MOMENTUM PATHWAYS: CLASSROOM UTILIZATION AND SCHEDULING COMMITTEE

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SUMMARY

This committee was charged with "Conducting a review of classroom utilization and scheduling and develop recommendations, to be presented to Leadership Council, for increased opportunities for student success." In light of other suggestions out of the Momentum Pathways White Papers, we expanded and redefined our remit. Here, we collect concerns and offer recommendation about scheduling and classrooms, which can be used to inform discussions about new outlooks, structures, and processes, going forward.

Our committee did not conduct a review of classroom utilization. Initially, there were issues with doing this in the spring when classes were in session and then we were all preoccupied with the upheavals of COVID-19. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that there are issues with simply collecting raw data about utilization, which may not provide a full picture of why a classroom is over- or under-utilized.

The report has two main parts. Part 1 focuses on scheduling, with a section on concerns and one on recommendations. Part 2 focuses on classrooms, again with a section on concerns and one on recommendations.

Here is a summary of our main findings and recommendations:

- Scheduling a complex issue, but the issues that need to be addressed are specific and straightforward (if not easy) to deal with.
- We recommend efforts to help predict enrollment and learn about student and faculty satisfaction with scheduling.
- Scheduling issues are pronounced in the distance learning classrooms.
- We recommend scheduling students into Math and English in their first semester.
- We identify the fact of different scheduling conventions across colleges and campuses and recommend further research into whether these differences create issues for students or efficient course delivery, especially distance courses.

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- The issues around classroom infrastructure are pervasive and extensive, and include issues in technological infrastructure, security (in terms of data), accessibility, and maintenance.

- We recommend that ISU develop a Committee on Academic Infrastructure to address these issues, with the first charge of this committee being to develop a vision for how ISU's classrooms should support ISU's why (changing lives through education) and a set of standards for classrooms in terms technology, security, accessibility, and maintenance.

PART I: SCHEDULING

SECTION I: SCHEDULING CONCERNS

A. *Scheduling for Student Interest/Enrollment*

A major component of scheduling is predicting student interest and need. Currently, the main only predictor for student enrollment/need is past enrollment. How do other schools predict student interest? Are there best practices for determining enrollment? Would it be possible to develop a survey to consider the types of classes students want? Once a first-year class has been admitted, could we predict from the get-go how many seats will be needed in Math or ENGL 1101P, ENGL 1101, or ENGL 1102? An issue here is timing: scheduling is done in January, well before the admission of a new fall entering class.

B. Creative Scheduling Risks

In the absence of predictive models for scheduling, department chairs sometimes implement new models for course delivery or scheduling in order to meet student interest/demand, such as offering Saturday courses or blended/hybrid delivery (half in-seat; half-online). Sometimes these are a success, but other times these models do not work out. Even when a creatively scheduled course needs to be cancelled due to low enrollment, Department Chairs and faculty members trying out new delivery models should not be criticized for trying something new.

C. Distance Learning

Scheduling in distance learning classrooms is a major issue as there are not enough classrooms on other campuses to facilitate the broadcast of courses to each site. The conflict resolution process is painful and can feel like a game of "chicken." While we see the need to offer more distance classes, the lack of physical infrastructure and the difference in scheduling conventions on different campuses makes it much more difficult to offer remote classes than it would initially appear. (See next point and also Classrooms Concerns and Recommendations.)

D. Non-Standard Scheduling

The ISU Registrar's Office has established standard meeting patterns for courses at ISU, with courses meeting T/TH for 75 minutes, or MWF for 50 minutes. Some programs, colleges, and campuses have meeting patterns that do not fit with these standard scheduling blocks. The best example is the Idaho Falls Campus, which has a M/W or T/Th schedule. While this scheduling works well for their students, it leaves programs aiming to schedule distance courses in a bind. They must offer either five-day per week classes (that enroll lower in IF due to the non-IF standard M/W/F pattern), or they must offer M/W classes that throw off the standard meeting pattern for Pocatello students, thereby limiting their ability to create an efficient, back-to-back schedule. Furthermore, different scheduling conventions on different campuses means that, for distance courses, there are not as many "spots" available to schedule distance classes on MWF, further impacting the efficient scheduling of distance courses.

That said, simply aligning all colleges and campuses is a vexed issue. Distance courses are only one, very small piece of a large scheduling pie. College of Business and Idaho Falls leadership report that student strongly prefer the four-day per week schedule, and in this sense, this meeting pattern is student-centered. Going to a four-day meeting pattern everywhere raises a question about whether there are enough meeting times available each day to offer all courses, could create more scheduling conflicts for

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students, and will push more course offerings out of the 9am – 1pm prime time. Enforcing five-day meeting patterns everywhere can help students to create efficient schedules and promote delivery of distance courses, but it can also inconvenience students who prefer the four-day meeting pattern and it can potentially reduce enrollment at colleges and campuses where the meeting pattern has helped to recruit and retain students.

E. Scheduling Rhetoric

The most important factors in scheduling are enrollment and facilitating paths to graduation, not faculty preference in terms of specific courses or meeting patterns. That said, it is important to recognize that a good department chair will schedule faculty members with a variety of other issues in mind, including a faculty member's committee obligations, the expectations of an upcoming major review (such as T&P), whether that faculty member is a morning or evening person, and whether that faculty member has ad hoc or on-going medical or family care issues. It is appropriate for faculty members to have preferences about scheduling, and for those preferences to be factored into the scheduling process. When discussing scheduling, it is important that upper-administration reinforce the main priorities in terms of enrollment and graduation, while using a rhetoric and approach that recognizes that faculty members are by and large deeply committed to their jobs and ISU, and they are people with complex work-work and work-life obligations that deserve to be part of the scheduling process, even if those obligations are not prioritized in decision making.

F. "Owned" Classrooms and Scheduling: This is Not an Issue

The committee considered a rumor that "owned" classrooms are an issue because they limit usage on one space, and thereby also create conflicts for space elsewhere. The committee members see that this could be a local issue in a specific space, it does not seem to us to be an issue that deserves the general attention of the university. If this is an issue for a specific department, faculty member, or building, we suggest that those involved work with the Office of the Registrar and their Dean to resolve the issue.

SECTION II: SCHEDULING RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Block Scheduling – Math and English

We know that students who complete their Math and English in their first year are retained at a higher level, and for Math this is true even when they do not pass those courses (data for English is unknown). We also know that students do better when then have a cohort of students. For this reason, we propose that ISU develop block schedules for general education Math and English. One way to start is to schedule

students automatically into general education Math and English courses, perhaps based on preferences in terms of morning, afternoon, and evening.

B. *Increase Synchronous Distance Learning Capacity*

ISU needs to increase its synchronous distance-learning capacity, for instance by increasing the number of classrooms available for distance learning on other campuses or increasing ISU's ability to deliver courses in other ways, such as using OWL technology. (But N.B. if we are using OWLs, there needs to be established tech support and other classroom tech infrastructure that makes it so that the classroom is not being jerry-rigged for distance learning and there is adequate support for faculty who might encounter technical problems.)

C. *Further Discussion of Scheduling Conventions*

Given the issues with the different scheduling conventions across colleges and campuses, it might seem reasonable to make everyone fit the same schedule pattern. But it is worth recognizing that, with the exception of distance courses, it is not how much the lack of a standard impacts students. Even with the distance courses, fitting those courses to the four-day pattern in Idaho Falls helps students and that campus tremendously, and may help that campus more than it hinders individual students in Pocatello or the totality of distance courses available. (The bigger issue is the number of distance classrooms.)

For these reasons, this committee cannot make a recommendation about whether a change is needed. We believe that a conversation about scheduling conventions needs to be taken up separately and involve impacted groups, such as College of Business, Idaho Falls, and faculty senate. As part of that discussion,

As part of these further discussions, we believe that it would be useful to survey faculty and students about four-day teaching possibilities. Faculty members who prefer a four-day schedule would need to be aware that this schedule would put more pressure on "prime time" (9am to 2pm), and they would thus need to be prepared to start earlier and/or end the teaching day later. Students would need to be aware that it might be difficult to come to campus for just a half day on a four-day schedule. In addition, a four-day schedule would mean that there would likely put significant pressure on Fridays as meeting days, which would impact faculty and student representatives of committees. A four-day teaching week would not equal a not a four-day work week.

PART II: CLASSROOMS

ISU has a wide variety of classroom spaces used for a wide range of purposes. For instance, there are "general assignment" classrooms in REND, used for a wide range of General Education courses, and there are classrooms used by the College of Technology for specific purposes, such as automotive tech-related courses. For this reason, it is difficult to generalize about all classroom spaces on campus in terms of maintenance, technological infrastructure, up-to-date furniture, etc. etc.   Nevertheless, as we discussed classrooms, a number of concerns emerged.

These areas of concern impact student learning, but it is important to recognize that they add up to a larger issue, which is that our classrooms convey different messages to students about how much ISU cares about their learning and how much the physical and tech infrastructure of the classrooms support ISU's Why.

A. Inconsistent Student Experiences I

Even for students enrolled in the same course, taught by instructors in the same term, student experiences in the classroom can vary widely depending on the building or classroom assigned. For instance, a student enrolled in ENGL 1102: Writing and Rhetoric II (General Education Objective 1), might take the course in REND in a classroom with relatively comfortable seating and functioning technology. Student enrolled in a section of the course taught in Kegel Liberal Arts might be in a classroom with a chalk board, and with the instructor rolling relevant technology in on a computer cart.

B. Inconsistent Student Experiences II

Distance Learning Classrooms: In our discussions, the distance-learning classrooms in the basement of the Library on the Pocatello Campus were singled out for special concern, with issues being raised about outdated and dysfunctional technology, as well as about extremely uncomfortable chairs. In addition, staffing in these classrooms has been reduced, which means that technical problems take longer to solve and teaching is more static as instructors cannot move from a set spot and still be seen by the camera.

C. Maintenance and Sanitation I

It is not clear who is responsible for the maintenance and upkeep of the "general assignment" classrooms on campus. As a result, there appears to be no routine budget available for maintenance, including updating paint, replacing broken tables and chairs,

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or dented chalk or white boards. With the COVID-19 pandemic, it is also not clear who is responsible for "resetting" the sanitation of classrooms between classes.

D. Maintenance II – Technology

For those general assignment classrooms with technology, it is not clear who is responsible for maintaining the tech equipment. Furthermore, outside of REND, if something breaks just prior to or during a class, there is no in-classroom tech support on call. Frequently, other faculty or staff members are called upon to assist, which is a distraction from their execution of other parts of their job, such as grading or service.

E. Security

There is no routinized system for "opening" and "closing" (powering up and powering down) classrooms. Buildings have different systems. For instance, in the LA Building, the English Admin unlocks the classrooms, but if she is sick, the English chair will come in early to do this. Early in fall semester 2019, the ISU Registrar had to open classrooms in REND. Similarly, there is no campus-wide protocol for powering down classrooms at the end of the day. Custodial staff often shut off lights and lock doors, but technology sometimes remains on. Computers shut down differently, with some returning to a baseline, and deleting added apps and documents at the end of the day; others simply shut down like any desktop, sometimes keeping faculty members inadvertently signed in, creating a security risk.

F. Online "Classrooms"

While our committee is charged with considering physical classrooms, it is important to recognize that learning also takes place in virtual classrooms online. It is important to think about how ISU wants its online learning platforms and spaces to reflect, augment, and extend the experience of the physical classroom space. We welcome the recent addition of an incentive payment to those who complete Teaching Online with Moodle, and we think that an Academic Infrastructure Committee could work with the instructors of ToM to build in a segment on conveying an ISU ethos and why in online courses.

SECTION II: CLASSROOM RECOMMENDATIONS

A. ISU's "Why" in the Classroom

ISU needs to develop an ISU why-related vision that will inform our approach to physical and virtual classroom spaces. If ISU's "why" is helping students to better their lives through education, then it is important to consider how we think our classrooms should convey and support that aim. What does a space for "bettering your life through learning" look or feel like?

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Relatedly, if ISU is essentially open access, how do our classrooms convey: "you belong here?" (This is a special issue for students who are larger or need ADA accommodations.) In our meetings, we initially referred to this concern as a brand-related vision for the classrooms, but it's important to recognize that this recommendation is not about bringing ISU colors into every room. Rather, our point is about how we think we should connect classrooms to our Why, which is an issue of functionality, ease of use (for instructors and students), match of classroom infrastructure to learning content, and student access.

For this reason, ISU needs to develop a why-related vision for our classrooms. For instance: at ISU, we seek to help students to better their lives through education. For this reason, we seek to create classrooms that seamlessly foster concentration, respectful interaction, and a forward-looking mindset. For this reason, our classrooms clean, safe, ADA compliant, have space for every student, their bookbag, and an accompanying guide dog or sign language interpreter. Our classrooms have up-to-date functional technology that seamlessly facilitates each lesson.

B. Committee on Academic Instructure

Many of the concerns above reflect a general issue of lack of routinized communication among all the offices and groups that are involved with classroom scheduling, usage, upkeep, and refurbishment. To address this lack of communication, ISU needs to charter a centralized Committee on Academic Infrastructure, which would bring together the Registrar, Facilities, IT (and perhaps other, department-specific IT reps), ITRC, disability services, diversity/equity/inclusion, and the university architect or classroom designer, faculty representatives, and other relevant entities. One charge for this committee would be to develop an ISU why-related vision for classrooms (both in-seat and online; see above), a set of basic classroom standards for accessibility and security (see below), and a process for reviewing and prioritizing larger requests for maintenance and refurbishment of classroom spaces.

As part of this process, we also recommend that this committee put together a tour of classrooms for themselves and with a view to offering it periodically to members of the upper-administration in order to illustrate current issues in classroom infrastructure.

C. Classroom Standards

ISU needs some basic standards against which to measure its classroom spaces. This should involve basic fire code and ADA compliance, as well as active shooter defensibility (defensible, windowless doors). But this should also extend also to minimum required square inches per person (with a book bag and coat), ergonomics,

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lighting, window treatments, white boards, screens, outlets for plugins, etc. It is important to recognize that these are basic standards, and a department may need to request an exception (for instance, many mathematicians prefer chalk boards; another group might need more space per person because of the work done in the class).

D. Survey Users about Classroom Experience

We recommend regularly surveying students, and separately, faculty members, about specific classrooms and classroom spaces. This survey can provide a baseline sense of student experience and start to index needed improvements for the coming years. The best way to facilitate this survey is to have faculty members take classtime to have their students fill out the survey. Some questions might ask students to identify the course and room they are in, and then to answer questions like: What kinds of activities occur in this classroom? (Lecture, group work, interactive discussion, etc.). What activities seem relatively easy in this classroom? What activities seem harder? Is there anything about the physical space of this classroom that interferes with your education (uncomfortable chairs, non-functioning technology, weird lighting, lack of outlets, etc.) Is there anything about the physical space of this classroom that makes learning easier?

The survey should be short, and should be developed by the Committee on Academic Infrastructure, perhaps in conjunction with a class, such as CoB's Marketing Research Class. It could be rolled out with some advance publicity in the Bengal and other venues for student and faculty communication. We think it is especially important to survey users in a variety of spaces, such as general assignment classrooms, but also specialized classrooms, such as distance learning classrooms.

E. Interior Design: Creating and Renovating Classroom Spaces

At times, ISU will find that it needs to create new or refurbish old classroom spaces. In light of this, we recommend that all plans be evaluated in light of ISU's why-related vision and classroom standards as developed by the Committee on Academic Infrastructure.

As classroom plans are developed, we recommend that ISU hire an interior designer who can work with the architect, campus planner, CAI, and individual departments to ensure that any plans will meet these standards, since design decisions can have unexpected consequences. In the recent LA Building renovation, the decision to put in orange and gray carpet was nice, except that most of the desk chairs in the building are a deep blue, such that many classrooms now feel more BSU than ISU, and the desks are too expensive to replace right now.

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In addition, the lively, on-brand, and nice looking orange and black flooring clashed with the historic art deco façade, historic, pink and green tile in the entryway to the building, and the historic green glass pillars on the second floor, suggesting an indifference to history that seems out-of-keeping with ISU's messaging about its robust history and legacy elsewhere.

An experienced interior designer can weigh in on such decisions to ensure that specific brand-related plans will support the larger vision of why, ethos, brand, and standards without clashing with historic or difficult-to-replace elements of the classrooms that are already in place.