

## The Case for On-Time Registration



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By Terry O'Banion and Cynthia Wilson

In the past decade, the policy of late registration—the practice of allowing students to continue registering during the first week (or more) of class—has come under scrutiny in the community college field. Part of the common culture of community colleges for decades, advocates for late registration have argued for continuing it based on access and revenues. By keeping the doors open one more week beyond the deadline, colleges will increase opportunities for more students to enroll in college, and more students mean more revenue from increased FTE or ADA. These arguments have held sway without question until very recently, when an increasing number of colleges, along with several larger research studies, have identified late registration as a barrier to student success. Findings from a recent survey of community college CEOs suggest that late registration is on the decline and may be disappearing as a common practice.

In late 2012, the League for Innovation in the Community College (League) surveyed 525 community college CEOs, who are members of the League's Alliance, on the current status of late registration. One-hundred and thirty CEOs responded to the survey for a return rate of 25 percent, and although the response rate is low, the results may suggest trends in late registration that should be considered by community college leaders. Although typically cloaked in the terminology of *eliminating late registration*, the trend may be shifting to one better described as *requiring on-time registration*—and doing so for all the right reasons: increases in student enrollment, persistence, and success; innovations in options for learners; improvements in faculty and student services staff satisfaction; and, yes, increases in revenue.

In the League survey, 33 percent of the respondents indicated their colleges no longer provide opportunities for students to register late. Thirty-six percent indicated they were beginning to think about eliminating late registration, and only 13 percent indicated they had no plans to eliminate late registration. To the extent these figures reflect community colleges across the nation, it is clear that the practice of late registration is on the decline and may soon be eliminated in a majority of the nation's colleges.

For colleges that had already eliminated late registration, the survey asked respondents to indicate the year this action was taken (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Year Late Registration Was Eliminated**

Year Eliminated	% Response
2008-2009 or earlier	6.1%
2009-2010	4.6%
2010-2011	6.9%
2011-2012	9.2%
2012-2013	6.9%

According to these data, the move to eliminate registration began fairly recently; of the respondents, only 6.1 percent eliminated the practice prior to 2009. The data are too limited to identify a trend, but there are still a few months left in the 2012-2013 academic year; if the number increases for that year, it may be appropriate to declare a trend that colleges in the last three years are increasingly terminating late registration. A number of respondents added comments indicating that in 2013 they plan to eliminate late registration.

Apparently the issue of late registration is a topic of discussion and action on many community college campuses. Even colleges that have not eliminated late registration have made some changes in the policies and practices related to late registration, as indicated in the following comments:

*Late registration is discouraged but allowed in extenuating circumstances.*

*Students in developmental education may not register late; others may only register for those classes that have not met.*

*Previously, we allowed 10 days of late registration, reduced it to 5, and now allow only 2.*

*Modularizing courses with multiple entry and exit points made late registration irrelevant.*

*We offer more late start and mini-term courses.*

*Students may register after the first class has met but not after the second.*

*We allow documentable exceptions, but these are not routine.*

College leaders who had eliminated late registration were asked why they did so. The four most frequently indicated reasons are listed in Table 2; respondents were asked to check all applicable reasons from a list provided in the survey, and "other" was an option.

**Table 2. Reasons for Eliminating Late Registration**

<b>Reason</b>	<b>% Response</b>
We knew from experience that it did not help students.	36%
We reviewed research that indicated students who register late were less likely to be retained or complete goals.	22%
Our teaching faculty indicated that it interfered with early class sessions.	22%
Our student services staff indicated it created problems with assessment, orientation, advising, financial aid, and registration.	20%

These responses suggest that faculty and student services staff have long believed there were problems with late registration, and are beginning to be aware that research supports their intuition.

The practice of late registration has been studied for more than three decades, and results have strongly indicated that it is detrimental to student success. In a study by Smith, Street, and Olivarez in 2002, 35 percent of new students who registered late were retained to the next semester, compared to 80 percent of those who registered on time. The study also found that new students who registered on time for their courses withdrew from 10 percent of their course hours, while those who registered late withdrew from 21 percent of their course hours. In 2007, Keck, in a study of the relationship between subject areas and late registration in one community college, found that in math and science courses 17 percent of the students who registered on time were unsuccessful as measured by the final course grade; 44 percent of late registrants were unsuccessful. In the social sciences, only 7 percent of timely registrants were unsuccessful, while 41 percent of late registrants were unsuccessful.

In 2010, Patricia Goodman conducted a major study of 2,159 first-time, full-time students who enrolled in one of the colleges in the Kentucky Community and Technical College System in the fall 2008 semester. She concluded that "...students who registered late for their courses were less likely to persist through their first year of college." The study examined predictive behavior of students related to persistence through their first year of college based on three variables: (1) course registration time; (2) transfer-orientation; and (3) income level. Of these three variables, course registration time had a direct, significant relationship to student persistence, and specifically late student registration appeared to have a direct relationship to the lack of persistence during the first year of college.

The problem for students is not difficult to understand. The most at-risk students tend to register late at a time when the system is most overloaded and least capable of meeting their needs. In a 2005 study, Zottos found that low-performing students were more likely to register late. While at-risk students need more time and attention, late registration occurs at a time that provides less time and attention.

College leaders who had eliminated late registration were also asked to indicate the results of doing so. Asked to check all that apply, the results are reported in Table 3.

**Table 3. Results of Eliminating Late Registration**

<b>Result</b>	<b>% Response</b>
We offered students an opportunity to register for late-start, shorter term, or accelerated classes if they missed the registration deadline.	28%
Our faculty indicated a greater degree of satisfaction.	26%
Our student services staff indicated a greater degree of satisfaction.	26%
We had no or very few complaints from students.	24%
We offered students an option to register late if they met certain strict conditions.	8%
We experienced a loss of enrollment and revenue for the next academic year.	8%

According to these data, the impact of eliminating late registration is almost all positive. Colleges have options for assisting students who do not meet the deadline, and there is considerable value for the college in increasing the satisfaction for faculty and staff. Only 8

percent of the colleges indicated a reduction in enrollment and revenue, and this might have been prevented with better planning and communication. One president commented that as a result of eliminating late registration, "Enrollment increased to record levels." Colleges that have experienced a reduction in enrollment and revenue have indicated that these reductions were temporary.

All respondents, whether they had eliminated late registration or not, were asked "Would you recommend eliminating late registration?" Their responses are indicated in Table 4.

**Table 4. Recommendations for Eliminating Late Registration**

<b>Recommend?</b>	<b>% Response</b>
Definitely not	5%
Probably not	13%
Neutral	17%
Probably	24%
Definitely	35%

Only 5 percent of respondents were definite in their position not to eliminate registration, while 35 percent were definite in their view that it should be eliminated. Fifty-nine percent indicated probably or definitely that late registration should be eliminated as a practice in community colleges.

In this limited survey of community college presidents, it is clear that late registration is an issue being addressed by the nation's community colleges. Many of these leaders are struggling with the philosophical and humane issue of how to keep the door of opportunity open for their students and with the practical issue of how to maintain and increase revenue. The colleges that have eliminated late registration keep the doors open by adopting innovative course structures such as modularized courses with multiple entry/exit points, late-start courses, and mini-courses; and they maintain enrollment and revenue by careful planning and timing. Eliminating late registration is likely to lead to increases in retention and completion, and it surely leads to increased faculty and staff satisfaction.

### **The Case for Requiring On-Time Registration**

The case for requiring on-time registration is strong. Colleges that redesign their registration and intake procedures to eliminate late registration will

- Improve persistence and retention rates for their students;
- Send a message to students and to faculty that learning and instruction are important every day and every week of the term;
- Establish expectations for students to meet deadlines and live with the consequences of their decisions, which may translate into improved workforce habits for some students;
- Permit faculty to begin the process of instruction the first day of class without the interruption of swirling students; and
- Realize increased revenues based on FTE and ADA as persistence and retention rates are increased.

For colleges that want to plan for requiring on-time registration, the following guidelines will be helpful:

1. Appoint a college-wide committee to study the issue and make recommendations. The committee should review and summarize the national research on the impact of

late registration, complemented by a review of local research and perceptions of the college's faculty and staff.

2. The committee should create a rationale for adopting a policy of on-time registration that reflects the values, needs, and resources of the college.
3. College leaders should use this opportunity of change in the college culture to explore and experiment with integrated models of student services, accelerated learning models that enroll students in intensive but shorter periods of time offered throughout the year, and the application of technology to support these efforts.
4. A marketing plan should be prepared and implemented that communicates the change and the new registration processes and deadlines to all stakeholders, including enrolled students, new and prospective students, full and adjunct faculty, staff and administrators, area high school counselors and administrators, and relevant community agencies and groups. College materials that include information about registration will need to be updated to reflect the changes.
5. The office of institutional research should design programs to assess the impact of the change on students and the institution including enrollment, student success, revenues, and satisfaction.

As community colleges gear up to implement new policies, programs, and practices to ensure they are meeting the goals of the Completion Agenda, now is the time to terminate the policy of late registration and institute a new policy of on-time registration. Removing the universally-acknowledged barrier of late registration will be much easier than harvesting the fruit clustered in the tops of the trees. Even if colleges do not plan to embrace the Completion Agenda, their students and faculty will greatly benefit by a change in the registration deadline—the day before the first day of class—that supports students and faculty in their efforts to successfully navigate the educational enterprise.

## References

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