

From Structure to Success at Isothermal Community College: Eight-Week Terms and Intentional Course Redesign



Context and Rationale

Isothermal Community College's transition to eight-week academic terms stemmed from a recognition that the traditional 16-week model was not equitably serving its students, particularly part-time, adult, and working learners. Institutional data showed persistent equity gaps, uneven student momentum, unclear pathways, and low course success rates among students trying to balance college with work and family responsibilities.

College leaders grounded the decision to explore shortened terms in disaggregated analyses of student outcomes by Pell eligibility, age, enrollment intensity, and credit accumulation. Combined with external research and peer case studies, this analysis reframed the conversation from individual preference or instructional tradition to institutional responsibility and student impact. Shortened terms were positioned not as a scheduling convenience but as a lever to improve access, momentum, and completion.



COLLEGE PROFILE

Classification: Two-year, small, rural

**Total undergraduate enrollment
f all 2023:** 1,810

Faculty union: No

Scope and Design Decisions

Isothermal made a strategic decision to implement the eight-week model at scale rather than through limited pilots. Leaders concluded that partial implementation would perpetuate confusion and inequity, especially for students navigating multiple modalities and programs.

What changed:

- The academic calendar shifted to an eight-week term structure across programs and modalities.
- Course sequencing, scheduling logic, and academic policies were redesigned to align with the accelerated cadence.
- Pedagogical expectations shifted from content coverage to outcome prioritization and intentional course design.



What deliberately did not change:

- Academic rigor and learning outcomes remained intact.
- Transfer and accreditation requirements continued to anchor course and program design.
- Faculty retained ownership of curriculum, supported through structured redesign processes.

From the outset, the redesign was framed as a system-wide transformation, not an isolated academic reform, with equity as the central design principle.

Leadership and Cross-Functional Coordination

Leadership at Isothermal emphasized transparency, shared governance, and cross-functional collaboration throughout the transition. A defining feature of this approach was the formation of the Patriot Pulse team, a group intentionally composed of faculty and staff who were initially skeptical of the shift.

Rather than marginalizing dissent, leaders elevated these voices into the design process, using structured feedback loops to surface concerns, identify risks, and co-create solutions. This approach strengthened trust and enabled real-time problem-solving as the model scaled.

Regular communication, data sharing, and visible responsiveness helped align academic affairs, advising, student services, and operations around a common goal: improving student success through coherent design. Over time, this fostered a culture of shared ownership, data-informed decision-making, and continuous improvement.



Instructional and Student Support Implications

The transition required significant shifts in instructional practice and student support roles. Faculty were asked to redesign — not compress — their courses, focusing on essential learning outcomes, intentional assignment scaffolding, and workload pacing appropriate for accelerated terms.

This work was supported through the launch of the Redesign Academy, a sustained professional learning model that emphasized:

- Backward design and course alignment
- Prioritization of essential outcomes
- Scaffolding to support student momentum
- Strategies to prevent burnout and support diverse learners



Faculty leaders and instructional designers facilitated the academy, fostering trust and a professional community. Notably, support extended beyond initial training through follow-up sessions, peer feedback, and ongoing course refinement.

Advisors and student-facing staff also adjusted practices, helping students understand term pacing, manage credit loads, and recover quickly from course disruptions through improved scheduling and retake options.

Operational and Systems Alignment

Scaling the eight-week model required intentional alignment across operational systems and policies. Key changes included:

- An “opt-out” scheduling model in which all courses defaulted to eight-week terms unless a strong case was made to the contrary
- Strategic scheduling to address “toxic pairings” of high-demand courses and to reduce student overload
- Introduction of “trailing” courses in the second term, allowing students to retake key courses without delaying progress
- Revisions to credit caps, overload policies, and program maps to reflect the new academic cadence



These changes ensured that institutional systems reinforced, rather than undermined, the goals of the redesign.

Communication and Change Messaging

Isothermal’s leadership invested heavily in consistent, values-driven communication. Messaging emphasized the *why* behind the shift, student equity, momentum, and success, rather than operational logistics alone.

Faculty, advisors, and staff were provided with shared talking points and data to support conversations with students. Messaging emphasized student benefits, including:

- Faster feedback and clearer momentum
- More manageable course loads
- Flexible and transparent pathways to completion

Concerns were addressed openly, with clear strategies for success articulated alongside expectations. This consistency helped cultivate a shared narrative of purpose and progress across campus.

What Practitioners Should Notice

Isothermal's experience offers several insights for institutions considering shortened academic terms:

- **Redesign must be holistic:** Shortened terms require rethinking pathways, policies, pedagogy, and supports — not simply compressing content.
- **Scheduling is a student success strategy:** Course sequencing and term balance matter as much as instructional design.
- **Faculty development must be sustained:** Ongoing professional learning and peer collaboration are essential to long-term success.
- **Cross-functional alignment reduces friction:** Students benefit most when advising, instruction, and student services operate as an integrated system.
- **Engaging skeptics strengthens design:** Structured dialogue surfaces blind spots and builds institutional trust.
- **Data shifts culture:** Disaggregated outcomes help move conversations from opinion to impact.
- **Access and equity improve with clarity:** The eight-week model particularly benefits part-time, working, and first-generation students when it is designed intentionally.

