

BRIDGING THE GAP:

Department Chairs as Change Agents for Compressed Academic Terms

FEBRUARY 2026

Community colleges nationwide are investing in evidence-based practices to support student success and degree completion. Compressed academic terms are a large-scale instructional innovation that provides course scheduling flexibility and more frequent enrollment opportunities for today's community college student population.¹ Findings from this comparative case study of two community colleges that successfully implemented compressed academic terms study highlight that early, transparent communication from senior leadership — paired with structured opportunities for chairs to process the change—significantly shapes chair perceptions and faculty buy-in.

Department chairs emphasized the need for ongoing, role-specific professional development to support course redesign and change management. The following brief summarizes a qualitative study comparing the perceptions of department chairs about the compressed academic term and the implications of professional development to support faculty in implementing this change.

INTRODUCTION:

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, 68% of community college students enroll part-time and, among those students, only 19% graduate within six years.² Research on part-time student completion is limited, yet many colleges have identified compressed academic terms as a promising strategy for improving student completion and success for diverse student populations.³ Although often described as innovative, offering classes in compressed format is not a new concept in higher education. A compressed course offered over five, seven, or eight weeks, rather than the traditional semester of a 16-week term, delivers the same content and instructional hours, and thus generates the same number of credits toward a credential.⁴ College leaders have seen part-time students gain traction by completing multiple courses within compressed terms, thus completing a credential in less time.



As institutions adopt compressed academic terms to address these completion challenges, the shift represents not only an instructional innovation but also a significant, large-scale organizational change that must be effectively communicated and supported. Often, community college leaders make decisions about institutional strategy that enable the college to fulfill its mission and disseminate information relating to change via formal messages that communicate their vision (i.e., convocation ceremony, email from the president). With instructional changes, senior academic leadership often disseminates the formal communication, but the mid-level department chair helps faculty members to understand the message. As the faculty members' first point of contact, department chairs act as a translator to support implementation and professional development for instructional policies.⁵

Department chairs play a multifaceted role; typically, they serve as faculty members working with students, supervise faculty within their department, and represent their departments at administrative meetings on instruction.⁶ Research suggests that department chairs are essential in higher education management to facilitate communication between administrators and faculty about curriculum and instructional changes that impact students.⁷ Department chairs also directly supervise and support part-time faculty,⁸ estimated to make up 65% of community college instructors.⁹ The relationship between the department chair and both sets of faculty members impacts the socialization and motivation of new and long-term faculty, along with their acceptance of teaching strategies and expectations.¹⁰

This study is framed by Rogers' Diffusion of Innovation theory¹¹ and Laurie Lewis' Stakeholder Model of Change Implementation Communication.¹² Rogers' theory examines how communication about an organizational innovation impacts the adoption rate among organizational stakeholders. This theory postulates that organizational leadership uses various communication channels (i.e., face-to-face, email) over time to guide support for an innovation, in this case, the compressed academic term. Lewis' Stakeholder Model of Change Implementation Communication expands Rogers' work to include how the stakeholder response to formal announcements about an innovation impacts the informal conversations among employees.

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- **Department chairs serve as the primary communication bridge between senior leadership and faculty, influencing how instructional changes like the compressed term are received and implemented.**
- **The chair's ability to interpret, contextualize, and communicate change through both formal (i.e., emails, meetings) and informal (i.e., hallway conversations, peer collaboration) channels is critical to faculty ownership and successful adoption.**
- **Institutional leaders need to invest in ongoing, role-specific professional development that equips chairs with communication strategies, change management tools, and data-informed decision-making practices.**

Data Collection and Analysis

During Fall 2024, twelve department chairs were interviewed from Rural Community College (RCC) and Urban Community College (UCC) both pseudonyms for two community colleges located in a southern state, where the compressed academic term has started to make traction for increasing part-time student enrollment. RCC serves 2,500 students and has 100 full-time faculty, while UCC enrolls a diverse student population of more than 10,000 and has over 250 full-time faculty members. In addition, the study incorporated a document analysis of the formal communication at each institution about the compressed academic term. To participate in the study, department chairs needed to have served in their position for a minimum of two years at their institution, which enabled each interviewee the opportunity to provide historical context regarding the arc of communications and adoption of the roll-out of this change.

Findings

Interviews revealed several key points, among them, their perceptions of the compressed academic term and the communication processes used with their faculty. Their insights regarding the success of change management strategies used at their campus provide organizing themes for the study's findings and resulting recommendations.

Presidential communication sets the tone for the change implementation process.

Department chairs from both institutions discussed how the president set the vision by sharing the “why” for launching the compressed academic term. Interviewees expressed that the president’s office was part of the initial communication strategy for the compressed academic term. For example, department chairs at RCC credited early, data-driven communication from leadership with shaping more positive perceptions of the change and reinforcing its student success mission. With UCC, all department chairs discussed how the president’s office provided the official statement about the compressed academic term.

Instructional change without consultation breeds skepticism.

Several UCC department chairs shared feelings of fear, frustration, and lack of clarity due to top-down communication and exclusion from early planning. Such language was perceived as dismissive and hindered faculty ownership. The RCC math department chair shared that he was frustrated about the lack of time for chairs to process the change before meeting with their faculty to start the course redesign process.

The institutional transformation of implementing and scaling compressed academic terms connects to John Kotter’s work on large-scale organizational change and the importance of creating a sense of urgency, while building the guiding team who will communicate the vision and generate stakeholder buy-in for the change. Institutions who have implemented Guided Pathways, a whole-college transformation to recreate the student experience for increased completion, can use the experience to guide stakeholders through the change.¹³

Kotter’s work also challenges organizations to shift ‘analysis that shifts thinking’ to ‘showing a truth that influences their feelings’ (p.1).¹⁴ Within this study, department chairs expressed strong emotional reactions to this instructional change, with many sharing that they were expected to focus on how to implement the change rather than first having the opportunity to process how they felt about the change.

Informal conversations create engagement.

While many department chairs revealed mixed feelings about the compressed academic term, they intended to have supportive conversations with faculty about the change. Chairs who participated in the initial exploratory meetings about the compressed eight-week term had more positive feelings about the change. Conversely, department chairs who learned about the instructional change late in the process (i.e., within one to two weeks of sharing with the

entire faculty) experienced feelings of anger, fear, and surprise. These chairs discussed their less positive emotions related to concerns about student success in their courses. Further, these faculty stated that there was limited time to process their own emotions about the change, as the expectation from leadership was to guide their department faculty through the change.

Lewis' stakeholder model of change implementation communication emphasizes that organizations benefit when mid-level managers translate the vision of change and communicate the implementation process. This model positions department chairs as playing a critical role in facilitating informal communication with faculty members about the change.

All chairs indicated that they intentionally conducted conversations with their full-time faculty about the compressed academic term as a means for processing the emotions of managing the change. Chairs used regular, informal conversations as powerful tools to engage faculty in curriculum redesign and foster ownership over the instructional transition.

Compressed Academic Terms: Implications on Practice & Policy

Institutions pursuing the compressed academic term change should evaluate strategies for communication among the organizational stakeholders responsible for implementation.

Create an institution-wide communication strategy

- When implementing major instructional changes like compressed academic terms, the rollout plan should include a multi-level communication plan, which includes a timeline for department chairs to grapple with the change before sharing with their faculty members.
- The plan should include both formal communication from senior leadership and provisions for informal communication networks (i.e., peer learning, dialogue opportunities), which research shows are vital for faculty adoption.

Create a change management infrastructure

- Adopt a systems-level approach to change by forming cross-functional implementation teams that include faculty, department chairs, and student support staff. Bringing diverse voices into the process can better ensure that decisions reflect the unique insights from across the institution regarding the systemic barriers that students face, are responsive to stakeholder needs, and aligned with the realities of teaching and learning.
- Employ project management through a formal change structure, such as with an implementation team, that develops implementation timelines and evaluation checkpoints grounded in models like Rogers' and Lewis' frameworks. These structured processes provide clarity, consistency, and ongoing feedback that increase stakeholder trust and support during major instructional changes.

Elevate the role of department chairs in institutional change

- Formalize the role of department chairs as key agents of change by their leadership in policy-level conversations. Department chairs should lead discussion forums with faculty and senior-level administrators on best practices for instructional change initiatives.
- Policy should be informed through structured involvement of department chairs in strategic planning and change management to improve alignment between administration and instructional practice.

Invest in Scalable and Sustained Professional Development

- Redefine institutional policy to strategically allocate dedicated funding and time for ongoing professional development for faculty – full-time and part-time adjunct faculty are tied to instructional innovation that scales student success strategies aligned to the institutional mission.
- Facilitate feedback sessions with faculty particularly part-time faculty about previous compressed courses teaching experiences in all learning modalities (traditional, blended, hybrid, and online) to gauge best practices for the course redesign and course delivery process
- Professional development should be embedded within institutional strategy, not treated as optional or short-term training. Topics should include course redesign for compressed formats, student engagement, and generational learning needs.
- Create partnerships with an institution's instructional design staff and faculty for the course redesign process. Institutions should create a course redesign evaluation process using a peer review process of both instructional designers and subject matter experts.

Implement Policies for Assessment and Evaluation

- Create institutional practices of data collection and analysis before, during, and after implementation of compressed terms for continuous improvement and evaluation of the impact on learners and faculty.
- Facilitate post-implementation focus groups with department chairs to codify institutional best practices for leading faculty through instructional change.

CONCLUSION:

Department chairs occupy a pivotal space in the success of instructional innovations like compressed academic terms. As both leaders and liaisons, chairs interpret institutional messages, guide faculty through change, and foster faculty engagement. This study highlights that when chairs are informed early and equipped with professional development, they are more effective in facilitating change that centers on student success. Conversely, late-stage communication and lack of consultation foster skepticism and hinder buy-in.

Institutions aiming to improve instructional outcomes through compressed terms must recognize department chairs as essential change agents. Investing in communication infrastructure, leadership development and ongoing evaluation ensures that these mid-level leaders are empowered to drive innovation in ways that are sustainable for their faculty.



ABOUT THE BELK CENTER

As a trusted resource for North Carolina's community college leaders, the Belk Center delivers actionable research and tailored leadership programming to advance college and student success. We support leaders at every stage of their careers, equipping them with timely insights and practical tools focused on improving the experiences and outcomes of their students. Our work is both nationally informed and deeply focused on North Carolina's unique community college landscape.

The Belk Center was launched in 2019 as a research center within the College of Education at NC State, 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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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge and thank my dissertation committee, Drs. Audrey J. Jaeger, Ken Ender, Devon Graves, and Janet Spriggs for their support and feedback on my dissertation research. Thanks to Dr. Sarah Deal, Director of Research for the Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research, for her encouragement and editing suggestions. A special thanks to my reviewer, Dr. Christine Bailie for her expertise on the compressed academic term topic.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Melniczek, A. (2026). *Bridging the Gap: Department Chairs as Change Agents for Compressed Academic Terms*. Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research. Raleigh, N.C.

Further Reading:

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ENDNOTES

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