Do Students Work Less in Courses Offered in Compressed Time Frames?

By: Maryellen Weimer, PhD in Teaching and Learning

This is an important question because so many institutions now offer regular courses in shorter time frames. It might be a course offered in a monthlong summer session or one taught in January between regular-length semesters. It’s also important because there is a perception among students that shorter courses are easier. How could you possibly do as much work in a four-week course as in a 15-week one?

Grades students earn in courses offered in compressed time frames have been compared with grades earned in semester-long courses, and a variety of analyses (cited in the article referenced below) have shown them to be comparable. Students aren’t earning more A’s (or any other grade) in shortened course time frames, and that supports the conclusion that these short versions of normally longer courses aren’t easier. Another way to ascertain whether compressed courses are easier is to look at the workload, as reported by students, in courses offered in these two time frames.

That’s the analysis reported in the study, titled “To what degree do compressed term courses differ in workload rigor from their regular semester counterparts at Brigham Young University?”

It is important to note that this study was done at one institution. Semesters at BYU contain 70 days of instruction spread over a 15-week period. What they call “term courses” contain 34 days of instruction over a seven-week period. The number of contact hours (hours spent in class) is the same for both kinds of courses. Data was collected via a regularly used online questionnaire that asks students about various factors related to each course they are taking. One question asks them to report the number of hours per week spent on assignments outside of class.

Using that data, these researchers compared workload by subject and by instructor for all semester and term courses, a selected group of general education semester and term courses, and selected general education courses. Across all semester and term courses they found small but statistically significant workload levels: “On average, students taking a semester course spent about 21 minutes more per credit per week than those taking it during its term counterpart.” The same results were found when selected general education courses were compared.

Differences in course rigor, defined in this case by workload, were much more pronounced depending on the course and who taught it. For example, in some sections of a general education economics course, students reported spending 56 hours more on course assignments than did students in other sections. In summary of their findings, the researchers wrote, “When disaggregating the workload comparisons by subject, differences in workload between session types tended to be low. … However, significant differences in workload were found among courses, and significant differences were found among instructors of these selected general education courses. Some of the differences were quite large (i.e., over 3 hours per week) depending on the instructor.”

So, if students tell you they’re opting for courses offered in compressed time frames because they think short courses may be easier, you can use this evidence to question that assumption. For teachers, the question lurking in these data relates to the variation in workload and the fact that teachers, even those teaching sections of the same course, weren’t having students work equally hard. Would that be true of multiple-section courses at your institution? If focusing on individual courses and teachers is too politically charged, perhaps the dialogue could begin with a more general conversation about workload expectations for students.


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- **Gordon McGregor** - 1 week ago  
  I took a condensed course this past summer. There was no less material or requirements than the same course over 12 weeks. It was possibly the hardest thing I have had to do.

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- **Michele** - 1 week ago  
  I loved condensed courses. The workload was indeed the same and they fit so much better into my life when I am working full time. They work best for me when I am disciplined and read at least half of the material (textbook or papers) before the class even starts. I am then better prepared for discussions and assignments. Truth is, I am not in it for the grade. I have places to go!

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- **KirstenHansen** - 19 hours ago  
  I have only taken one condensed course and the workload did, in that case, need to be adjusted slightly. There were two of us taking the course, it was a grad level course, and we hit a point where we could either work hard on our papers or do the extensive weekly readings. Our instructor agreed that she could give us a break one week. (I also had mono at the time but that was not played in as a factor). There are only so many hours in a day and for courses that are a heavy workload for a full semester, there may need to be some changes made like @Michele mentions (giving access to the materials ahead of time). I also know of one course at my institution that actively recorded lectures because they knew students would be suffering from information overload and would need to review the material later. It depends on how tight the course is, what the requirements are, who your students are. I think the quality of work and, to a great extent, the amount should be the same. But in a semester long course, you may have to adapt slightly also, to ensure that students have sufficient time for assignments if you have required more work than is really feasible or to go over something in more depth if your students are struggling.

  Reply

- **Jim Clark** - 12 hours ago  
  People are asking the wrong question ... the right question is what do students retain from the course months later when taking a subsequent course building on knowledge in the compressed course. There are lots of reasons to think that students will retain less from the compressed course, such as that distributed learning is better than compressed learning. Faculty and administrators adopting these "innovations" are not serving students well.