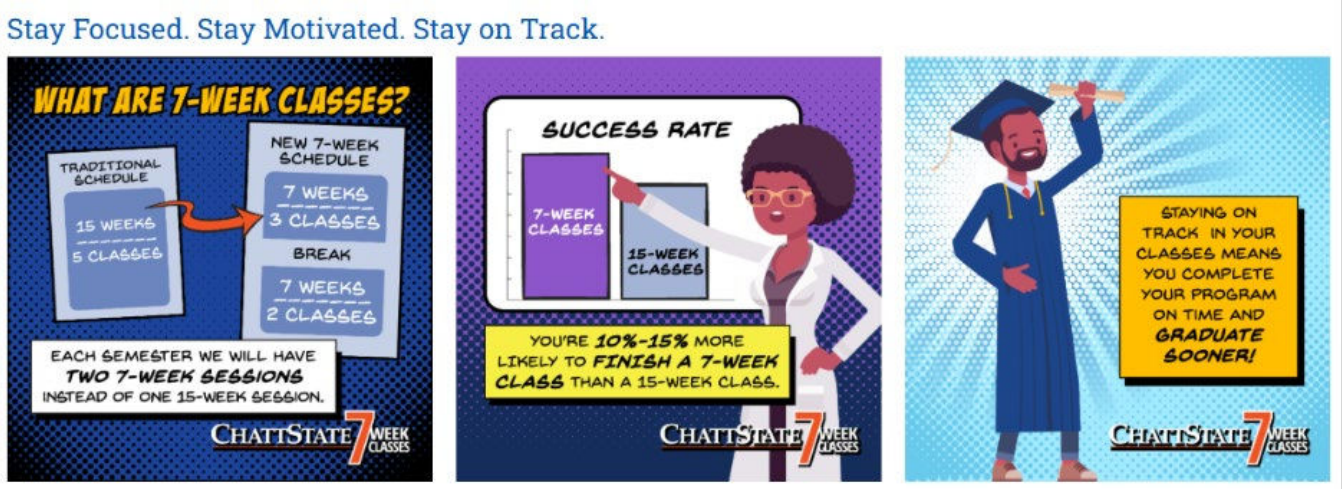
The college faced challenges enforcing prerequisites and aligning corequisite courses, often requiring manual interventions and increased cross-departmental coordination. These challenges underscored the importance of tighter system alignment and clearer ownership across functions to minimize student disruption.

Communication and Change Messaging

The transition to seven-week terms was part of Chattanooga State's strategic enrollment management (SEM) plan, but early implementation exposed gaps in internal communication. Some faculty and frontline staff reported feeling underprepared, underscoring the need for clearer, earlier messaging during large-scale change.

Initial student-facing messaging emphasized acceleration ("Finish Faster"), which failed to resonate. Leaders later reframed the narrative to focus on clarity, focus, and momentum, adopting messaging such as **"Stay Focused. Stay Motivated. Stay on Track."**

Paired with consistent visuals and reinforced talking points, this shift helped students better understand how the new model supported their success.



What Practitioners Should Notice

Chattanooga State's experience offers several insights for institutions considering shortened terms:

- **Faculty inclusion matters early:** Engaging instructors in planning and professional learning before launch builds ownership and improves course quality.
- **Modality effectiveness is contextual:** In some disciplines, in-person instruction proves more effective than hybrid formats in seven-week terms.
- **Language shapes perception:** Avoiding terms like "compressed" or "accelerated" helps reframe the model as intentional design rather than reduced rigor.
- **Redesign is not compression:** Backward design is essential to preseving rigor and relevance. Focus on delivering the best version of a class within the shortened time frame
- **Cross-departmental coordination is non-negotiable:** IT, financial aid, advising, academic departments, and marketing must align to support faster academic cycles.
- **Support must be immediate:** The pace of shortened terms leaves no margin for delayed access to course materials or academic or basic needs support.