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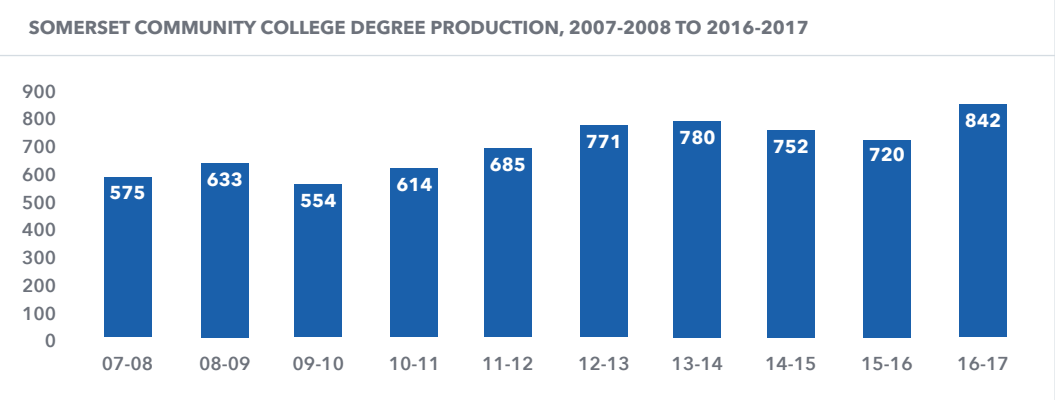
Graduate More Students Faster and Save Millions in the Process

Since 2007-2008, Somerset Community College (KY) has increased full-time equivalent enrollment by 5.8 percent and Associate's degrees awarded by 46.4 percent, and in the process, saved over $2.3 million. How did they do it? Somerset partnered with Ad Astra, a course scheduling and enrollment management organization, to generate a more efficient course schedule that focused on improving accessibility, reducing waste, and encouraged students to take more courses to graduate faster.

Somerset Community College Degree Production, 2007-2008 to 2016-2017



From 2007-2008 to 2016-2017, Somerset Community College increased FTE enrollment by 5 percent and Associate Degree production by 46 percent.

About Somerset

Somerset Community College is a public, two-year institution with an enrollment of 7,943 students and is in Somerset, Kentucky, approximately 80 miles south of Lexington, Kentucky. About a decade ago, Somerset Provost Tony Honeycutt was exploring options to digitize the traditional paper course offerings into an online format, which led him to Ad Astra, a course scheduling and enrollment management organization. "In my initial meeting with [Ad Astra CEO and Founder] Tom Shaver, I remember him mentioning that they could definitely digitize my schedule, but if we had an inefficient schedule, then we would just be rolling forward a bad schedule," Tony Honeycutt recalls. "At the time, I was primarily concerned with digitizing our schedule for our students, so efficiency was not really a priority." Efficiency soon became a priority for Dr. Honeycutt and Somerset when enrollment swelled to a high of 10,028 students in Fall 2011.

Making Course Scheduling a Priority

At the time, Somerset was not very different from most two-year institutions. There was a lot of under-filled course sections, and this was leading to a higher than average number of course cancellations, which created challenges for the registrar, faculty, and most importantly, students. Since 2010, when Tony Honeycutt and Somerset Community College made a commitment to use predictive analytics to make course scheduling decisions, the number of course sections delivered has declined 34 percent while the enrollment ratio in those courses increased 24%.

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Effectively Managing the Schedule Reduces Stress and Saves Money

At the core of this enrollment management strategy is a focus on "right-sizing" the course schedule, so students can get the courses they need to graduate without offering too many competing offerings. By offering a more balanced schedule with student demand in mind, course cancellations have declined 79 percent at Somerset. "Fewer course cancellations mean less work for admissions and academic staff, it increases the likelihood of a guaranteed schedule, which is good for students, and it is good for faculty as it guarantees employment," Honeycutt noted. Strategically aligning course scheduling means that full-time faculty can be prioritized, which decreases reliance upon part-time faculty. Since 2010, Somerset has seen a 20 percent increase in the share of student credit hours taught by full-time faculty, which is good for students. While many part-time faculty make exceptional contributions in the classroom and to the institution, independent research has found that full-time faculty are more likely to be on campus and can spend about 50 percent more time per credit hour on instruction (Benjamin 2002). Research has found that every 10 percent increase in full-time faculty at public institutions is associated with a 2.65 percent increase in the institution's graduation rate (Ehrenberg and Zhang 2004). At Somerset, during this time, the amount of degrees awarded has increased by 46 percent. By focusing on improving the course schedule, scheduling inefficiencies such as unstandardized meeting patterns and course alignment resulted in an opportunity to better meet student demand. Additionally, by providing a more consistent schedule, with a lower risk for course cancellation, students were able to get the courses they needed, when they needed them which has enabled them to graduate on-time at a greater frequency. An added bonus of scheduling efficiency has been additional financial margin for Somerset. Since 2011, Somerset has avoided $3.4 million in additional costs and saved $2.3 million in instructional expenditures through scheduling efficiency.

The Journey Continues…

The most recent work with Somerset has focused on better understanding student availability. Through Ad Astra research, Somerset learned that approximately 40 percent of their students were "non-traditional," or over the age of 25. These students were less likely to be in the labor force and were three times more likely to be taking care of children or dependents. By focusing on those students, Somerset can build a schedule that meets their needs. For example, by offering required courses between the hours of 9.00 AM – 3.00 PM ensures those students will be able to attend while their children are in school. This should help with retention, time to completion, and graduation as Ad Astra-led research found that students who are more likely to skip class are less likely to have a higher cumulative GPA, net of other demographic factors. Thus, having a schedule that fits into their lives might increase the likelihood students will attend class and succeed. Although your student population may not mirror Somerset's, Ad Astra can partner with you to deliver a customized solution that meets your student demand and student needs.

Ernst Benjamin, "How Over-reliance on Contingent Appointments Diminishes Faculty Involvement in Student Learning," Peer Review, Fall 2002, http://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/how-over-reliance-contingent-appointments-diminishes-faculty.

Ronald Ehrenberg and Liang Zhang, Do Tenured and Tenure-Track Faculty Matter? (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2004), http://www.nber.org/papers/w10695.pdf; Zhang, Ehrenberg, and Liu, Changing Faculty Employment.