

DOES TIMING MATTER?

Investigating Student Success Across Terms in Eight-Week Courses

SEPTEMBER 2026

SHORT OVERVIEW

This brief examines whether student success differs between first-half (A term) and second-half (B term) eight-week courses across the North Carolina Community College System. Using course-level data from approximately 1.35 million course enrollments, the analysis finds that students, particularly post-high-school students, are consistently more successful in A term than B term, suggesting that B term burnout may play an important role. The brief offers evidence-based recommendations for advising, student supports and course scheduling to help improve success in accelerated course formats.

INTRODUCTION

As of fall 2025, more than one-third of curriculum course enrollments were in an accelerated, eight-week format in the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS). Interest in eight-week courses continues to gain momentum, and many students are more successful in the shortened format, particularly in [courses with high rates of withdrawals and failing grades](#) (Smail & Nichols, 2026). As interest grows, findings from early adopters highlighted distinctions in student performance between the first eight-weeks (A term) and second eight-weeks (B term). This finding – combined with limited information on performance disparities between the two terms in existing literature – prompted the need for a system-level evaluation.

Considering a student's trajectory throughout the semester helps explain the possibility of performance gaps between terms. Typically, students enter the semester energized and prepared for the workload. Enrollment in eight-week courses allows full-time students to focus on two or three courses at once, rather than juggling four or five simultaneously. However, these courses move rapidly, and students are required to master and apply concepts quickly. By the time a student enters B term, they may experience burn out from the rigorous pace of the first term. Moreover, as with full semester courses, students may become distracted by circumstances outside of the classroom, including financial or familial obligations throughout the semester. Understanding the factors that drive these performance differences underscores the need to examine whether students are equally positioned for success in A term and B term.

KEY POINTS

- Our findings demonstrate that while, overall, students are more successful in programs with eight-week courses in comparison to 16-week courses, they are less successful in B term courses than in A term courses. This is particularly true in fall terms, even when accounting for student – and college-level characteristics.
- Post-high-school (non-dually enrolled) students show larger gaps between B term and A term success than dually enrolled Career and College Promise (CCP) students.
- B term success is still lower at colleges that offer a high proportion of eight-week courses, suggesting that this is not driven by an issue of faculty and student familiarity with the course format.
- After ruling out other possibilities, we believe that the reduced odds of success in B term may be due to burnout, indicating a key discussion point for advisors to consider when helping students think about their course mapping.
- Leaders should consider additional broad and targeted messaging about student supports at the start of B term.

THE PROJECT

ANALYSIS

Using student-level administrative data from NCCCS, we examined eight-week course enrollments between fall 2022 and fall 2025, excluding summer semesters. Eight-week courses were defined as those lasting between seven and nine weeks, calculated using the course start and end dates. For each individual college and reporting term, we identified B term courses as those starting greater than or equal to 42 days (six weeks) after the start of the semester.

We estimated the likelihood of B term success (defined as a letter grade of either A, B, C or P) relative to the likelihood of A term success using mixed effects logistic regression models. These models controlled for demographic and institutional characteristics – such as semester, course level, instructional method, student demographics, course load and college – to isolate the relationship between term enrollment and course success. Because we expected that there may be differences for dually enrolled students and differences in the fall and spring semesters, we ran disaggregated models by semester and dual enrollment status.

To determine whether the results were different in certain populations of students, we conducted three sensitivity analyses. First, we looked at whether success was different for students who enrolled in both A and B term courses in the same semester. Second, we looked at whether success was different for students enrolled at colleges who offer the majority of courses in an eight-week format, since these students would likely be more familiar with eight-week courses and have more support and dedicated resources when taking them. Finally, we looked at whether success was different for associate degree-seeking students who have already accumulated a significant amount of credits (i.e., 30 or more) prior to beginning the semester, as these students have increased motivation to succeed in their courses and progress toward their degree.

FINDINGS

Across seven semesters (four fall semesters and three spring semesters), students enrolled in nearly 1.35 million eight-week courses. Around 53% of these courses were taken in B term and nearly two-thirds (66%) were taken online. Approximately 680,930 unique students took eight-week courses across these seven terms, 25% of whom were dually enrolled students. Around 62% were female, with an average age of 23.3 years old. A detailed breakdown of course-level and student-level characteristics by model is available in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Course and Student-level Characteristics

Share of Enrollments

The share of enrollments in A and B terms are about the same by semester and dual enrollment status.

Spring Non-Dual Enrollment (195,274 Unique Students)



Fall Non-Dual Enrollment (313,245 Unique Students)



Spring CCP Dual Enrollment (69,056 Unique Students)



Fall CCP Dual Enrollment (103,332 Unique Students)



Credits Attempted

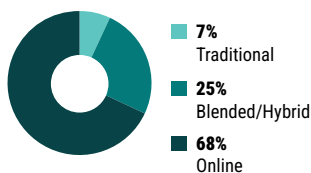
Non-dual enrollment students attempt more credit hours on average than dually enrolled students in eight-week courses.



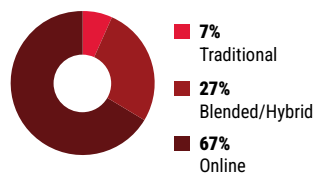
Course Delivery Method

Across semesters and types of enrollments, more than half of eight-week courses are offered fully online.

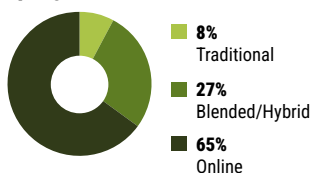
Spring Non-Dual Enrollment



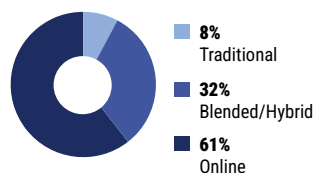
Fall Non-Dual Enrollment



Spring CCP Dual Enrollment



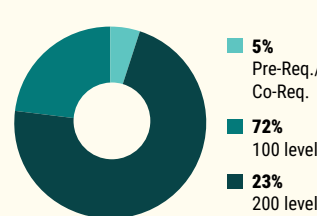
Fall CCP Dual Enrollment



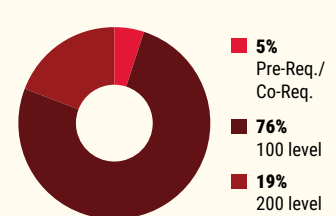
Course Level Characteristics

The majority of eight-week course enrollments are in 100 level courses.

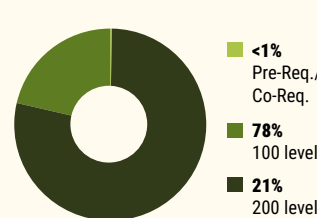
Spring Non-Dual Enrollment



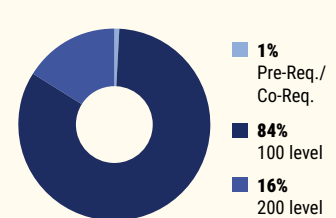
Fall Non-Dual Enrollment



Spring CCP Dual Enrollment



Fall CCP Dual Enrollment



Student Level Characteristics

Underrepresented minorities comprise just under half of all non-dual enrollment in eight-week courses, and a third of dual enrollment eight-week courses, while women comprise about 60% of eight-week enrollments.

Spring Non-Dual Enrollment



Fall Non-Dual Enrollment



Spring CCP Dual Enrollment

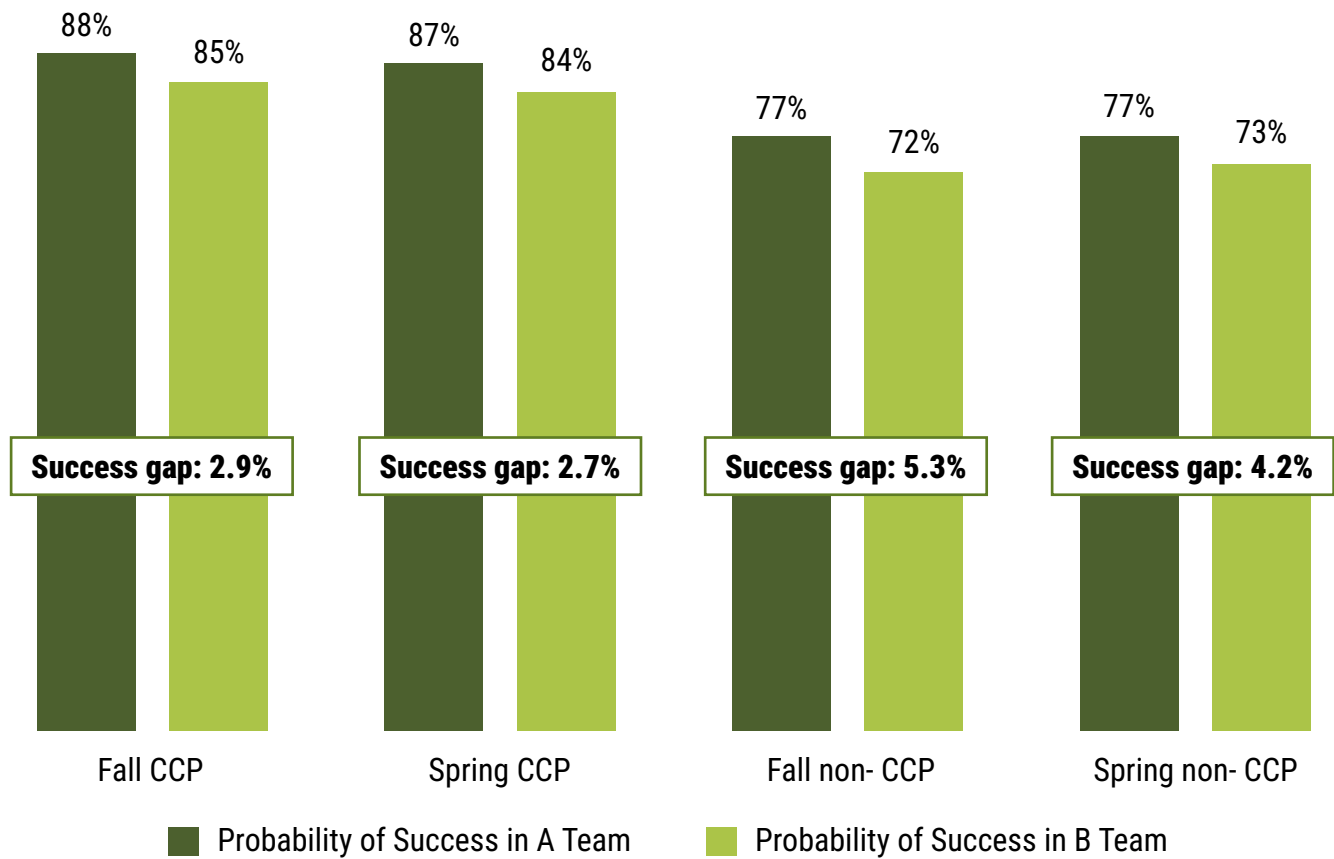


Fall CCP Dual Enrollment



Our findings demonstrated that students had significantly lower odds of success in B term courses (Figure 2). For dually enrolled students, the predicted percent of successful course enrollments in B term was 2.9% lower than A term across fall semesters and 2.7% lower than A term across spring semesters. For post-high-school students, the predicted percent of successful students in B term was 5.3% lower than A term across fall semesters and 4.2% lower than A term across spring semesters, indicating that the performance gap is highest for post-high-school students in the fall. To put this in perspective, if post high school students took 50,000 A term courses and 50,000 B term courses in fall 2025, we would expect 2,609 fewer successes in B term.

Figure 2: Predicted probability of success in A term versus B term for dually enrolled and post-high-school students in fall and spring semesters.



Students who took both A term and B term courses had a reduced likelihood of success, indicating that the success trends are not driven by students who enter the semester late – just in time for B term courses and potentially underprepared – supporting the idea that these results may be driven by burnout from fast-paced A term coursework. Moreover, these results were true for students at colleges with a high share of eight-week courses, who have access to advising and supports specifically geared towards the eight-week structure. This suggests that the findings are not due to a lack of familiarity with the course pace and rigor. Finally, these results were true for associate degree-seeking students who entered the semester with 30 or more hours of credit, indicating that this pattern prevails even among high-achieving students who arguably have the most motivation to succeed in B term. Student success in A term vs B term may also be influenced by program, which we recommend as an area for future investigation.

FOR DECISION MAKERS: IMPACT ON PRACTICE AND POLICY

Emphasize messaging about wraparound supports early in B term. Consider leveraging early alert technology to identify students who need “just-in-time” targeted support within the first week of B term. Students may not remember the information they received in A term; use the start of B term as a natural time to remind students about tutoring, coaching and advising services. This is especially critical in the fall, when post-high-school students show the greatest disparity in term performance. If possible, consider offering reminders about student supports before Thanksgiving so that students maintain focus as they potentially juggle additional financial and familial obligations around the holiday.

Institutional leaders and Chief Academic Officers should use their college’s own data to explore 8-week course success locally, including looking for patterns by term, program, course prefix and by student characteristics. This detailed knowledge of student outcomes will better inform decisions about course offerings that are specific to individual college’s context.

Optimize course scheduling to offset B term burnout. While this will look different for each student based on their individual goals and timeline, consider strategies such as:

- Encouraging a student not to register for multiple high-intensity, lab-heavy or math-heavy courses in the same term,
- Stacking difficult courses in A term so that B term is easier, or, conversely,
- Taking an easier course load in A term, which could reduce burnout and improve momentum going into B term.

Consider faculty workload and transition time between terms. Try to balance faculty workload so that instructors are not required to teach multiple high-intensity courses across A and B terms. Similarly, if your college offers both eight- and 16-week courses, ensure that faculty are teaching courses of only one length at a time. Finally, schedule a one-week buffer period between the end of A term and the start of B term to allow faculty adequate time to finish A term grading and prepare for B term.

CONCLUSION

These findings demonstrate that students consistently show lower rates of success in B term. Long-term, these course withdrawals and failures likely contribute to challenges in persistence and completion, and both students and institutions bear the cost of uncompleted coursework. This is especially true in the fall, when post-high-school students show noticeably worse B term performance, a period that coincides with Thanksgiving and the start of the holiday season, when many students face additional financial and familial obligations or begin seasonal work. However, this pattern is consistent across semesters, suggesting that the probable cause – burnout late in the semester – is not limited to fall terms. While we have ruled out some potential causes through sensitivity analyses (including late enrollees and unfamiliarity with the fast-paced structure), additional qualitative work is necessary to fully understand this phenomenon. In the meantime, colleges can proactively implement strategies such as marketing wraparound supports in B term and using targeted advising to intervene early and help students improve their likelihood of success.



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 efforts are North Carolina-focused and nationally informed.

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.

ABOUT THE NORTH CAROLINA COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM

The North Carolina Community College System is a public organization dedicated to providing affordable college access to everyone in North Carolina. Comprising 58 community colleges that enroll nearly 600,000 students, the System is focused on elevating North Carolina's future by delivering a diverse, highly skilled talent pipeline aligned to the labor market, supporting economic mobility that creates transformational generational change, and setting the national standard for innovation in higher education and workforce development. It achieves this through workforce education and training, partnerships with business and industry that fuel economic development, and services that improve quality of life in communities across the state.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Smail, E. & Nichols, H. (2026). Does Timing Matter? Investigating Student Success Across Terms in Eight-Week Courses. Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research. Raleigh, NC.

FURTHER READINGS

See additional research on eight-week courses at <https://belk-center.ced.ncsu.edu/great-in-8/>