

College Registration: Another Norman Door

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When I was in high school I never gave much thought to the classes I needed to take or their scheduling as every year I was simply handed a schedule with my classes. The only decision I had to make was whether I wanted to take band or art class, and since I didn't play any instrument, that was an easy choice. However when I reached college I was mystified, and frightened, by the registration procedure. Seniors, juniors, sophomores, and freshman were each given a different day to register on-campus, in that order. We were then given a thick book with the hundreds of courses being offered for the semester with their descriptions, dates, times, locations, and whether there were any pre- or co-requisites.

On the day of registration I showed up with a form in my hand of the classes I wanted to take. There were four long lines outside of the Student Center leading to four tables, each one with a registration advisor and a computer. Next to them were a series of projection screens with overhead projectors projecting hundreds of course numbers. As each course filled, they would simply black out the course number on the transparency. As I stood in line I checked my list each time a number was blacked out, and to my horror observed, slowly, each class I was planning on taking close. By the time I reached the front of the line, like many of us that day, I was left with a schedule of five classes on inconvenient days with inconvenient times for subjects I didn't really need. Surely there had to be a better way.

The good news is that there is a better way, but unfortunately, it is found in few places. At the community college I currently work at, like most every college in the United States, the registration system is all computer-based, allowing students to register for their courses online. This would seem to have fixed the "Norman Door" of processes that don't function the way they should found in the way I registered for classes as an undergrad, but it has also led to a new Norman Door.

The term “Norman Door” comes from Don Norman and his book *The Design of Everyday Things* (2013) and refers to a practice or a technology that actually undermines its own purpose. In the case of registering for college courses, the process should be rather simple: a student chooses a class they want to take and if there are empty seats it is added to their schedule. If the class is full, they can register for a different section. Hutt (2017) writes that colleges may not offer enough gateway courses, the courses that all students are required to take, to keep up with the demand. The solution to that, offer more courses, seems straightforward enough, but it also demands more faculty time, possibly more faculty, more space, and more resources. While looking at this, Hutt (2017) discovered “Simple things could keep students from registering, I found. The same problems and barriers emerged again and again, exposing our cumbersome internal processes” (n.p.).

Jackson (2013) notes that the experience I had as a freshman, where registration began with the students with the most credits and ended with the students with the least amount of credits, can have negative consequences for those just beginning their college studies as they find the classes they want to take or the ones they need are already filled. This makes community college students, many of whom do not finish in the intended two year timeframe to begin with, susceptible to dropping out before they even begin (Jackson, 2013). With low retention rates and even lower graduation rates, this not only effects the students, but the financial well-being of the schools themselves.

Similarly, Gurantz (2015) writes that California community colleges operate using this same thinking, giving priority to those who have accumulated the most credits. Gurantz (2015) goes on to write that

This has led two separate state commissions to declare that California “is rationing access to community colleges, but not in a rational way” (Little Hoover Commission, 2012, p. V) resulting in “policies that enable students to wander around the curriculum, . . . and accumulate an unlimited number of units . . . [which is] a disservice to enrolled students and to those who cannot get into the system due to a lack of available classes.” (pp. 55-56).

This is a scenario that plays out frequently, where students end up registering for classes because they fit their schedule but do not actually bring them any closer to graduation.

One way to solve this particular problem of students collecting credits with no value is to have mandatory advising for all students, where they must first meet with an advisor before being able to register for classes. While this may seem to overwhelm academic advisors, faculty are often required to perform advising duties and can be assigned students majoring in their department. This would spread out the number of students that each advisor would need to meet with while also assisting students in selecting courses that they actually need in order to graduate.

Looking back at priority registration, however, shows that this practice itself may harm the students who need the most assistance. Bahr, Gross, Slay, and Christensen (2015) state that “Put simply, during times of impaction, registration priority policies will have a significant impact on students’ outcomes” (p. 351). In fact,

students who are assigned a lower registration priority and, consequently, are unable to begin college in a timely manner, or are forced to attend part-time or to “stop out” of college due to the unavailability of needed courses, may suffer long-term consequences

even if they eventually return to college full-time (Bahr, Gross, Slay, & Christensen, p. 351).

One way to alleviate this issue is by using “Guided Pathways.” Durden (2018) writes that “The guided pathways approach to community and technical college redesign has significant impacts” (p. 161).

This approach involves creating a plan that students follow, allowing them some flexibility in their schedules but also making sure that they are on the “pathway” to graduation. Instead of choosing classes from a huge master list, they are given a more limited number of choices, perhaps only allowing access to gateway courses during their first semester. This assures the student that the classes they register for count towards their degree and will reduce the number of courses they take that are outside of their program. Because the courses are taken in a certain order, this prevents students who would normally receive higher priority during registration from waiting until their final semesters to take gateway courses and block out lower priority students. As they progress through their program, they are given more freedom in choosing electives, but only as their requirements are fulfilled. Guided pathways also offers multiple forms of support in areas other than registration designed to assist students in their journey through college (Darden, 2018).

For such a seemingly innocuous process, registration for college courses can have a very large impact on college students, whether they are incoming freshman or final semester seniors. Miller (2013) notes that community colleges in particular struggle with finances, and that retention can be one way of assuring money is flowing into the school. To increase retention, the registration process needs to be manageable for students and not turn them away before they can

even get started. By implementing some simple changes to current practices it may be possible to keep more students not only in school, but on the path to graduation.

Works Cited

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