Thomas Urban, Nathan D. Smith

Sometimes Shorter Is Better, But Not Always:
A Case Study

It is not common to think that shorter college courses produce better learning outcomes, but a recent, local study of over three years of data in Introduction to Philosophy courses at Houston Community College suggests that this may in fact be the case. In this study, we compare various term-lengths, from the traditional 16-week semester down to 5-week summer sessions and 3-week mini-sessions in both their Online and On-Campus „web-enhanced" formats.

The initial impetus for this review was to evaluate the effectiveness of Online, 3-week mini-sessions that had been offered, but which were viewed with skepticism by some faculty members on the Program Committee, which has curriculum oversight. So, the review of courses covers only those terms during which these online mini-sessions were offered. In order to provide adequate context for our review, we gathered data for all Introduction to Philosophy (PHIL 1301) courses, sorted by term length, for the period in question, from Fall 2007 to Summer 2011. The raw data were then analyzed using some very simple comparative arithmetic. We focused on *success rates* (the number of students receiving a C average or greater as a percentage of total students enrolled) and *completion rates* (number of students receiving a final grade as a percentage of total students enrolled) for all courses, comparing these rates across term lengths and delivery methods. On the basis of this comparison, we find that online courses fair worse than On-campus, though they exhibit a similar trend when like courses are compared across different term lengths. In particular, we find that shorter courses generally perform better than longer courses (with the exception of the 12-week term). However, this trend diverges when it comes to the controversial 3-week mini-sessions. In these cases, On-campus courses far outpace their counterparts, while online courses lag far behind. In other words, while the shortest term lengths seem to improve student success and retention in the case of On-campus courses, the

opposite is true for online courses. When the two delivery methods are compared against each other, our data show students achieving average success rates of 30 percentage points worse and completion rates of 22 points worse in online 3-week courses versus On-campus for the same term length.

This somewhat surprising result has not only left our HCC Philosophy Program Committee pondering possible reasons for the wide disparity, but also questioning whether there is anything that can be done to erase it. For now, the committee has voted to prohibit offering 3-week Online courses in Philosophy until these concerns can be addressed.

HCC's Philosophy program has offered Online classes for over a decade and our faculty have been leaders in incorporating Online components into their On-Campus courses since the late 1990s. In support of this, HCC's *Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence* offers a free, robust, two-tiered certification program for all Online learning modes, i.e., distance, hybrid (blended), and web-enhanced. Three years ago, our department at HCC/Northwest College made „web-enhanced" instruction mandatory for all faculty teaching On-campus, both fulltime and adjunct. Concurrently, our Program Committee has promoted an increase in the selection and number of different Online courses and raised the annual number of courses offered across the entire HCC district to seven, with multiple sections of each scheduled each semester. An eighth course is in the preliminary stages of development. At the same time, there are no „hybrid" or „50/50 blended" courses available to students in philosophy at HCC, though a shortage of classroom resources suggest that we will have no choice but to add them as enrollments continue to grow at their current pace.

Generally, our view is this. The question for all who have embraced technology for the sake of cultivating an increase in quality learning by today's students present a complex array of concerns that defy conventional approaches. Our data show the learning of 3-week Online students to be significantly deficient when compared to their On-Campus counterparts, but they do not tell us where the problem lies. One survey of data for all 3-week courses at HCC shows only 10 percentage points difference in success rates of Online courses as compared to On-Campus. What are the reasons for the disparity in the case of philosophy: the subject of Philosophy; the instructor; or student preparedness? These are questions for further study. For now, we will present the report that examined data on term lengths and success and persistence numbers as it was used to assess the online 3-week mini-session.

Review of 3-week DE Mini-term Sessions:

This report is intended to allow us to conclude our investigation into whether or not to permit 3-week mini-term courses to be delivered as Distance Education (DE) Online courses in philosophy. The question that prompted this review came from accreditation concerns, namely, „Does an Online course offered in this short length of time match-up in both content and quality with our On-Campus classes?" Southern Association (SACS) guidelines demand that this match be made.

In addition to this report, we have the raw data provided by the HCC Office of Institutional Research on success and completion rates for all DE and On-Campus sections of PHIL 1301 from Fall 2007 – Summer 2011. We also have preliminary data from our first full year of our course Student Learning Outcomes assessment report, however while it separates DE from On-Campus sections, it does not show a separate comparison according to term-lengths and is not part of this assessment.

The Office of Institutional Research data is differentiated by term length and delivery method, and the summary and analysis of these data. As reported, it provides grades, success numbers, and persistence numbers both in raw form and as a percentage of total students for PHIL 1301 courses from Fall 2007 to Summer 2011, distinguished by delivery method and length of term. I have color-coded both the DE and On-Campus results to differentiate them.

While the raw data are of interest, I have also provided a supplement by way of a summary and analysis, focusing on success and persistence as a function of method of instruction and length of term. In this table, you will find the total numbers for these courses and the total success and persistence numbers, but also the rate of success and persistence, defined as success or persistence number divided by total number of students, multiplied by 100. Additionally, the difference between the success and persistence rates of DE and On-Campus courses is given as the success or persistence rate of On-Campus courses minus success or persistence rate of DE courses. Finally, a „difference to average" score has been calculated in order to provide a basis for comparison across term lengths. This is defined as the success or persistence rate of a particular term of DE or On-Campus delivery minus the average of success or persistence rates for all like courses. This way we can compare the success and persistence rates of any type of

course against courses of the same length and different delivery as well as against the average of all courses with the same delivery. (NB: In calculating the average persistence and success rates for On-Campus courses, I have omitted BOTH the 10-week and the 8-week terms because of insufficient data.)

What we find when we compare these data is that, in general, On-Campus courses outperform DE courses in both success and persistence rates. The difference between On-Campus and DE courses becomes much more significant as the delivery term is shorter. Whereas shorter delivery terms improve the success and persistence rates of On-Campus courses, this is not the case for DE courses. Instead, what we find is that shorter terms improve success and persistence in DE courses up to and including the 5-week term. At this point, there is a significant drop-off in both success and persistence when the 3-week term is compared to the 5-week term. This seems to show that while students in DE courses for PHIL 1301 at HCC are less successful or persistent than their counterparts in On-Campus courses, this difference becomes increasingly significant as terms shorten and is very pronounced where the 3-week mini-term is concerned. In the case of the DE mini-term, student success and persistence are significantly lower than they are for any other course.

Now, there are a number of warnings that ought to be noted regarding both the data that we have used and the methods of analysis provided. First, we do not have similar sample sizes for course delivery methods and terms. Most significantly, we have many more students for the 16-week RT and the 12-week SS terms for On-Campus than any other type of course and almost no data on 10-week and 8-week On-Campus courses. Second, the difference to average figure is possibly skewed as a result of these differences in data sets. Surely, we do not have enough data for some of the figures. It is difficult to determine how many data points would be enough, but at the very least the comparison ought to be normalized by the total number of students in each course type. We have not done this yet in the present analysis. This concern is somewhat mitigated by the fact that our primary interest is in the delivery of 3 week mini-terms as DE courses. Here, we have roughly the same number of total students in DE courses as in On-Campus courses which give us some confidence that the numbers represented are accurate projections of the differences between these two delivery methods. And those differences are stark. Third, these data present numbers over the course of 3.5 years with no markers for improvement over those years. It is possible that instructors have improved their technique for

delivering content over this time and the data are not refined enough to point to this improvement.

Table 1. Houston Community College System, Grade Distribution Report, PHIL 1301 by Session Code – Distance Education vs Non-Distance Education

PHIL-DE_Non-DERawData-1

Table 2. Houston Community, Summary and Analysis Data for Review of DE Mini-Session in Philosophy, Period Under Review: Fall 2007 – Summer 2011, Course: PHIL 1301 – Introduction to Philosophy

PHIL-DE_Non-DEAnalysis1

This report culminated in the following conclusion: Given the information provided, we believed it sufficient to make a reasonable decision on whether or not to continue to offer PHIL 1301 or any other philosophy courses in a 3-week term through Distance Education.

Following this review, the committee members discussed the issues pointed to, both pro and con, and then voted to suspend approval for any DE course shorter than 5-weeks. This was accomplished without closing the door on the possibility that an effective shorter course might be developed in the future, but not until such time that all possible reasons for the disparity shown are thoroughly vetted. Meanwhile, new challenges related to Online learning and term lengths had already introduced themselves that promise to aid that process.

Until Fall 2008, no Online section of Philosophy was offered in less than the 10-week Summer term. Before that time, the full 10-week Summer term was considered to be the shortest time-frame in which it was possible to assure student success in Online courses. This view was predominant, despite the fact HCC regularly offered 5-week On-Campus Summer courses as well as 3-week On-Campus mini-sessions (one in December, the other in May) going back several years. In December 2008, our Program Committee discovered that two On-Campus mini-sessions of *Introduction to Philosophy* had been rescheduled as Online without our knowledge committee approval. The issues raised by the 3-week Online course and our attempt to retroactively administer the proper review and oversight of such courses has been our primary concern.

Administratively, Philosophy does not have its own departments or department chairs at HCC's six autonomous colleges. Across the HCC system, our courses are offered through five of

those six colleges. Oversight of these courses is shared by a system-wide Program Committee of fulltime Philosophy faculty and five department chairs, none of whom are philosophers. The department chairs schedule our courses. While our Program Coordinator works closely with them, the chairs often find themselves under pressure from administrators to offer courses in formats that do not necessarily agree with committee standards or previously established precedents. This has been particularly true with Online learning, where the demand for shorter courses has prompted many programs to offer sections of not only 3-week mini-sessions, but also 5-week, 8-week, and „Ready When You Are" courses. Philosophy has offered 8-week Online course in the past and, in Summer 2012, changes in HCC Distance Learning scheduling guidelines resulted in all Online summer courses being either 5-weeks or 8-weeks. A similar drift toward shorter courses is evident in On-Campus scheduling with the announcement in January 2011 that some core courses will be offered in 8-week sessions, with two such sessions being offered concurrently over the 16-week regular term. These shifts in the delivery methods of our courses should prompt similar reviews. The administration may well argue for scrapping longer terms as a way to serve a greater number of students over the calendar year, a move that would also significantly raise revenue. Without the proper review and analysis of empirical differences between delivery methods, we have little grounds for deciding which methods are most effective. These shifts pose an additional challenge for instructors to devise effective ways to deliver the same content that is currently delivered in upwards of 16-weeks in shorter time periods. Our informed analysis of differences in outcomes can help instructors improve their delivery learning objectives.

While some may question the wisdom and reasons underlying this demand for shorter course formats and greater flexibility, the fact is that all of these courses tend to fill up early during registration, particularly the Online sections. From the perspective of administrators and some department chairs, short to medium term Online courses are a win-win on all counts. Nevertheless, it is appropriate for us to ask whether it is a win for our students, which is the primary concern in Program Committee oversight. While students and some administrators may be interested in achieving degree completion as soon as possible, the Program Committee is charged with assuring that established quality benchmarks and best practices are part of that achievement.

As indicated at the beginning of this article, our Program Committee has consistently promoted the use of technology in the delivery of our courses. Across the system, most Philosophy courses are web-enhanced with an LMS presence, supplemented by customized Learning Web pages maintained by faculty. Most of those sections also include a component for online course credit. We actively encourage our entire faculty to complete HCC's required „Certificate in Teaching Technology" courses that permit them to teach Online sections. In addition, no new version of any of our Online courses can go „live" without a thorough review by the Program Coordinator, who himself has completed the training and teaches Online. Finally, three of the four developers of a Humanities Online „Master Course" were members of our Program Committee, including the lead developer. In other words, our concern is not a question of rejecting new uses of technology on principle. However, we do not support the careless or haphazard use of technology. This is what we feared was the case when we discovered the two mini-session sections of *Introduction* in an Online format. The committee, following established HCC standards, believed that Online courses ought to be every bit as rigorous as our On-Campus sections, while some members of the committee were very concerned that such standards were not being met in these cases.

One potential problem related to the committee's review of this mini-session is due to an insufficient number of 3-week Online instructors and sections compared to On-Campus during the period in question. With only one instructor in the first cohort, there is a real possibility that the poor showing is directly attributable to that individual's approach to Online teaching. The sample size is insufficient to warrant broad generalizations. One can clearly see this in the raw data which show no 3-week Online courses offered during Fall 2010 when our sole instructor was away on sabbatical leave. Nevertheless, the differences between outcomes are so stark that we feel we have sufficient grounds for arriving at the conclusion we do. For instance, during the December 2008 mini-session, 20% received „A", 22% „B", and 13% „C", while 45% of the students either failed, or withdrew. These outcomes compare to 46%, 39%, 8%, and 0% for the On-campus courses offered at the same time. Similar percentages can be seen for subsequent 3-week sessions; with one Online term showing that over 50% of the students enrolled did not complete the courses.

Obviously, grade distributions and retention rates alone do not give a complete picture of what's going on here. Our question was and continues to be whether there is a better approach by

which to design a 3-week Online course, the aim being to improve the numbers. While students must bear responsibility for failing to successfully complete courses in which they enroll, there is a correlative responsibility for instructors and institutions not to set them up for failure or withdrawal by promising fast learning opportunities without simultaneously underwriting those opportunities with effective learning strategies. The counter argument, advanced by those who see nothing wrong with the Online outcomes, is that it's the students' responsibility to successfully complete the courses as offered, an argument our Program Committee rejects.

This review of 3-week Online mini-sessions is part of a larger assessment of learning across the program. Integral to our ongoing review of the Philosophy Program is implementation of course-based student learning outcomes (SLOs) that allow for clear and consistent assessment of student learning and, we believe, will result in a more engaging student-centered learning environment regardless of delivery method. Each course in our twenty-course inventory has five course-specific Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs). We conceive of outcomes in a way that is largely informed by a process called „backwards design"[1]. Learning outcomes under our assessment plan are measured by individual instructors according to Standard Form rubrics and then reported to the Program Coordinator for the collection and appraisal of system-wide data. Learning outcomes are not necessarily correlative with grades, though we encourage outcomes assessment to work in conjunction with existing grading practices. We continue to improve our assessment and collection of data by educating our faculty on how to not only conduct their assessments, but also how to use that information to improve their student's learning environment. This is being accomplished by conducting workshops and other less formal gatherings throughout the year. The objective is to „close the loop" so that assessment doesn't run into a dead-end, but informs teaching and learning.

Since we have only recently fully implemented our assessment plan, the jury is still out as to whether it will be useful in developing a 3-week Online course that meets our Program Committee's standards and expectations. For now, we believe prohibiting the scheduling of 3-week Online courses at this time to be a fair-minded judgment. However, as we move forward with the implementation of our on-going comprehensive course-based outcomes assessment plan, and follow-up employment of the principles of backwards-design for creating a more student-

---

[1] G. P. Wiggins, J. McTighe, *Understanding by Design*, Hawker Brownlow Education, Cheltenham 2005.

centered learning environment, the lessons learned by our course developers may well make it possible to create a viable 3-week Online course that compares favorably to the success rates of our 3-week On-Campus classes and all other terms of Online sections. The key to accomplishing this will be to devise tools and strategies that not only provide an effective delivery of content, but also the means necessary to engage student interest and thinking along philosophical lines. The integrity and future of our Philosophy program depends on it.

Thomas Urban is Professor and Assistant Department Chair for Philosophy and Humanities at HCC/Northwest College, and served as the HCC District Philosophy Program Coordinator from 2001-2011. He is currently Associate Chair of the American Philosophical Association's Committee for Philosophy in Two-Year Colleges.

Nathan D. Smith is Professor of Philosophy at HCC/Northwest College and the current HCC District Philosophy Program Coordinator.