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# Responding to Rural Community College Student Needs through “Be Great in 8”

## INTRODUCTION

As community colleges strive to support the career and educational aspirations of their students, many colleges are adopting innovative strategies to create pathways directly connected to family-supporting careers. Such strategies are necessary as, nationwide, only 19% of students enrolled part-time at a community college earn a credential within six years.<sup>1</sup> Many of these part-time students are adult learners, ages 25-44, with other obligations, such as work and family care-taking that must be balanced alongside their coursework. Specifically, within North Carolina, an estimated 348,000 adults have completed some college courses, but have not obtained any degree.<sup>2</sup>

Some colleges are responding to their communities’ need to better engage adult and part-time learners by increasing the flexibility and speed at which students can earn credentials. This response may be particularly important in rural contexts where smaller communities and the local workforce need to work together closely and rely on the few local postsecondary institutions to build that workforce. Rural-serving community colleges are uniquely positioned to impact local workforce development in a timely manner.

In order to better serve the needs of their community, [Isothermal Community College](#) (Isothermal) implemented a compressed course schedule to provide their students with paths to quicker credential completion that can be balanced with their other commitments outside of coursework. Based on recent data describing the challenges adult learners experience with persisting through traditional course schedules, and the success of schools across the country in implementing compressed course schedules, Isothermal embarked on a campus-wide – [“Be Great in 8” campaign](#) – to shift most of their 16-week courses to eight-weeks through longer and more frequent classes, covering the same curriculum and total instruction hours.<sup>3</sup>

## BENEFITS

As Isothermal looked to improve student success and to support the local workforce, they identified several benefits of moving to eight-weeks:

### 1. TIMELY COMPLETION

By allowing part-time students to carry a larger load while still being enrolled in one class at a time, eight-weeks supports students' timely completion of education while staying engaged in the workforce. Additionally, eight-week courses allow for pairing of courses with multiple levels (e.g., medical billing one and two, computer coding classes) to allow a student to complete chains of training in less time and with fewer breaks. With fewer breaks, the condensed schedule prevents retention loss for the student, and mitigates critical needs in the local workforce

### 2. MULTIPLE ON-AND-OFF RAMPS

Eight-week courses allow for students to more easily flow on and off the education pathway as their employment status changes.

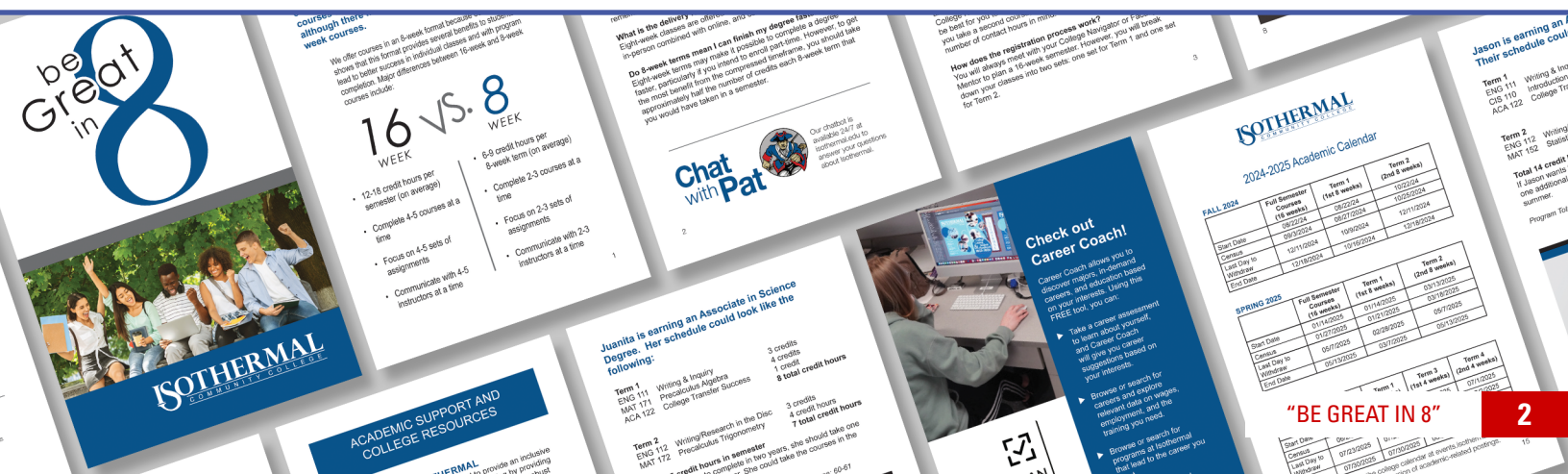
### 3. SKILL BUILDING

Eight-week courses allow for skill building courses (versus whole degrees) to be completed in a timelier manner if an employer requires a course or a student is looking to upskill.

This brief describes the key experiences of one community college as they transitioned to predominantly eight-week courses and offers guiding questions for college leaders who are considering a similar approach on their campuses.

## KEY POINTS

- Leaders looked for models of compressed schedules in other states and institutions and applied those models to the available data at their institution. They found that spending time identifying what kind of data is already being captured at their college to guide decisions, communications and progress made the transition smoother.
- Communication throughout the implementation of this effort was frequent, tailored to faculty, staff and/or students. Communication strategy actively encouraged and was responsive to honest feedback.
- It was important to plan for the time and support employees needed to adjust courses from a 16-week to eight-week format. Initial faculty support was provided through a five-week Redesign Academy that offered participation stipends. Future efforts should anticipate what student support staff may need to adjust to the change.



## DATA SOURCES

Isothermal participated in the three-year [Rural College Leaders Program](#) designed for executive leaders as they address challenges to student enrollment, retention and completion within the rural context. Researchers from the [Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research](#) (Belk Center) conducted four one-hour focus groups at the college in the spring of 2024 as part of research supported by [Ascendium's Educational Philanthropy](#).

The goal of these conversations was to understand how the college identified and implemented the “Be Great in 8” campaign, and consisted of four separate focus groups of Isothermal employees:

- **SENIOR ADMINISTRATIVE LEADERS**
- **FACULTY**
- **STUDENT SERVICES STAFF**
- **BE GREAT IN 8 CORE TEAM, WHO LED THE CHANGES ON CAMPUS**

In addition to this work, Isothermal led a day-long convening with support from the NC Community College System's Student Success Center and the Belk Center in the summer of 2024. The purpose of this convening was to share learnings from Isothermal's experiences about the transition to a compressed course schedule with leaders of other community colleges interested in pursuing a similar approach. Researchers from the Belk Center attended to record additional information about Isothermal's experiences, and how to best support North Carolina community colleges considering compressed course scheduling.

## WORKING WITH DATA

The starting point for Isothermal was reviewing institutional data related to their strategic plan, according to Greg Thomas, Vice President for Academic and Student Affairs, who said their leadership team noticed “gaps relating to recruitment, retention and completion” among different groups of students, including adult learners. The catalyst for the transition to eight-week courses was data from other community colleges showing that this strategy could be successful. Specifically, a guide by [Achieving the Dream](#) and data from the [Texas Student Success Center](#) resonated with Isothermal.<sup>4</sup> As one core team member shared, “We relied heavily on data coming out of Texas...they were doing exactly what we talked about and had the exact same kinds of gaps. They saw immediate results and substantial results...and that gave us a model.” Inspired by the results achieved in Texas, Isothermal turned back to their data to determine how they could implement and measure similar changes on their campus. A key piece of their work was understanding what student data they were already collecting, and what data was needed to accurately measure successful changes.

### LEADERS' GUIDING QUESTIONS ON WORKING WITH DATA

- [How can you engage your Institutional Research/Effectiveness staff in the early stages of planning?](#)
- [Connecting key performance indicators to both the eight-week course transition and the college's strategic plan can streamline staff efforts. What ways can you make those connections clear through direct communication, visual cues on campus and through public-facing web presence?](#)
- [Not all data is useful or meaningful to everyone on campus. In what ways can you collect and disseminate information that will inform the work of different offices across the institution? How can you ensure dissemination is timely and relevant?](#)
- [Celebrating the little wins along the way can maintain momentum. How can you work with your Institutional Research/Effectiveness staff to track data during the transition and communicate markers of success to your institution?](#)



## COMMUNICATION

As Thomas said at the “Be Great in 8” convening, “in order for Isothermal to be Great in 8, it had to be great at communication.” In multiple focus groups and at the convening, communication emerged as the bedrock on which all processes and practices were built. Within community colleges, everyone is both a sender and a receiver of information, requiring institutional leaders to be both competent at disseminating information regularly, as well as receiving feedback and ideas from a variety of sources. As the program was planned and implemented, Isothermal leaders had to be prepared to adapt to the feedback from faculty, staff and students as well as members of the greater community, adjusting processes, practices and communication to function effectively.

***To communicate with students***, Isothermal created a [Be Great in 8 booklet](#) which shared examples of how the new course structure could impact students, and provided answers to anticipated questions about the transition.<sup>5</sup> However, what they heard in response was that the booklet was not answering all the questions students were asking, as evidenced by the heavy number of questions coming into the financial aid office. They later created a second version of the booklet to better address questions about finances, which resulted in a dramatic decrease in questions for the financial aid office.

***To communicate with faculty and staff***, Isothermal leadership established the Pulse Team, made up of a group of faculty and staff who were trusted with the responsibility of gathering regular feedback from their colleagues, and then honestly communicating back to leadership. By acquiring feedback from the Pulse Team, leadership was able to get the honest opinions that may not have been shared directly to leaders.

***To communicate with community members and the Board of Trustees***, Isothermal’s President had intentional conversations with key business and community leaders, including the Board of Trustees. During these conversations the President shared the “WHY” behind Isothermal’s transition and the positive impacts on students. The President also remained responsive when concerns were raised and would provide them with additional information.

### LEADERS’ GUIDING QUESTIONS ON COMMUNICATION

- When large-scale changes are announced, like a transition to eight-week courses, those impacted often question why those choices have been made. How can you articulate the way in which implementing this change relates to your institution’s mission and values?
- How can you create transparency as changes are made and be honest when addressing misinformation in ways that are productive and reach faculty, staff, students, community members, and the Board of Trustees?
- What strategies can you use to ensure that important information is communicated in a way that everyone can understand?
- In times of substantial change, institutions are more likely to under communicate than over communicate. In what ways can you consistently communicate with stakeholders, even if you don’t have new information to convey?
- Regular and honest feedback is a crucial piece needed to evaluate how the transition is working. How can you create opportunities for leadership to collect and listen to the feedback of faculty, staff, community members, and the Board of Trustees so that the feedback shared is honest and timely?

## SUPPORTING FACULTY

A transition from 16-week to eight-week courses most directly impacts faculty. So, as Isothermal made significant adjustments to their courses to fit into the new instructional period, they described being very intentional about providing as much support as possible for faculty. The two most significant pieces of support provided were the establishment of the Isothermal Teaching and Learning Center (TLC), and the development of an exemption process for courses that should remain in the 16-week format rather than transitioning these courses to eight weeks. The TLC, led by an instructional design specialist, offered a five-week Redesign Academy where faculty from across the college could gather and work on designing their courses to be delivered in eight weeks. All faculty members who completed the Academy received a stipend for their time and energy dedicated to redesigning their courses. One faculty member shared of their experience:

*“I appreciate the opportunity to talk to folks in the other disciplines, because I may not be the best person at doing forums in my online class, but someone else on campus is. So, it gave me this time to say, hey... how do you do this for them? Explain to me how this works, how do you grade it? Those kinds of things.”*

To address concerns that some courses may have content or other requirements that would make them unsuitable to be delivered in eight weeks, Isothermal created an online form where faculty could request to have a course or program continue using a 16-week schedule. While a majority (82%) of Isothermal’s courses transitioned to eight weeks, high contact hour courses – and those with content that can’t easily be learned in short timeframes (e.g., music, upper-level math, internships) – received exemptions.<sup>6</sup> While some faculty initially expressed skepticism that their request would be taken seriously, and declined to submit a request, more than 90% of the requests for an exemption were honored in the first year – leading those same faculty to gain trust in leadership and submit exemption requests for the second year.



### LEADERS’ GUIDING QUESTIONS ON SUPPORTING FACULTY

- What resources do you currently have in place to support faculty in course redesigning? Are there additional resources needed for faculty of all levels of experience to have sufficient pedagogical support?
- Are there sources in your institution’s budget, partnerships or grants that could be used to compensate faculty for time spent on course redesign? If not, are there other ways you can recognize the efforts of faculty?
- What process(es) can you put into place to address courses where the curriculum may not be best suited for an eight-week format?

## SUPPORTING STAFF

While still able to ultimately engage student support offices during the transition to eight-weeks (e.g., registrar, admissions, financial aid), leaders initially found it challenging to identify the right ways to support staff engaged in a variety of functions throughout campus. While faculty are not a monolith, they share more similarities in their tasks creating eight-week courses than various support services. By contrast, the complexities of providing support to different staff functions was harder for leaders to anticipate. One core team member shared:

*“If we had to do it over again, we would do that differently. Because I think it unintentionally might have shown that we didn’t value the work of the staff as much. And I know from where my office is located and who I get to see every day that the staff were putting in a lot of work.”*

For example, the Redesign Academy for faculty provided specific development opportunities, with compensation for the additional work, and was created, in part, due to faculty vocalizing their need for support. Smaller and separated offices of specialized staff did not collectively ask for assistance in the same way as faculty. Consequently, there was not a similar program for staff professional development or compensation for their additional work.

### LEADERS’ GUIDING QUESTIONS ON SUPPORTING STAFF

- Even if there aren’t changes to their daily practice, staff often wear many hats when working with their peers and students. How can you intentionally gather feedback from staff to support the work of their individual offices, and of staff throughout the institution?
- What forms of professional development could you offer to staff to aid in the transition and to help them understand the ‘why’ behind changes?
- Are there sources in your institution’s budget, partnerships or grants that could be used to compensate staff for the additional work they are doing as they develop and implement new processes and procedures? If not, are there other ways you can recognize the efforts of supporting staff?





## WORKING WITH K-12 PARTNERS

When talking with attendees of the “Be Great in 8” convening, multiple colleges shared concerns about how a transition to eight-week courses would impact existing dual enrollment partnerships with the K-12 education system. For North Carolina’s community colleges, similarly to many colleges across the country, dual enrollment students are a substantial percentage of the college’s enrollment. High school students’ schedules are less flexible and would need to be accounted for to continue serving that population. Isothermal anticipated this concern during their transition and took intentional steps to minimize disruptions to dual enrollment partnerships. Isothermal worked closely with K-12 partners to ensure that the new academic calendar and course schedule would provide what dual enrollment students needed by including K-12 representatives on the calendar committee, and by granting course exemptions when 16-week courses were necessary to align schedules. One school partner did not believe that eight-week courses would be an appropriate fit for their students, so Isothermal maintained some 16-week courses specifically to address the needs of those students. In the year since the transition, Isothermal has seen stable dual enrollment numbers. As one staff member shared their discussion with dual enrollment students about the new eight-week courses, the overwhelming response from students was, “If I want to learn, I’ll do it in eight or 16 weeks. It doesn’t matter.”

### LEADERS’ GUIDING QUESTIONS ON WORKING WITH K-12 PARTNERS

- How does your institution’s leadership team strategically balance the needs of your dual enrollment student population with community needs that might be better served with compressed course schedules? How does this balance show up in your strategic planning and performance metrics?
- How can you gauge your institution’s capacity to implement some eight-week courses while keeping other courses on a 16-week schedule?
- What are district and high school policies and practices that need to be considered (i.e., block scheduling, policies on retaking courses, extended course adjustment periods at the beginning of the term)?
- What “paired” courses are your K-12 partners regularly making use of to meet K-12 graduation requirements and how will the sequencing of those offerings be affected? (e.g. HIS 111 and HIS 112 to meet the World History graduation requirement)?
- Do your local high school partners provide adequate space, environment, and other resources for students to be successful in accelerated courses?



## CONCLUSION

Isothermal's transition to an eight-week course schedule represents a strategic response to the unique challenges faced by learners in rural communities. Their commitment is already seeing meaningful results in enrollment, student passing rates and student satisfaction.<sup>7</sup> Spring term enrollment in 2024, just after Isothermal rolled out the "Great in 8" campaign, increased by 7% over the previous spring term. Student success rates in courses – defined as earning a C or better – improved by nearly 8% in 2023-24. In addition to these key performance indicators, Isothermal gathered feedback from students by adding a question about eight-week classes to all course evaluations. Overall, the feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with favorable responses to eight-week courses in 77% of fall 2023 and 79% of spring 2024 evaluations.

By carefully analyzing data, fostering open communication and providing targeted support to faculty and staff, Isothermal has demonstrated a commitment to enhancing student success through innovative scheduling. As college leaders seek to improve credential completion rates and support local workforce development in their own communities, the lessons from Isothermal's "Be Great in 8" initiative provide a useful example for effectively balancing institutional priorities with the needs of diverse student populations.





## ABOUT THE BELK CENTER

The Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research serves North Carolina's community colleges by convening leaders, creating tools, and catalyzing social and economic mobility for learners – building stronger, more resilient communities. We equip community college leaders with actionable insights and create opportunities for collaboration as we tackle the most pressing issues facing students and campuses to build stronger, more resilient communities. The Belk Center is housed in the College of Education at North Carolina State University, a land-grant university that shares our commitment to community colleges and the critical role these institutions play in creating and expanding opportunities for all North Carolinians.

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## ENDNOTES

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