

Late Registration: May It Rest in Peace

As pressure mounts to improve completion rates, more colleges consider the advantages of hard deadlines for course registration



BY TERRY O'BANION

Almost every institution of higher education engages in late registration. But evidence is mounting that the practice, originally intended to keep the doors of opportunity open for students as long as possible, wreaks havoc on the ability of colleges to achieve the goals of the emerging completion agenda.

Despite best intentions, late registration is an educationally ineffective architecture deeply embedded in the culture of the community college. It is time, once and for all, to end late registration. May it rest in peace.

Advocates for Late Registration

For decades late registration has been championed by two groups advocating for its value as a key policy and practice of community college culture. One group makes the case for late registration as a key component of the community college access agenda. Members of this camp say that extending registration, even as long as a week after classes begin, is an expression of the open-door philosophy of community colleges.

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90%

Percentage of college-ready students enrolled at Florida's Valencia College who persist from fall to spring semesters following the dissolution of late registration at the college.

The second group holds that late registration increases the number of students who enroll by extending the deadline for registration and, therefore, increases the number of full-time equivalent (FTE) students who generate revenue for the college. Some administrators have used this argument to defend the practice as a necessary evil to garner more resources. The argument is sometimes made that the practice is related to resources that support faculty salaries—thus checkmating disgruntled faculty who argue for its termination.

The Case Against Late Registration

Many more educators, however, favor an end to late registration—and with good reason. For decades, in his writing and speeches, John Roueche, former director of the famed Community College Leadership Program at the University of Texas at Austin, asked two questions: “What is the most important day of the semester?” and “What is the most important week of the semester?” His answer: The first day and the first week, respectively.

The first day and the first week of classroom instruction are significant because this is when students who are most at risk become engaged and make connections that encourage persistence and success. All students—but especially first-generation, underprepared students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds—need to connect with other students, with instructors, and with course content as quickly as possible. Late registration limits those opportunities for engagement.

On campus, the first to observe the fallout from late registration are often the faculty, on the ground and in the trenches, along with advisers and the registrar's staff. In cases where late registration is still common practice, the 16-week term is frequently reduced to 15 weeks of instruction—cheating students of their tuition and learning opportunities. An instructor might begin day one with 30 students and come to the next class session to find

that 15 of the day-one group have dropped out, and 15 new students have taken their place. The third class session of the first week is often a crash-course. Realizing this, many instructors attempt no serious organization or instruction in the first week of classes.

Faculty give careful consideration to orienting students, creating a sense of class community, helping classmates connect, presenting course overviews, introducing themselves and their perspectives, and making initial assignments—all in the first day and first week of class. This initial groundwork early in the term is the key to subsequent success for many students, but the preparation and orientation process is constantly interrupted by the comings and goings of late registrants.

When students are allowed to ignore deadlines and spend a week or more milling about campus to orchestrate their schedules, we create the illusion that they do not have to show up on time or care about their decisions. If we are to prepare the workforce of the future with the work habits required for the 21st century, the myths propagated by this culture of late registration must be debunked.

Impact on Students

The practice of late registration has been studied for more than three decades, and results have overwhelmingly indicated that it is detrimental to student success. In a study by Smith, Street, and Olivarez in 2002, 35 percent of new students who registered late were retained to the next semester compared with 80 percent of those

who registered on time. The study also found that new students who registered on time for their courses withdrew from 10 percent of their course hours, while those who registered late withdrew from 21 percent of their course hours. In 2007, Keck, in a study of the relationship between subject areas and late registration at one community college, found that in math and science courses, 17 percent of students who registered on time were unsuccessful as measured by their final course grade; 44 percent of late registrants were unsuccessful by that same measure. In the social sciences, just 7 percent of timely registrants were unsuccessful, compared with 41 percent of late registrants, according to the study.

A 2010 Goodman study, which polled 2,159 first-time full-time students enrolled in the Kentucky Community and Technical College System, found that “...students who registered late for their courses were less likely to persist through their first year of college.”

The study examined predictive behavior of students related to persistence through their first year of college based on three variables: course registration time, transfer-orientation, and income level. Of these three variables, course registration time had a direct, significant correlation to student persistence—specifically, late student registration was directly related to a lack of persistence during the first year of college.

Seventy-nine percent of low-income students in Goodman's survey who registered on time for their courses persisted to the next semester, while

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just 52 percent of students who registered late persisted. Excluding low-income students, 80 percent of those who registered on time persisted, compared with just 64 percent who registered late. Seventy-nine percent of transfer-oriented students who registered on time persisted, while only 60 percent of those who registered late persisted. Of students with technical and vocational academic goals, the report said, 80 percent of students who registered on time persisted, compared with 56 percent of those who registered late.

The problem is obvious. The most at-risk students tend to register late at

a time when the system is overloaded and least capable of meeting their needs. In a 2005 study, Zottos found that low-performing students were more likely to register late. When at-risk students need more time and attention, late registration is a practice that provides less of both.

In addition, students who register late are likely to find their desired courses and sections closed, further sapping their motivation. The challenge of securing financial aid, purchasing books and arranging child care at the last minute—in a system that is overstressed—is often the last straw that drives students away.

How to Terminate Your Late Registration Program

For colleges that want to terminate late registration, the following guidelines will be helpful:

- The college should appoint a collegewide committee to study the issue and make recommendations. The committee should review and summarize national research on the impact of late registration complemented by a review of local research and perceptions of the college's faculty and staff.
- The committee should create a rationale for terminating late registration that reflects the values, needs, and resources of the college.
- College leaders should use the opportunity and subsequent change to the college culture to explore and experiment with integrated models of student services, accelerated learning models that enroll students in intensive courses over shorter periods of time, and the application of additional technology to support these efforts.
- College leaders should direct that a marketing plan is prepared and implemented that communicates the changes, including subsequent new registration processes and deadlines, to all stakeholders: enrolled students, new and prospective students, full and adjunct faculty, staff and administrators, area high school counselors and administrators, and relevant community agencies and groups. College materials that contain information about registration will need to be updated to reflect these changes.
- The college's office of institutional research should design programs to assess the impact of the change on students and the institution, including enrollment, student success, revenues, and satisfaction.

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greater the likelihood those students will be successful.

Culture Change

Looking to move in a new direction, many colleges already have terminated late registration programs. Sinclair Community College (SCC) in Dayton, Ohio, and Valencia College (VC) in Orlando, Fla., are two examples.

A 2002 SCC position paper, *Paradigm Shift to Emphasis on Student Success*, charged the school's retention committee to analyze critical factors that affect retention and success. Committee members identified late registration as a primary barrier and organized internal and national research on problems related to late registration. Keeping in mind the need to minimize the impact on enrollment and budget with the termination of the practice, college leaders examined the benefits and challenges and created action and marketing plans. Steps were taken to

inform all key stakeholders, including students, that the last day of registration would occur the day before classes began—thus ending the practice of late registration at SCC.

SCC administrators say the outcomes so far have been positive. Persistence from spring to fall semesters for all students increased slightly while persistence for *new* degree/certificate-seeking students increased by 7.3 percent. Fall 2002 to fall 2003 retention improved from the 2001–02 baseline of 45 percent to 47.9 percent for all students and 52.5 percent for new degree students. Withdrawals requiring a refund were significantly lower on the new deadline date, according to administrators. Course and room scheduling was

easier; registration, financial aid, and enrollment services staff were free to respond to routine business rather than to emergencies; and faculty were pleased to begin their classes in earnest with a student roster reflecting true enrollment.

VC has been moving in a similar direction for years. The college's Start Right program eliminated late registration and traditional drop/add (no class can be added once it has met) periods, and instituted a real admission deadline to enforce the expectation that every new student must be assessed, advised, placed, and oriented before the first class. VC President Sanford Shugart's call to action was, "Let's make the first minute of the

first day of the first class a learning minute."

Critics initially worried that eliminating late registration would have a negative effect on enrollment, but administrators say any effects proved temporary and negligible. Still others raised concerns about access for late-arriving students. To appease these concerns, VC added a series of "flex-start" classes for first-time students that begin a month later. Any college can address the concerns about closing off enrollment by adding accelerated courses that begin after the regular schedule is under way.

Gone now are the lines outside the doors of academic departments for

the first week of classes as well as the chaos created by late registration and extended drop/add periods. Administrators credit the college's Start Right program with contributing to significant improvements in fall term success and fall to spring persistence, which is now at 90 percent for college-ready new students and 84 percent for new students in need of developmental education.

Late Registration: End Game

The case for terminating late registration is strong. Colleges that redesign registration and intake procedures to eliminate late registration will: (1) improve persistence and retention rates for their students; (2) send a message

to students and faculty that learning and instruction are important every day and every week of the term; (3) establish expectations for students to meet deadlines and live with the consequences of their decisions, which may translate into improved workforce habits; (4) permit faculty to begin the process of instruction the first day of class without interruption; and (5) realize increased revenues based on FTE as persistence and retention rates increase.

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MORE ON THE COMPLETION AGENDA

This article on late registration by Terry O'Banion continues his work in speaking and writing about the Completion Agenda. In the fall, AACCC will publish his monograph on *Academic Advising: The Key to Student Success*. For information on other articles by O'Banion, see www.league.org/terry or contact obanion@league.org.

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