

Scheduling System Design Team

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Year after year, the College “rolls” over the previous year’s schedule of classes. How do we know that those courses on those days with those times, locations and formats will work best for our students, or that there aren’t individuals missing from our student population because our offerings are not accessible to them? We don’t. However, anecdotal information suggests that more diverse offerings (days of the week, times of day, flexible terms) would increase access for students in our community to pursue their educational goals. But expanding or making offerings more flexible proves challenging. Even minor changes, such as adding linked courses or trying to increase the number of sections offered can involve hours of extra (and time inefficient) work on the part of the academic administrators and others, and the new options may not be noticed by those who would most benefit. There are some exceptions. The College began using waitlists managed by the Registrar’s staff in 2009. Though time consuming, these waitlists have become a valuable source of previously uncollected information about student demand. Still, as one faculty member commented to a design team member, “Schedules frequently give greater preference to what—and when, the faculty wants to teach rather than what—and when, students want/need.”

The Scheduling System Design Team researched:

- How MVCC’s schedule of classes is developed and how it could be developed
- Challenges related to scheduling (college calendar, room and instructor capacity)
- Cohort and accelerated pace learning models that might help us optimize resources and meet the needs of non-traditional students.

Initially, the team explored several areas related to course scheduling:

Should there be more flexibility in the academic schedule and college calendar? We discussed the following:

- Staggered and late term starts
- Varied term lengths (5 week, 8 week, etc.)
- Alternative schedules for meeting contact hours within a week (MWF vs. MW, F/S, etc.)

Recommendations:

- 1) **Streamline and simplify the college calendar**
 - a. **Eliminate the “Tuesday is a Monday” Fall Schedule.** This approach to the calendar is very confusing for students. It is also very challenging both for students and for adjunct faculty. When working students or adjuncts with other responsibilities sign up for a Tuesday class, that means they are committing to be available on a Tuesday, not a Monday. As a community college, it is critical that we fit into people’s schedules as seamlessly as possible. Adjuncts who agree to teach on a Tuesday may not be available to teach on a Monday. Students may not be able to rearrange child care and employment schedules because of quirks in our schedule.
 - b. **Consider a future calendar with a post-Labor Day start date.** As a community college, we are tied closely to the K-12 schools. Many high school students take MVCC classes. Our adjuncts are sometimes school teachers. Most importantly, many of our students have family responsibilities that make it difficult for them to start classes before their school age children are back to school. Finally, MVCC would be more accessible to students who bounce back from 4 year colleges or who start on enrollment/financial aid in late summer if classes began after Labor Day rather than the start of the fourth week in August.
- 2) **Identify partners near campus and within our region to expand physical space capacity.** Space on campus remains a concern, not just for special needs such as science labs or new programs, but even for regular lecture courses. The College should pursue creative partnerships with area agencies and businesses to overcome this challenge. It is possible that we could expand educational access as a result.
- 3) **Maximize internet and hybrid course offerings** that increase scheduling flexibility and capacity. The College needs to gain more control over which courses are offered via these alternative means, as well as the reliability and consistency of those offerings over time. This recommendation may overlap with those of the Online learning design team.
- 4) **Offer more evening, weekend, and internet courses** as demand builds for those classes, or to meet demand for oversubscribed courses.
- 5) **Centers should work coordinate their offerings to ensure that there are no conflicts between course offerings** for students following the recommended plan of study in academic programs.
- 6) **Ensure that online, evening, summer, and Rome sections are offered on a regular rotation.** Under the current system a course tends to be offered online or not, in the

evening or not, in Rome or not, based on preferences of faculty. Courses should be offered regularly in the evening to meet the needs of students in programs. This doesn't mean that a certain 200 level course needs to be offered every semester in the evening, but planning should be done to make sure that such a course if required for graduation is offered in the evening (or online, summer, Rome) on a predictable schedule and responsive to student demand.

- 7) **Establish course schedules and offerings to make it possible for students to complete at least some degree programs through online only and evening only study.**

Scheduling System Technology

The more flexible the College becomes with regard to course offerings (term length, times of day, etc.) the more challenging it becomes to create a course schedule. Course Scheduling Software could assist us to:

- Support student retention by determining student-specific course needs
- Maximize room use
- Maximize faculty resources
- Optimize the schedule creation process

Recommendations:

- 8) **The College should purchase course scheduling software (such as Astra Schedule Suite).** The team researched several software packages and determined that the Astra Schedule Suite provided the best package, which allowed input of information on student needs, classroom availability and existing course schedules and is compatible with BANNER.
- 9) **Implement a more robust Course Search that permits searching by a full range of day/time/ campus criteria.** Technology is not involved only in creating the course schedule from the College's side, but is also used by students and advisors as a means to search for classes and schedule them. Currently, there are two course searches, a public one on the website that allows students to search by term and campus but not

by other factors such as days or times. The secure search in SIRS, on the other hand, allows for searches by days/times but does not allow selection of campus, pulls outdated course information from Banner, and does not provide some important information such as major restrictions and course notes. The strengths of both searches should be combined and the weaknesses eliminated in a single course search.

10) **Present course search results** in a student and advisor friendly manner. This includes:

- Consistent numbering of sections (i.e. 100= morning, 200=afternoon, R=Rome, 800=internet, a= A term, etc.)
- Courses should appear in a logical order on a course search (For example, all 9 am MWF classes should be listed one after another, not mixed up with other days and times, alternate sections of the same course should be listed together).

11) **Develop a more graphic presentation of the Wait List.** The Argos reports viewed by Deans, faculty and staff, should be presented in an accessible, graphic format.

12) **List notation for Fall and Spring Only courses on degree worksheets.** While listing this information in the catalog is not desirable, it would still be helpful from an advising perspective to note that information on working documents that come from centers.

“Packaged” degree programs for targeted audiences

Finally, members of the design team spent a significant amount of time researching cohort programs that meet the needs of adult/non-traditional students. There is more to these programs than just alternative scheduling. Programs designed to meet the scheduling needs of working adults are also designed so that they function as packaged programs with a promised start and end date, a cohort of students and faculty for support, and a philosophy of learning that emphasizes relevance, interactivity, and life-experience. The following characteristics should be part of any such program that MVCC develops:

- **Adults seek results oriented programs.** Having an obtainable goal and set schedule allows the adult student the opportunity to arrange their hectic schedules and plan for the future.
- **Front loading for success.** Having the ability to accomplish milestones motivates the adult learner. Students shouldn't begin with a developmental math course, but rather a course or two that can build confidence and community and create a sense of success. Programs should include earning a certificate on the way to a degree.

- **Cohort Format.** Adults have different needs from the traditional student. A cohort of students that moves through an entire program together strengthens the group dynamic and builds a positive support network.
- **A packaged deal.** The accelerated/cohort programs for adults that we reviewed maintained rigor in the content of the courses, but attempted to reduce the amount of time and effort students have to put in to enroll and stay enrolled in classes. Students should be able to register all at once, with subsequent registration periods in the pre-set schedule handled on their behalf. In addition to the packaged schedule, adult cohort programs are usually designed so that students can have their books and materials available in the classroom the first night of class or sent to their home.
- **Online Learning Component.** Teaching adults to learn online will allow them to further their education in non-traditional formats. Building increasingly independent online learning components into the program will mean that as they progress toward the degree, students will not need to meet face to face as frequently, saving them time for travel and adding flexibility to their schedules as they proceed.
- **Connected to bachelor programs.** In our desire to promote education, it is important for us to be able to direct students to higher education programs that have similar non-traditional formats such as Keuka College, Cazenovia College, and Franklin University. Having these ties will enable our students to be successful in the future.

Recommendations:

- 13) **Offer an accelerated packaged cohort program targeted toward working adults.** The timeline should take into account the fact that most new programs require a full year for marketing and recruiting. (Adults generally spend about a year making the decision to begin a degree program.) It is critical that MVCC be clear about what it is promising, and follow through on this promise. For example, if we promise: “Enroll in this adult learner cohort program, and you will come every Tuesday night for 4 hours and then in 34 months you’ll have your Associate Degree in Business Management” then we need to make sure that the program starts and finishes promptly for those students.
- 14) **Start small** to get ourselves established and gain experience with packaged accelerated programs. The team recommends beginning with a business degree before expanding. This is the model that other colleges have followed. Once successful in a single program, these colleges have expanded into other areas (accounting, computers, human services, criminal justice, etc.)

- 15) **Provide adequate student support services** for the cohort program. This includes: orientation, tutoring, online learning support, advising, admission and registration, financial aid and payment, books and supplies. Students need one number and one person to contact to minimize the time spent on the “logistics” side.
- 16) **Set a clear minimum age limit** (suggested: 25 years) for admission to the program to guarantee maturity of students in the program and build common sense of life experience and purpose.
- 17) **Establish guidelines in advance for advanced placement or alternative credit.** We should have a clear idea how we will answer questions adult students frequently ask about credit by exam and life experience CLEP, military credit, and transfer credit, and we should have a streamlined processes for handling such credit requests.
- 18) **Make the workload at any given time manageable for a busy working adult.** Generally, this means that students need to take courses consecutively in modules so that they are not balancing multiple courses in the same period of time.
- 19) **Assign a dedicated employee to the accelerated program who can ensure its smooth process and success.** The individual should work with both academics and student services to ensure that students’ needs are met.
- 20) **Complete the design and establish the staffing and logistics of the cohort/accelerated program prior to marketing such a program.** The program will not have the credibility nor a good chance of providing quality services if it is thrown together right when students are enrolling.
- 21) **Explore a full range of options for staffing the course offerings.** We found that most of these adult packaged programs rely primarily on adjuncts for teaching. This works very well for evening only programs. Colleges we researched provided adjunct faculty relevant training in the learning models that work best for adult students, and they provided a single contact person for support and communication, just as the students in the program do.