

What Every President and Every Chief Academic Officer Should Know About College and University Summer Sessions

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information about Summer Session at *Washburn University* provided by *Tim Peterson*

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This document was designed to be freely downloaded and used by colleges and universities to assist their chief executive and academic officers in understanding the nature of academic summer sessions. Each institution using this document will need to update the *italicized* portions of this document with pertinent information from the institution.

Summer Session is a vital enterprise at your college or university. In this electronic document, we hope to provide you in a convenient format information to make you more aware of this enterprise and its importance to your campus. We know that, in your line of work, you have great demands on your time, so we've tried to be brief.

As the title suggests, this document is addressed to you as the President or as the Chief Academic Officer of your institution. The author is the director of a university summer session, and was helped in the preparation of the document by many summer session administrators from across the country. If you have comments or suggestions about this document, please click on the author's name and send an email message.

The variety of types of summer sessions, and the issues concerning them, is as rich as the variety of institutions of higher education in the U.S. In this brief document, we provide a broad view of summer sessions. We will discuss how summer session benefits [students](#), [faculty](#) and the [institution](#); indicate how summer sessions are [organized administratively](#); and provide [some links](#) to web sites which offer additional details about summer sessions across North America.

Unless otherwise indicated, data used in this document are from the "2000 Summer Sessions Associations' Joint Statistical Report," prepared at Washburn University by [Debra Warren](#). (The data in the statistical report are based on responses from participating institutions; however, the institutions that respond to the survey tend to be most active in the development of summer sessions. A complete list of participating institutions is included in the report.)

1. Someone has to be in charge

Summer sessions are organized in numerous different ways, and no one model is universally agreed to be superior. Some institutions have highly centralized models, where decisions regarding summer programs and budget are made by one individual. Others have more decentralized models, with a summer session officer who delegates certain program responsibilities and/or allocate program funds to deans or department chairs. Some institutions are highly decentralized, with each academic unit given a budget and accepting responsibility for programs. Every point along this spectrum seems to be occupied. Campuses also have their own unique climates and cultures as well.

The common factor found among successful summer programs, however, is that someone (we'll call that person the "summer session director") ultimately has clear responsibility for the summer session, and has been given the authority and the budget needed to carry out this responsibility within the structural model of the institution. The principle is that "when everyone is in charge, no one is in charge." The summer session experience at many different kinds of institutions bears witness to this principle. A few phone calls to your colleagues at other institutions will no

doubt confirm it as well.

Perhaps the main reason why this is so is that there are many competing interests involved. Students have needs and desires regarding the summer session, but so do faculty and administration. These competing needs can often be reconciled in a very beneficial way, but this will not happen on its own. Summer session brings benefits to all groups, however, as will be discussed below.

There are many reporting models for summer session directors. Most commonly, summer session directors report to the chief academic officer (or to someone reporting to the CAO) or to a dean of continuing education (and/or extension, special instructional programs, or other names). The "right place" for a summer session director depends on the institution, of course. However, in order to be able to exercise the authority described above, the summer session director should report to a senior administrative official.

The summer session director at Washburn University is Tim Peterson. He reports to the Vice President for Academic Affairs

Typically, the summer session director is charged with a specific fiscal obligation that must be met through summer tuition and fees. That obligation might be to cover a certain percentage of instructional costs. At some institutions, an overhead assessment is added to the obligation, and at others, costs of the summer session office are part of this obligation. The following table shows the fiscal obligations assigned at 151 public and private institutions participating in the 2004 Joint Summer Session Associations survey:

| | | | | |
|--|----------------------------------|--|---|-----------------------|
| Less than 100 % of instructional costs | 100% of instructional costs only | 100% of instructional costs, plus year-round cost of summer session office | 100% of instructional costs, cost of summer session office, plus an overhead factor | other or not reported |
| 6% | 7% | 13% | 70% | 5% |

Naturally, such choices depend on the fiscal structure and the tuition and fee structure of the institution. However, at most institutions, summer sessions can be expected to cover costs and to make some contribution toward the overall operation of the institution.

Summer Session at Washburn is expected to cover 100% of instructional costs plus an overhead factor of 51% of instructional cost.

2. Summer Session should be designed for students

Students are and must be at the heart of college and university summer sessions. If this is not the case at your institution, you may want to consider exercising your influence to bring about this perspective. Three questions, asked in this order, should drive the planning of the summer session:

- [What courses/programs do students need or want?](#)
- [What times or instructional formats meet student needs?](#)
- [What faculty are available to teach these courses?](#)

What courses/programs do students need or want?

While students vary from institution to institution, the research and experience of many summer session directors in a variety of settings shows that the majority of students who take summer session courses do so for one or more of the following reasons:

- to enable themselves to graduate on time, or at least to shorten the time to graduation
- to lighten the course load required in other terms
- to concentrate on some area of study that needs full-time attention

- to take courses that can't be offered at other times of the year
- to take courses that they could not get into during other terms
- to be in smaller classes
- to overcome academic difficulties/deficiencies
- to get a "jump start" in a new environment (for freshmen or transfer students)

Students choose particular courses in the summer session for many of the same reasons they choose courses in the fall and spring: to meet general education requirements, satisfy prerequisites, fulfill major or correlate requirements, to take electives, to improve job-related skills or employability, or for personal enrichment. Understanding which of these are most important to various groups of students at your institution is an important part of summer course planning.

Thus, the summer session schedule can be likened to an investment portfolio. A diversified selection of courses is required to meet these varied needs.

At the same time, the summer student body is often dissimilar from the academic year student body. At many institutions, summer session serves a substantial number of "visiting" students, in addition to its own regular students. Such students may attend your institution because they are home for the summer, perhaps while working at home. Perhaps, as in the case of public school teachers, they are only free to take classes during the summer. They may have come to take a particular course or set of courses at your campus that they cannot get at their home institution. Whatever the reason, such students provide a real revenue bonus for your institution, since they would not be attending otherwise.

12-18% of students enrolling in Summer Session courses at Washburn University are visiting from other higher education institutions.

It is important to remember that, for most students, summer session is an optional attendance period. Therefore, it is important to put some effort into marketing the summer session. Your own students must be sold on the benefits of giving up some of the freedom of summer to take classes. Visiting students will need to be convinced that their needs can be met on your campus. You can expect that your institution's investment in promotional materials such as the class schedule will be somewhat larger on a per unit basis than in the fall and spring. Your institution may very well use a variety of other advertising methods to communicate to students the benefits of your program. Typically, these activities will be separate from the usual recruitment programs of the institution.

What times or instructional formats meet student needs?

Summer Session is by its nature compressed relative to the fall and spring terms. Typical academic calendars for schools on a semester system allow 15-16 weeks for fall and spring terms. Starting in early June and ending in mid-August leaves only about 10 weeks for summer session, though some schools manage to squeeze 12 weeks in by starting sooner and/or ending later. Whatever the time allotted, summer session often consists of a mixture of course lengths. For instance, there may be an eight-week summer session, with a couple of five-week sessions overlapping it. There may be back-to-back five or six week sessions. Some larger institutions have more than 30 different summer "sessions" going on at the same time. The trend over the past 20 years seems to be toward shorter sessions, and this trend appears to be driven by student preferences.

The table below shows the length of the term having the most enrollment (by student credit hour) among 144 public and private institutions surveyed for Summer 2005:

| Length of term | 3 weeks | 4 weeks | 5 weeks | 6 weeks | 7 weeks | 8 weeks | 9 or more weeks |
|-------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|-----------------|
| Number of schools | 10 | 14 | 40 | 47 | 5 | 22 | 6 |
| Percent of total | 7% | 10% | 28% | 33% | 3% | 15% | 4% |

Shorter terms are often popular with students and faculty because they help to overcome one of the frequently reported hindrances to summer session enrollment, the need for a break in the summer. Students can devote 5 weeks to pursuing course work and still have some time off before the next term begins

Some disciplines (for example, mathematics and some of the natural sciences) do not lend themselves as well to shorter terms.

Summer Session at Washburn University consists of two five-week sessions with an overlapping eight-week session. Numerous short-term courses are also offered.

What faculty are available to teach these courses?

With good communication and careful planning, summer session can and should benefit students and faculty alike. [Benefits to faculty](#) are discussed in the next section. Certainly the choice of courses to be offered depends on the availability of qualified faculty to teach them. However, summer session course offerings should not be planned primarily on whose "turn" it is to teach. Departmental planning for summer session sometimes takes on the following form: the department chair asks who wants to teach, and then asks those who want to teach what they would like to teach. While this may serendipitously result in a schedule that meets student needs, it is not as likely to do so.

3. Summer Session should benefit faculty

Over 130 regular and adjunct faculty taught courses at Washburn University during Summer Session 2004.

Summer session offers at least two fundamental opportunities for faculty:

- The opportunity to innovate and develop new or improved courses through experimentation in summer when classes might be smaller and other distractions might be fewer.
- The opportunity to earn extra income.

To a certain extent, summer session can at the same time meet student needs and serve as a laboratory for curricular innovation. With the smaller class sizes and longer class periods that often characterize summer courses, instructors can attempt to incorporate new technologies and methodologies. In addition, courses involving certain kinds of field work are often ideally suited for the summer. Even courses that are offered in the other academic terms can be given a different look by including some activities that work well in a summer setting.

Summer session can also offer opportunities for faculty to teach different clientele. Many institutions have offered summer programs for gifted high school students, or intensive workshops for professionals. Teaching these unique groups of students can be great fun, and is a form of faculty development.

To the degree possible within other constraints, then, faculty should be given the opportunity to think creatively about the summer session.

Faculty also appreciate some of the same aspects of summer session that students like. Students are taking fewer courses and can give each more attention. There are usually fewer students so faculty can give them more individual attention. Courses meet more often and for longer periods, providing better continuity of subject matter. Facilities are more accessible, the atmosphere more relaxed. And parking is more plentiful!

At some institutions, particularly research-oriented colleges and universities, enticing faculty to teach at all in the

summer is difficult to do. Most institutions, however, find that the opportunity to supplement salaries makes summer teaching an attractive option for faculty. The attractiveness of the option will depend on the rate of pay and related compensation issues, however, and there is great variety among institutions in this regard. Key factors are:

- Basis for computing the summer salary. Frequently used methods include: a fixed percent of regular 9-month salary per credit hour or per course taught, a flat amount per credit hour or per course taught, and a flat amount based on academic rank per credit hour or course taught
- Type of summer contract; that is, guaranteed contracts vs. contract contingent upon enrollment
- Existence of a per-course cap on summer earnings.
- Payment for supervision of independent studies or direction of these
- Extension of benefit package to summer salary (for example, if the institution contributes a percentage of regular salary to a retirement plan, is the same percentage contribution made for summer salary?)

Of course, faculty represented by a collective bargaining unit will usually have these factors spelled out by contract. On every campus, finding an equitable balance of these factors to make summer teaching attractive while still remaining affordable to the institution requires considerable effort on the part of the summer session director, the administration, and the faculty. Here is the status of these factors at your institution:

| Compensation factor | Status at Washburn University |
|---|--|
| <i>Basis for computing salary</i> | <i>Three and one-third percent of 9-month salary per credit hour</i> |
| <i>Type of summer contract</i> | <i>contingent upon enrollment</i> |
| <i>Salary cap?</i> | <i>none (voluntary cap in one School)</i> |
| <i>Faculty paid for ind. study or thesis supervision?</i> | <i>no</i> |
| <i>Benefit package applied to summer salary?</i> | <i>no</i> |

Where it is difficult to find faculty willing to teach in the summer, many institutions provide opportunities for visiting faculty from other institutions, graduate students and or adjunct faculty during the summer.

4. Summer Session should benefit the institution

Perhaps the most fundamental thing you should know about the summer session is its importance to the university as a whole. The benefits of summer session to students and faculty were discussed above. But consider also the following:

- Most summer sessions make money for the institution, as mentioned in part 1 of this document. Net revenues from summer are used to meet other institutional needs. Other fiscal benefits accrue to student housing, the bookstore, food service, etc. Buildings and grounds do not stand empty for three months, but are used more efficiently.
- Summer sessions provide opportunities to students, staff, and faculty that would otherwise not be available to them. For example, new programs are much easier to try in the summer. New courses can be offered on a trial basis. Staff and members of the community can utilize summer offerings for personal development. In general, summer session is more flexible. There is much greater autonomy and liberty in the summer than during the rigid, usually conservative, fall and spring terms, and hence the summer provides an essential dimension to an institution of higher learning.
- Many of your students depend on summer session to meet specific academic needs or to keep their programs on track. Surveys at some institutions have found that as many as 75-80% of their graduates attended at least one summer session during their academic careers.
- Many academic departments depend on summer session to handle excess load in certain courses.
- Summer session increases the visibility of the institution. Summer programs which reach out to high school

students or other special populations can provide positive public relations for the institution, and can serve as a recruiting tool as well. People who might not otherwise ever be a part of the institution form a connection. If you haven't already received one, be sure to ask your summer session director for a copy of the summer session policy handbook or planning guide at your institution. Such a document should provide you with a good indication of how summer session is contributing to the life of your college or university.

Here are a few of the ways Summer Session 2005 benefited Washburn University:

A total 2,385 students generated 11,277 credit hours

Net revenue generated exceeded the budgetary goal by 13% (figure approx. for 2005)

Virtually all graduate programs depend on summer session to help keep their part-time students on schedule to graduate

Previous studies have shown that nearly 80% of graduates enrolled in at least one summer session course

5. Summer Session IS part of the "academic year"

Unfortunately, the term "academic year" is often used to refer to the fall and spring semesters. Calendar years and fiscal years are 12 months long, and so are academic years. Colleges and universities operate year round, and the portion of the year known as "summer session" provides significant opportunities and benefits to the institution. Many students depend on summer session to keep on schedule for graduation or to take lighter loads in other semesters. For these students, summer truly is a third semester. The institution should guard against marginalizing this important part of the academic year.

6. Your college or university should belong to a national or regional organization of summer session administrators

There are two regional organizations and two national organizations of summer session administrators. These organizations provide a variety of services to their memberships, including annual conferences, newsletters and home pages. In addition, these organizations work together to provide two major publications, the annual "Summer Sessions Associations' Joint Statistical Report" and "Summer Academe," a refereed journal emphasizing scholarship relating to college and university summer sessions. Most important for your institution and your summer session director, however, is the wealth of ideas and contacts that arise from meeting with counterparts from other schools.

Annual dues to these organizations are low, making them a real bargain.

The four national and regional summer session organizations are:

- [North Central Conference on Summer Schools \(NCCSS\)](#)
- [North American Association of Summer Sessions \(NAASS\)](#)
- [Western Association of Summer Sessions Administrators \(WASSA\)](#)
- Association of University Summer Sessions (membership in AUSS is by invitation only)

Washburn University is a member of NCCSS and of NAASS.

Another valuable resource is "Summer Academe," a journal devoted to scholarly articles pertaining to summer sessions. To subscribe, contact the publisher, Caddo Gap Press, 317 South Division St, Ann Arbor, MI, 48104.

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