

Are 4-Day Workweeks the Future?

Sure, it sounds like a great idea. But how well does it work in practice?

With energy prices skyrocketing, a number of colleges tried longer day, four-day schedules this summer, letting commuting students and employees save on gas, while also cutting utility costs, since some offices could be shuttered an extra day. Now with a few months of experience and institutional data under their belts, some college administrators are convinced that the four-day workweek is the shape of things to come in higher education.

Others, however, are not nearly as certain, arguing that the approach limits student access to valuable resources. The trend appears more popular with community colleges — many of which don't have residential populations and enroll many students who have never been on campus five days every week — but some four-year colleges also went four-day. Generally, colleges switched three-day-a-week course schedules to longer time periods two days a week, so students had Monday/Wednesday and Tuesday/Thursday courses.

If there is a model of the four-day workweek in higher education, it may be Brevard Community College in Florida. The four-campus institution, located midway between Miami and Jacksonville, made headlines last week when it adopted a year-round four-day workweek, after successfully implementing the schedule for two summers and a four-and-one-half-day workweek last fall and spring semester. The college says it saved almost \$268,000 on energy costs this summer — while seeing online enrollments rise 24.5 percent.

According to Brevard, it has consumed almost 1.7 million fewer kilowatt-hours this year than last, and it spent \$474,000 less than was budgeted for energy costs. The benefits, however, do not stop at the college's bottom line. It reported a 50 percent reduction in the number of sick hours used by its employees and noted a 44 percent reduction in annual staff turnover, when comparing this fiscal year to last. Also — there must be something in the water at Brevard — its job applicant pool grew by 51 percent in the six months after the college's initial pilot program of the shortened workweek last summer as compared to the six months before it. Though Brevard's state support has been cut by \$2.3 million this year, it has managed to increase the number of full-time faculty members and double the number of tutors and learning lab assistants with the energy savings.

Not all colleges, however, have Brevard's detailed institutional data to justify a year-round use of the four-day workweek yet. As this summer was the first attempt for many colleges using this unorthodox scheduling, they will have to wait and crunch the

numbers for themselves to see if they saved any money or work for their employees or students. For the moment, these institutions can only note what they saw anecdotally from the summer.

Delta College, a two-year institution in University Center, Mich., adopted the four-day workweek this summer. Leanne Govitz, the college's marketing and public relations director, said the idea blossomed out of an institution-wide sustainability summit. When faculty and staff members floated the idea during meetings, she said, the administration thought it might be a simple way for the college to reduce its carbon emissions and save on utility costs. Still, not every aspect of the college shut its doors Fridays. Govitz said the institution's fitness center, library and public broadcasting station were among those departments that stayed open during the pilot program due to student demand. Though the college is still evaluating the benefits of the pilot program, Govitz noted initial comments about the program have been positive. No decision has been made on repeating the four-day schedule.

While Delta College introduced to program to reduce its carbon footprint, other institutions were more interested in helping their employees and students save at the gas pump. Northwest Florida State College, in Niceville, Fla., formerly Okaloosa-Walton Community College, attempted a four-day workweek for eight weeks this summer. Most of the college's professors travel an average of 40 miles round trip to and from work, said Sylvia Bryan, a spokeswoman. Though students probably did not notice much difference this summer, as the university offers few Friday classes, the institution's support staff appreciated the three-day weekend, said Jill White, the college's vice president. As with most four-day workweek schedules, employees worked longer hours to fulfill their 40 hours a week.

"For most administrators, what the Friday off meant was that we actually got to have a two-day weekend," White said, adding that she often takes work home during the weekends to keep up around the office. "It was a side benefit for administrators, as we're already used to working until six or seven in the evening anyway. I worked normal on Friday, and then I had two days off like normal. We don't have a lot of chances to be creative. Having the ability to have such a change in the summer is a bit like the old adage, a change is as good as a vacation."

Though White anticipates that the college will save several thousand dollars in energy costs from this summer's pilot program, she does not expect it to adopt the shortened workweek for the regular academic year. She said the smaller summer enrollment made a four-day workweek practical, but she also noted that it would not be possible to provide classroom space for the college's full enrollment with such a schedule during the fall and spring semesters. Additionally, she noted that a few faculty members with younger children expressed concerns about the longer hours resulting from the pilot program. It was more difficult for these employees to find child support and day care centers that would accommodate their late working schedules, she said.

Instead of designating a specific day off for most employees, typically Friday, some colleges took a staggered approach to the four-day workweek. Eastern Kentucky University, in Richmond, Ky., implemented its summer pilot program primarily to give more flexibility to its staff, said President Doug Whitlock. Some employees worked Monday through Thursday and others worked Tuesday through Friday.

The only major problem the university encountered this summer, Whitlock said, was accommodating this staggered workload in some of its smaller departments and offices. Additionally, he noted that some supervisors were less than enthusiastic about the program. Still, for those who were able to participate, he said the schedule had its intended effect and the average employee saved about \$80 a month in gas. The university is currently awaiting the full results of a faculty and staff survey to judge whether it should consider the four-day workweek in the future. So far, the university has received more than 700 responses to its survey, a majority of them with positive feedback about the pilot program, said Marc Whitt, an Eastern Kentucky spokesman. "While it was in place and what we've seen so far has been positive [enough] that I would be very surprised if we didn't try it for the full school year," Whitlock said. "During the registration and fee payment rush in the early part of the semester when you're trying to serve the student body, it might be difficult to do in there. Still, I won't rule out doing something within the semester."

In the push to adopt the four-day workweek, some administrators argue that colleges and universities should not forget their primary mission: to serve students. Potentially shutting the doors to some student services on Fridays, for example, might reflect negatively on a university.

Northwestern State University in Natchitoches, La., adopted a shortened schedule that actually might have given its students more access to services. Typically, under the five-day workweek, university offices would be open from 8 a.m. until 4:30 p.m., said President Randall Webb. Under the four-day workweek, Webb said, the offices are open from 7 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. As individual employees must have their shortened workweek approved by their supervisors, and they are not all eligible for the same day off (nor would they choose it), the university now has its administrative doors open for a longer period during the business week and can serve its students even more. Even though some are working a shorter week, Webb said others at the university are working more than ever.

"I've been in some situations where we'd try a four-day workweek to preserve energy consumption," said Webb, recalling a time when he was a registrar at another institution that did not have formal Friday office hours. "I would go out to work on Fridays, to be around, and there were prospective students showing up with their parents. There would be no one there to serve them. I don't want to cast aspersions on the four-day workweek, but that does not always work because you don't serve your clientele, in my opinion. I much prefer the five-day workweek and allowing, in certain circumstances, some staff to work a four-day week."

The university has left open the option for some employees to consider the four-day workweek during the fall semester, but Webb said he expects fewer people to take part. Though his main goal is to serve students, Webb said he would revisit the workweek debate informally with other administrators as the university gathers more data. Some people may choose to work four days a week, but Webb maintained that his university would be open five.

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