



The SPOT Advantage: Reimagining Academic Terms

Insights from Nine Institutions
on Accelerating Learner Success
Through Flexible Scheduling

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Executive Summary

There is a lack of a common term used in U.S. higher education to describe classes shorter in duration than what is considered a full-term class in a semester or quarter-based academic calendar system. These shorter classes may be built to start and end within the date boundaries of a standard term but not span the full term (e.g., fall, spring, summer) or built between terms (e.g., start at the end of the spring term and end before summer term begins) or run across standard terms dates (e.g., start in fall but end in the spring term). Terms used to describe this scheduling practice include session, part of term, compressed term, and shortened term.

This white paper examines the **implementation, impact and implications** of what has been coined for this white paper as shortened parts of term (SPOT) use across **nine diverse higher-education institutions**. Based on a roundtable discussion with key stakeholders from these institutions, this report explores the **motivations** behind adopting shortened terms. It examines the **strategies** for:

- Enrollment management
- Challenges in class scheduling and resource allocation
- Impacts on learner success
- Data-driven approaches to optimization when shortened terms are employed

KEY INSIGHTS INDICATE THAT SPOT PROVIDES BOTH BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES FOR LEARNERS



Benefits

Increased flexibility and accelerated degree completion



Challenges

Maintaining academic rigor and supporting diverse learner populations

This white paper reveals institutions are at various stages of implementation; some fully embrace SPOTs across multiple programs, while others selectively apply them to specific areas or learner groups.

The **effectiveness of SPOTs** varies significantly based on many factors, such as learner demographics, class content and institutional resources. Data gathered at the roundtable discussion underscores the need for robust data analysis and continuous assessment to refine and improve shortened-term offerings over time.

Recommendations include:

- Developing comprehensive faculty-training programs
- Implementing clear communication strategies for learners
- Investing in advanced scheduling and analytics software
- Establishing targeted support services for learners in SPOT programs or classes

Conclusions drawn from these expert insights may also help institutions understand how SPOT use can transform higher-education delivery while cautioning against a one-size-fits-all approach.



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Introduction

U.S. institutions of higher education use shortened parts of term (SPOT) classes to enhance flexibility, improve learner outcomes and respond to evolving educational needs. Adopting SPOTs represents a departure from traditional full-term class formats and has far-reaching implications for learners, faculty and administrative processes. As institutions introduce the use of SPOT in their class schedule, they face opportunities and challenges in reimagining their academic calendar and learner support.

This white paper synthesizes insights from a virtual roundtable discussion held on October 1, 2024. Representatives from nine higher-education institutions in the United States were present. The discussion explored aspects of SPOT implementation, from initial motivations to long-term impacts and data-driven optimization strategies. By examining various experiences of roundtable participants, this report aims to provide understanding of the current state of shortened-term use and offer guidance for institutions considering, or refining, such implementations.

The higher-education landscape is evolving, driven by changing learner demographics, technological advancements and shifting workforce demands. In this context, SPOT classes have emerged as a potential solution to address several pressing challenges including:

- ✓ The need for greater flexibility to accommodate nontraditional learners and working professionals
- ✓ Pressure to accelerate degree completion and reduce time to degree
- ✓ Demand for more efficient use of institutional resources
- ✓ The imperative to improve learner retention and success rates

This paper examines the experiences of institutions that have implemented SPOT, exploring their motivations, strategies, challenges and outcomes. The insights presented here provide a foundation for understanding the complexities of implementing SPOT and can guide institutions in navigating this practice.

ROUNDTABLE TAKEAWAY



The adoption of classes offered in less than full-term length was a response to changing learner demographics and evolving educational needs. As the 'typical' learner profile continues to shift, **institutions are finding more flexible scheduling options are necessary to meet diverse learner needs.**



Definitions

As noted in the executive summary, there is currently no common term used in U.S. higher education to describe classes that are less than full-term length. There is also no standard use of the terms *class* or *course*. The terms defined below provide a common understanding of terms used in this discussion of classes that are offered in something other than a full-length term format.

SHORTENED PARTS OF TERM (SPOT)

Academic class periods intentionally designed to be shorter in duration than full-length term classes. Classes offered in this format have the same credit value and content as full-term counterparts but are delivered in an accelerated format. Higher education institutions implement shortened parts of term to provide increased flexibility, support diverse learner populations and accelerate degree completion. Shortened terms may run concurrently with traditional academic periods or may be scheduled during typical academic-calendar break periods, allowing year-round learning opportunities. Also known as *shortened terms* or *compressed terms* or *sessions*.

CLASS

A course from an academic catalog built into a class schedule, available for registration for a particular term or SPOT. A course may be offered as a class several times each term. Classes represent the practical implementation of courses, within specific time frames, that learners directly enroll in. A class provides the structure for course delivery, including assigned instructors, schedules and locations, allowing institutions to manage multiple offerings of the same course content across various terms or concurrent sessions. Also sometimes called a *section*.

COURSE

A foundational academic unit that resides at the academic-catalog level and encompasses various types of information essential for curriculum planning and learner progression. Course details include various elements, such as title, level, description, course-learning outcomes/performance objectives, pre- and co-requisites, and type. Courses serve as the blueprint for class creation, providing the content and learning objectives and form the basis of academic programs and degree requirements.





Motivations and Implementation Strategies

An institution's decision to adopt SPOT is often driven by a complex interplay of institutional goals, learner needs and external pressures. The roundtable discussion revealed several key motivations.

SERVING UNDERSERVED POPULATIONS

Many institutions view SPOT as a means to better accommodate nontraditional learners, including working professionals, adult learners and online learners. One participant explained, "Evening learners¹, adult learners, online learners and working professionals are frequently mentioned [at this institution] as target groups for shortened-term offerings. This format provides greater flexibility for learners balancing academic pursuits with work and family responsibilities."

ACCELERATING DEGREE COMPLETION

This practice offers the potential to accelerate learners' progress through their programs. One institution reported, "We've created a year-round schedule using what we call 'flex' terms, allowing learners to complete associate degrees in 18 months." This approach has been particularly effective for this institution's workforce programs and high-enrollment majors, such as business and prenursing.

IMPROVING LEARNER SUCCESS AND RETENTION

Some institutions have implemented SPOT to enhance learner success and retention. These formats can help learners maintain eligibility for scholarships and financial aid, assist learner-athletes in maintaining athletic eligibility, and provide opportunities for learners to catch up if they are unsuccessful in regular terms.

1. Note: An editorial choice was made to replace participants' use of the term "student" with "learner" where appropriate to match the remainder of the content. In addition, participant quotes have been edited for grammar and clarity.



ENHANCING ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT

SPOT can be a powerful enrollment-management tool, allowing institutions to attract new learner populations and manage class-fill rates more effectively. One participant stated, “We view SPOT as a tool for attracting more learners, particularly to new online programs. The flexibility offered by these formats was seen as a recruitment and retention tool.”

RESPONDING TO CHANGING LEARNER DEMOGRAPHICS

As the “typical” learner profile continues to evolve, institutions are discovering more flexible scheduling options are necessary to meet diverse learner needs. SPOT classes are seen as a way to adapt to changing demographics and preferences.

Implementation strategies vary widely among institutions, reflecting the diverse needs of their learner populations and institutional contexts. Some common approaches include:

- Offering a range of term lengths, from as short as 1 week to as long as 12 weeks
- Implementing “flex” terms that allow for year-round scheduling
- Using SPOT for specific purposes, such as internships, fieldwork and study-abroad programs
- Maintaining a mix of traditional length classes and SPOT to provide maximum flexibility

ROUNDTABLE TAKEAWAY

“ We’ve implemented what we call flex one, flex two, which is similar to consecutive 8-week sessions, but we’ve done a year-round schedule, which is flex one, flex two, winter, Maymester and summer. This allows us to have associate degrees that can be completed in 18 months.



Enrollment-Management and Program-Specific Approaches

Managing enrollment across different term formats requires a multifaceted approach that combines technological solutions, program-specific strategies and personalized advising. Institutions have developed various methods to navigate this complexity.

LEVERAGING TECHNOLOGY

Many institutions use information systems, such as Banner or PeopleSoft, to manage registration and waitlist processes for various term lengths. However, these systems often require manual adjustments to accommodate the unique needs of shortened terms, such as earlier registration deadlines or modified waitlist procedures.

PROGRAM-SPECIFIC STRATEGIES

Different academic programs often approach shortened terms in distinct ways. Technical programs, particularly those with lab components or hands-on training requirements, may use shortened terms to offer intensive, focused instruction periods. One participant described their approach. “We have linked 4-week block classes for technical programs to ensure learners can complete all necessary classwork in a condensed time frame.”

On the other hand, liberal arts programs may use SPOT to offer general-education classes or provide opportunities for learners to catch up or accelerate their progress. This differentiation allows institutions to tailor their SPOT offerings to meet the specific needs and constraints of various disciplines.





Enrollment-Management and Program-Specific Approaches

PREVENTING LEARNER OVERLOAD

Some institutions have limited learners' ability to enroll in concurrent shortened-term courses to ensure learner success in the intense environment of shortened terms. As one participant explained, "We restrict learners from taking multiple shortened-term classes simultaneously, or we limit the total number of credits a learner can take in shortened formats within a single semester." These restrictions are often enforced through automated system controls and advisor oversight.

SPECIALIZED ADVISING

Many institutions have recognized the need for specialized advising processes for learners in SPOT programs and classes. This may include assigning dedicated advisors or learner-success managers to guide them through accelerated formats.

ONLINE-PROGRAM DESIGN

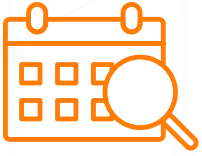
For online programs, particularly those catering to working professionals, institutions often design entire programs around SPOT to provide greater flexibility. Programs may use a series of SPOT throughout the year, allowing learners to maintain a steady pace of classes while balancing work and other commitments.



STRATEGIC CLASS OFFERINGS

Several institutions mentioned using SPOT strategically to manage enrollment in high-demand classes or to provide "parachute" options for learners needing to withdraw from full-term classes. By offering popular classes in both full and shortened formats, **institutions can provide more opportunities for learners to enroll in classes** while improving overall class-fill rates.





Challenges in Class Scheduling and Resource Allocation

The implementation of SPOT has introduced a variety of challenges in class scheduling and resource allocation, requiring institutions to adapt their traditional approaches and develop innovative solutions. These challenges stem from the need to accommodate more diverse class formats within existing institutional structures and resources.

COMPLEXITY IN SCHEDULING

One of the primary challenges reported by several institutions is the complexity of creating a cohesive schedule that accommodates both traditional term length and SPOT. This complexity arises from the need to manage overlapping time slots, ensure appropriate course sequencing and avoid conflicts for learners and faculty. One participant noted, "Placing a full-time faculty member in a SPOT class with more time in the classroom per class period than full-term classes might eliminate their ability to teach at particular times of day in other parts of the term."

ROOM ALLOCATION

Room allocation is challenging, particularly for classes requiring specialized facilities, such as laboratories. Several institutions reported difficulties accommodating the extended contact hours needed for lab classes within SPOT. This issue is exacerbated when intensive classes are scheduled later in the semester because available time slots often become scarce.

One institution shared their innovative solution. "We have adjusted those [lecture-and-lab combination classes] and shifted them to a hybrid format. The lectures are online, then we have reduced contact hours for the lab piece, which they do face-to-face on campus."



FACULTY-WORKLOAD MANAGEMENT

The management of faculty workload presents another layer of complexity in offering SPOT. Institutions must ensure faculty teaching loads are appropriately distributed across different term formats. This can be particularly challenging when SPOT classes do not meet minimum-enrollment thresholds, potentially leaving faculty with incomplete teaching loads that must be made up in subsequent terms.

CLASS PAIRING AND SEQUENCING

Several participants highlighted the challenge of creating effective class pairings across different parts of term. For example, one participant described their efforts to pair classes in consecutive 6-week terms, scheduling them sequentially at the same time of day, the same day(s) of the week and in the same room to maximize resource utilization. While this approach can be efficient, it requires careful planning and coordination to ensure class sequences make sense for learners while aligning with program requirements.

ADMINISTRATIVE PROCESSES

The need to adjust administrative processes, such as waitlist management, for shortened terms was also mentioned as a challenge. One participant noted, “Each part of a term requires individual waitlist settings and customized messaging to learners, adding an additional layer of complexity to the registration process.”

ONLINE SOLUTION FOR SPACE MANAGEMENT

Some institutions reported room allocation was not an issue for their SPOT offerings. This was particularly true for institutions that schedule a larger percentage of their SPOT classes online, eliminating the need for physical classroom space.

GRADING AND ASSESSMENT

One participant mentioned a unique challenge was the occasional tendency for faculty to give incomplete grades to entire classes in very short classes, such as 5-week summer sessions. This situation arises when class content cannot be adequately covered or assessed within the compressed timeframe. This highlights the need to consider carefully which classes are appropriate for extremely shortened formats.



Impact on Learner Success

The impact of SPOT use on learner success is a key area of interest for institutions implementing these alternative formats. Participants' experiences reveal a complex picture, with outcomes often varying based on factors such as learner demographics, class content and institutional support structures.

VARIED RATES OF SUCCESS

Many institutions initially expected SPOT to improve learner success by offering greater flexibility and accelerating degree completion. For some institutions, these positive expectations have been largely met.

ROUNDTABLE TAKEAWAY

“ Our data over the past 5 years showed **higher success rates in 8-week blocks than full-term classes**. Specifically, we found all learners had a success rate of 88.45% in 8-week blocks versus 80.91% in full-term classes. For degree-seeking learners, the difference was even more pronounced, with 88.52% success in 8-week blocks compared to 79% in full terms.

However, the impact on learner success has not been positive across all institutions in this sample of nine institutions or for all types of SPOT. Several participants noted very short classes, such as 3-week intensive classes, often resulted in lower grades than standard-length classes. One institution observed learners struggle more in these ultra-compressed formats, particularly when they are scheduled at the end of a regular term when learner burnout is more common.



Impact on Learner Success

DEMOGRAPHIC DIFFERENCES

The impact on learner success appears to vary significantly based on learner demographics. Several institutions reported working professionals and adult learners tend to perform well in SPOT classes, particularly in online settings. These learners often appreciate the ability to focus intensively on one or two classes at a time, allowing them to balance their studies more effectively with work and family commitments.

Conversely, one institution found traditional undergraduate learners, particularly those just out of high school, often need help with the pace and intensity of SPOT classes. This realization has led some institutions to restrict access to these classes or implement additional support measures for learners enrolled in SPOT classes.

TIME-TO-DEGREE COMPLETION

The relationship between SPOT and degree-completion rates is an area in which expectations and outcomes have varied. Some institutions report this format has accelerated degree completion for certain learner groups; other institutions are still gathering long-term data to confirm this effect.



STRATEGIES FOR ENHANCING SUCCESS

Institutions have implemented strategies to enhance learner success in SPOT in response to mixed learner outcomes. These include:

- Limiting the number of SPOT classes a learner can take simultaneously
- Providing additional academic support services
- Carefully considering which classes are suitable for compressed formats
- Focusing on faculty development to enhance teaching effectiveness in SPOT

ROUNDTABLE TAKEAWAY

“ We don’t allow learners to double up on the SPOT classes. So you can’t take two 7-week classes or two 5-week classes simultaneously because we found learners were not doing as well. **It’s better for learners to enroll in SPOT classes sequentially.** ”





Data-Driven Optimization

Institutions are employing a variety of data sources and analytical tools to optimize their SPOT offerings and prevent roadblocks in learner progression. The approaches described by participants reflect a growing emphasis on data-driven decision making in higher education, particularly regarding innovative scheduling formats.

DATA SOURCES

Many institutions rely heavily on their SIS as a primary data source. These systems are repositories for learner data, including enrollment patterns, class registrations, grades and degree progress.

ANALYTICAL TOOLS

Participants mentioned using specialized analytics and reporting tools. For example, some institutions use Tableau for data visualization and dashboard creation, allowing administrators to track key metrics related to shortened-term success. Others reported using Argos for more advanced reporting capabilities. Some institutions use SQL queries and built-in reporting tools within these systems to extract and analyze relevant data for shortened-term offerings. Power BI was also mentioned as a tool for creating interactive dashboards to monitor various aspects of SPOT performance.

CLASS-SCHEDULING SOFTWARE

Class-scheduling software plays a significant role in optimizing SPOT offerings. Several institutions mentioned using Ad Astra, a comprehensive scheduling solution with analytics capabilities.² Ad Astra and similar technology solutions enable institutions to analyze historical enrollment patterns, predict future demand and optimize room utilization across various term formats.

ROUNDTABLE TAKEAWAY

“**We’re really looking forward to using the analytics in Ad Astra** to help us determine whether or not all the parts of term that we do have right now are necessary, or if we need to reconsider how we are offering our parts of term.”

2. Participants were not required to be users of Ad Astra to participate in the roundtable.





KEY METRICS

The specific metrics tracked using these tools vary among institutions but commonly include the following:

- Class-fill rates and cancellation rates
- Average class size
- Learner credit-hour load per semester
- Class success rates (often called productive grade rates or PGR)
- Withdrawal rates
- Time-to-degree completion
- Graduation rates

Some institutions are conducting more nuanced analyses. For example, one participant mentioned comparing class grades in SPOT classes to those in standard-length classes. Another suggested examining performance in subsequent, more rigorous courses to assess whether SPOT prerequisite classes adequately prepare learners.

QUALITATIVE DATA

A few participants also highlighted the importance of qualitative-data sources. For instance, some institutions conduct surveys or focus groups with learners and faculty to gather feedback on their experiences with SPOT classes. Others have implemented withdrawal surveys to better understand why learners drop classes offered in this format.

CHALLENGES IN DATA ANALYSIS

Despite the array of tools and data sources available, several participants acknowledged challenges in effectively using all the collected data. Time constraints and the volume of data were cited as obstacles to more comprehensive analysis. As one participant noted, “We collect so much data, and I often joke, like, who has time to analyze any of it?”

Participants also expressed a desire for more sophisticated data integration and analytics capabilities, which could involve:



Development of predictive models to identify learners most likely to succeed in SPOT formats



Creation of early-warning systems to flag learners who may be struggling in the accelerated pace of SPOT classes



Implementation of more sophisticated data visualization tools to help administrators and faculty quickly understand trends and patterns in SPOT performance



Conclusion and Future Directions

The implementation of SPOT classes represents a fairly recent shift for some institutions, offering both opportunities and challenges for institutions, learners and faculty. This analysis of experiences from nine diverse institutions of higher education reveals SPOT can enhance flexibility and accelerate degree completion for certain learner populations.

However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this approach in fully understanding this complex topic. The small sample size and limited time frame restrict our ability to draw broad conclusions or truly benchmark practices across the sector. Additionally, the varying levels of experience with SPOT among participating institutions and the lack of standardized data collection methods limit our ability to make definitive comparisons or generalizations.

The roundtable discussion primarily focused on administrative and structural aspects of SPOT, with less emphasis on pedagogical implications or detailed learner outcome data. Perspectives shared are primarily from administrative viewpoints and may only partially capture the experiences of faculty and learners.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

The roundtable discussion raised many questions. For example,

- 1 How does the effectiveness of SPOT vary across different academic disciplines and course types?
- 2 What are the long-term impacts on learning retention for those primarily taking SPOT classes?
- 3 How can institutions best support faculty in adapting their teaching methods and course content for SPOT?
- 4 What are the optimal combinations of traditional and shortened terms to maximize learner success and institutional efficiency?
- 5 How do SPOT classes impact specific learner populations, such as first-generation, limited-income or working, in terms of academic performance and degree completion?



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR USING SPOT

Some recommendations can be made based on insights from this roundtable discussion, including the following:

- + Develop comprehensive faculty-training programs focused on effective teaching strategies for SPOT.
- + Implement robust data-collection and analysis systems to continuously assess the impact of SPOT on learner success metrics.
- + Modify advising processes to guide learners in selecting appropriate course formats based on their circumstances and learning styles.
- + Establish clear policies regarding course-load limits and registration processes specific to SPOT.
- + Invest in technology solutions that can effectively manage the complexities of scheduling and resource allocation across multiple-term formats.
- + Regularly review and adjust SPOT offerings based on learner-performance data and feedback from faculty and learners.

Data from this roundtable discussion provides a foundation for future exploration. Future research should gather data from a wide range of institutions, include more extensive quantitative analysis of learner outcomes and explore the long-term effects of SPOT on learning and degree completion. Additionally, in-depth studies on the pedagogical adaptations required for SPOT and their impact on teaching and learning would be valuable.



Acknowledgment

The insights and experiences shared in this white paper would not have been possible without the contributions of time and expertise from representatives of nine institutions who participated in our October 2024 virtual roundtable. These educational leaders openly shared their challenges, successes, and innovative approaches to implementing shortened parts of term. We sincerely thank these colleagues for their commitment to advancing our collective knowledge and their dedication to improving learner success through more flexible academic calendars.

- + Advent Health University
- + Alamo Colleges District
- + Laramie County Community College
- + Murray State University
- + New Mexico Highlands University
- + Texas Christian University
- + University of California Merced
- + University of Dallas
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Their contributions will continue to inform discussions and decisions about shortened terms across higher education institutions.



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