

Featured Article

Summer Sessions: The Centrality of Their Purpose to the Academy's Mission

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The launching of the new journal, *Summer Academe: A Journal of Higher Education*, presents an ideal opportunity to revisit issues regarding the purposes, goals, and status of summer sessions within North American institutions of higher education and to reflect upon the question of where we are now as opposed to 28 years ago, when Clay Schoenfeld, perhaps the emeritus doyen of summer session leaders, wrote *The American University in Summer* (Schoenfeld & Zilman, 1967). At that time it was stated that “the status of summer sessions with respect to organization and administration, instructional, and supporting staffs still leaves much to be desired in many instances” (Schoenfeld & Zilman). In fact, the foreword bears the title “The University Summer Term—Muddle or Model?”

In 1985 reflecting upon that book, he wrote in the article, “The American University in Summer Revisited,” the summer term “emerged from the Chautauqua tent show to a more or less respectful aspect of the year-round academic enterprise,”...“faced a number of problems and prospects, and inevitably will continue to do so.” (Schoenfeld, 1985). Today, as this successor to Schoenfeld and Harland Samson reflects upon the last few years of annual meetings of the North Central Conference on Summer Sessions (NCCSS), the North American Association of Summer Sessions (NAASS), and the Association of University Sum-

Summer Sessions

mer Sessions (AUSS), it is clear that summer sessions in many institutions still face some of these same problems and issues. Perhaps, not surprisingly, the perception of being on the periphery of the university's mission, working in isolation in one's college or university environment, depending on self-support, working in a decentralized environment, being combined with Continuing Education units, being vulnerable to administrative dictate and a plethora of others—all still abound in discussions in meeting sessions, workshops, and social settings. Further, the view still prevails that the abbreviated sessions of summer do not provide the same quality or scope of course material as do semester-length courses, despite an increasing body of research on summer sessions showing the contrary. For example, studies of student performance in intensive summer courses show that learning experiences in such courses are often more powerful and knowledge retention greater than in semester length courses (Scott, 1993). This view is being intensified by the increasing use of instructional technology (distance education) and will occupy the debating halls of academe for many years to come. As Schoenfeld in his inimitable style put it, "some troglodyte faculty continue to insist that anything taught in a shorter time frame than three or four months is ipso facto shoddy" (Young & McDougall, 1991). The same claim is made about the increased delivery of courses via the different distance education media, another rapidly emerging dimension of both summer sessions and the traditional academic year.

Despite these historic views and issues, there seems to be increasing evidence that the summer session, whatever its length, is increasingly central to the university's mission, primarily as a third term or fourth quarter for continuing students. What leads me to this position are two significant events in 1994 in two different settings: one in the June meeting of the directors and deans of summer sessions of the institutions within the University of Wisconsin System and the second, at the October annual meeting of the AUSS. On these occasions, the subject arose as to the need to express clearly and in unison the interconnection of summer sessions and the academic year as part of the academy's mission.

The directors and the deans of summer sessions at the different institutions within the University of Wisconsin System were aware that the Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs had appointed a Vice Chancellor's Working Group on Summer Sessions to look at fee and policy issues. (Traditionally, our system's summer sessions have had a substantial amount of state support.) To contribute to this study, the deans and directors felt that it would be most appropriate if they, the ones responsible on a day-to-day basis for summer sessions, were to

Howard Martin

develop a concise mission statement on the purposes of summer sessions within the University of Wisconsin System. Since that was not an identified charge to the Vice Chancellor's Group, it was felt a significant contribution could be made to the process. As a result, each of the institutions was asked to submit a copy of its summer session mission statement to me, if they had one. I then worked with a committee of two others to develop a concise mission statement reflecting the major activities of summer sessions within the University of Wisconsin System to the extent that the mission statements contained similarities. We were pleased to note that this concise mission statement became part of the final report of the Vice Chancellor's Working Group on Summer Sessions to the Senior Vice President, because it recognized that the goals of summer sessions should focus on student needs. (University of Wisconsin System Summer Session Working Group Final Report, December 21, 1994).

It is important to explain that the University of Wisconsin System is a diverse group of institutions: There are two doctoral institutions—the land grant institution, UW-Madison, and the urban university, UW-Milwaukee, 11 four-year comprehensive universities with some graduate programs, a Center System of 13 two-year colleges which acts as a feeder system to the different universities, and a Statewide Extension agency. Thus, what this group decided upon would no doubt be reflective of the different types of public institutions that belong to NCCSS and NAASS. It is also important to note that not all institutions had a written mission statement or were unable to share such (six out of a possible ten provided statements).

In the second instance, that of AUSS, we are dealing with about 50 major research institutions, both public and private, from across North America, each having large summer session activity at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. At the October 1994 Annual Meeting, it was decided by the membership that there was a need for the member institutions to clearly articulate a summer session mission statement for the Association. This need emanated from the concern that the position of summer session in relation to institutional mission in general had no clear focus or thoughtfully expressed purpose. Research into the objectives of summer sessions has borne this perception out: "The purposes of summer school are often not articulated in a clear and concise manner. Such statements are many and diverse..." (Young & McDougall, 1991). The AUSS members felt that in times of change within the academy and budgetary uncertainty, it is of crucial importance to articulate for the leaders of academic institutions, their faculty and staff, and their various constituencies the purposes of summer

Summer Sessions

sessions and the fit with institutional mission. As part of the discussion papers for the 1994 meeting, mission statements relating to goals and objectives for Summer Session at each of the member institutions were compiled (Association of University Summer Sessions Mission Statements, October 1994). Along with a subcommittee of four, I undertook to develop this statement using the compiled statements with any others we could solicit. This mission statement was presented to the entire membership at the October 1995 meeting. While the members accepted it, no decision to forward it to the academic leaders of their institutions was made. If that decision is made, then the members no doubt will be reminded that they are departing from a long held tradition because at the end of the 1960s AUSS “also rediscovered the wisdom in not preparing and adopting position papers” (Young & McDougall, 1991).

What emerges from an analysis of these two mission statements is, I believe, a clear statement that summer sessions are no longer a “more or less respectable aspect” (Schoenfeld, 1967) of the year-round academic affairs of the university, nor are they necessarily a hybrid of the academic world, since the great majority of students attending summer sessions are continuing from the spring semester (81.25 percent at UW-Madison). In fact, the emphasis of summer session “has definitely come to focus on service to students, both undergraduate and graduate, who are regularly enrolled during other terms,” as the research on changing objectives of summer schools from 1930 to 1990 shows (Young & McDougall, 1991). Summer Sessions have become an integral and central activity of the university if the remarkably similar mission statements emerging from both university groups are to be accepted.

In the case of the University of Wisconsin System institutions, ten of the 11 institutions with separate summer sessions (one did not respond) agreed that the mission of summer sessions is:

- u To provide, as a third term, courses and programs for undergraduate, graduate, and professional degree-seeking students who are also enrolled during the fall and spring terms enabling students to accelerate their time to degree;
- u To provide for student needs which cannot be met during the regular academic year and are best met during the summer period;
- u To provide courses and programs serving special groups of clientele (teachers, state professional staff, concurrently registered high school students, guests, and students from other colleges and universities);
- u To provide formats and opportunities for teaching and learning partnerships that are more difficult to offer and enroll in during other terms, *e.g.* field trips, internships, and field research;

Howard Martin

- u To provide a setting for curricular experimentation, innovation and change;
- u To encourage and support a variety of cultural and intellectual events on campus for students and staff as well as the university community.

In the case of mission statements obtained from the members of the Association of University Summer Sessions, comparison yields a very similar list with some slight variations.

Mission Statement of the Association of University Summer Sessions

The basic purposes and overall mission of the summer sessions offered by the members of the Association of University Summer Sessions are:

- u To provide courses and programs for undergraduate, graduate and professional degree-seeking students who are also enrolled during the fall and spring terms, thus enabling them to accelerate their time to degree;
- u To provide formats and opportunities for teaching and learning partnerships that are more difficult to offer and enroll in during other terms, *e.g.*, intensive foreign language courses, limited term academic institutes, field courses, internships, and field research;
- u To provide courses and programs serving special groups of clientele, *e.g.*, teachers, concurrently registered high school students, guests, and students from other colleges and universities;
- u To provide a setting for curricular experimentation, innovation and change;
- u To provide precollege programs which may serve to recruit students, serve as bridge programs for minority/disadvantaged youth, and/or continuing intellectual development;
- u To encourage and support a variety of cultural and intellectual events on campus for students and staff as well as for the surrounding community.

Neither of these lists claims to be all inclusive of the activities for which summer session deans and directors are responsible in either the UW System or among the member institutions of AUSS. Indeed, history shows us that summer session deans and directors have become and are becoming more and more responsible for non-credit and credit continuing education courses, distance education, K-12 programs, special programs, and external degrees among a myriad of other things. Nevertheless, these added dimensions of activity do not detract from the centrality of summer sessions to the academy's mission.

The summer session mission statements presented above should be

Summer Sessions

useful to institutions and summer session administrators as they articulate the role of summer sessions within, and related to, their institution's mission. Further, they could be regarded as sufficiently thought-provoking as to stimulate detailed research into summer sessions, a field in which there is a paucity of activity. They are reflective of a cross-section of North American institutions of higher education, public and private, land grant research, liberal arts schools and community colleges.

Summer Sessions have become a fundamental part of institutional missions of a significant representative section of North American institutions of higher education regardless of their size and type.

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