Collaboratively Scaling Student Success at a Large Institution Through Eight-Week Terms at Ivy Tech Community College

Context and Rationale

Ivy Tech Community College, Indiana's statewide community college system, began transitioning from traditional 16-week semesters to eight-week terms in response to internal performance data and broader national trends in student enrollment and persistence. As the nation's largest single-accredited community college, Ivy Tech serves a diverse, predominantly part-time student population whose progress was often disrupted by work, family responsibilities, and stop-out patterns.

Early success with shorter parts of term revealed the potential of an accelerated calendar to improve flexibility, increase student momentum, and support course success, particularly for part-time and working learners. What began as a grassroots effort on individual campuses gradually evolved into a coordinated, system-wide strategy to improve outcomes while increasing institutional responsiveness across diverse local contexts.

IVY TECH COMMUNITY COLLEGE

COLLEGE PROFILE

Classification: Two-year, urban, large

Total undergraduate enrollment fall 2023: 100,077

Faculty union: No

Scope and Design Decisions

Ivy Tech's transition to eight-week terms unfolded in phases. Initial pilots began system-wide in 2017–2018, and implementation accelerated during the 2018–2019 academic year, driven by early adopters described as a "coalition of the willing." Over time, the model expanded substantially.

What changed:

- The academic calendar shifted toward eight-week terms as the system default.
- Course scheduling, sequencing, and program maps were redesigned to support accelerated pacing.
- A formal exemption process was introduced to evaluate courses remaining in 16-week formats using data and shared governance.

What deliberately did not change:

- Academic rigor and learning outcomes remained central design anchors.
- Campuses retained flexibility to adapt implementation strategies to local needs.
- Courses with clear pedagogical or accreditation constraints could remain full-term with documented justification.

By spring 2023, Ivy Tech had increased the share of eight-week course sections from 38.5% to 84.8%. The COVID-19 pandemic further validated the model, as campuses with higher adoption rates navigated disruption more effectively, cementing shortened terms as the system's primary academic structure.

Leadership and Cross-Functional Coordination

Leadership at both the system and campus levels played a critical role in advancing and sustaining the transition. Early leadership from the Terre Haute campus's vice chancellor of academic affairs demonstrated the feasibility of a full-campus conversion and set a model for inclusive planning and transparent decision-making.

System-wide coordination ensured alignment across academic policy, governance, and standards, while campuses retained autonomy in operational execution. Cross-functional collaboration was reinforced through:

- Clear guidelines addressing faculty compensation, teaching load, and overload assignments
- Transparent communication about timelines and expectations
- Regular meetings that included both academic and student affairs leaders

By proactively addressing faculty concerns, particularly regarding workload and instructional quality, leaders built trust and reinforced shared responsibility for student success.

Instructional and Student Support Implications

The shift to eight-week terms required faculty and advisors to rethink how instruction and support were delivered. Faculty were asked to redesign, not compress, courses, prioritizing essential learning outcomes and instructional coherence.

Key instructional and support shifts included:

- Assignment of lead instructors to coordinate course-level redesign efforts
- Year-long redesign projects focused on aligning outcomes, assessments, and pedagogy
- Professional development to build capacity for teaching in accelerated formats
- Collaboration between faculty and administration to ensure fair compensation and manageable scheduling

Advisors were more closely embedded within academic departments and assigned to specific programs, enabling deeper alignment between advising conversations and curricular expectations. Over time, faculty reported stronger student relationships, greater ownership of course design, and a preference for the focused nature of eight-week instruction.

Operational and Systems Alignment

Shortened terms required significant operational redesign across the system. To support student momentum and improve institutional efficiency, Ivy Tech aligned scheduling, advising, and instructional delivery with the accelerated academic calendar. Program maps were redesigned to distribute coursework intentionally across the first and second eight-week terms, enabling students to regain momentum quickly if they encountered early challenges. Advising structures were strengthened by embedding advisors in academic departments and involving them in department meetings, improving coordination between student support and instructional planning.

The academic calendar was also restructured using a “five-start” model, creating rolling enrollment opportunities throughout the year and improving access — particularly during the summer term. To increase classroom efficiency, the college reduced underenrolled sections by strategically co-locating general education courses near students’ technical programs, thereby improving attendance and access. In high-contact fields such as health sciences, hybrid delivery models were adopted, pairing online lectures with in-person labs to preserve instructional quality while maintaining flexibility.

Together, these operational changes enabled more responsive scheduling aligned with workforce needs and enrollment patterns, while creating a more coherent and navigable experience for students.

Communication and Change Messaging

How the institution explained the change internally and externally

Clear and consistent communication was essential to building understanding and buy-in. At the campus level, leaders played an active role in student-facing messaging. Notably, the vice chancellor of academic affairs at Terre Haute personally attended every student orientation during the first year to explain the 8-week structure and its benefits.

Students reported valuing:

- The ability to focus on fewer courses at a time
- Faster credit accumulation
- Opportunities to re-enroll quickly after early setbacks

Internally, messaging emphasized that shortened terms maintained rigor and quality. Faculty and advisors were trained to provide aligned guidance and dispel myths that eight-week courses diluted academic standards.

What Practitioners Should Notice

Ivy Tech's system-wide implementation highlights several lessons for large, multicampus institutions:

- **Early, inclusive engagement reduces resistance:** Faculty and staff involvement from the outset enables transparency and shared ownership.
- **Professional development is essential:** Redesigning for accelerated terms requires sustained training and support.
- **Data must guide flexibility:** Formal exemption processes and disaggregated outcomes protect quality and equity.
- **Cross-functional collaboration strengthens impact:** Alignment between academic and student affairs improves advising effectiveness and student navigation.
- **Systems thinking advances equity:** Strategies such as embedded digital textbooks, aligned hiring practices, and centralized course locations reduce barriers and improve coherence.