

# Fueling change

Higher gas prices and fuel efficiency concerns lead colleges to look at a four-day week

**By Dennis Carter, Assistant Editor**

Colleges and universities are taking cues from the business world and implementing four-day weeks—a trend that some say could become the norm as gas prices and energy costs continue to rise.

Experimenting with four-day school weeks is becoming popular in some of the country's most remote locations in particular. Some colleges and universities have begun offering four-day weeks for employees and students, although most campuses don't close shop on Fridays. Instead, administrators are authorizing alternative schedules as an employee-friendly policy designed to soothe the sting of increasingly costly daily commutes.

Following the lead of its local government, Oakland University in Rochester Hills, Mich., began offering four-day weeks to its employees in July. In June, Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Patterson announced a four-day workweek for government employees, who work 10-hour days Monday through Thursday.

Ted Montgomery, a spokesman for the university, said it was deemed unfea-

sible to offer four-day weeks for students. The pilot program ended Aug. 30, and now each department head can decide whether to allow their employees to continue the practice, Montgomery said.

"I don't see why, if all the results come in and there have been no issues, that it wouldn't be continued," said Montgomery, who participated in the four-day week pilot for three weeks and saved about \$120 on gas. "I haven't heard of any problems so far, honestly."

Oakland University officials said shortening the workweek would not just save employees money; it would also bolster productivity, as many national studies have shown.

"The compressed work week is a win-win. The 20 percent reduction in fuel consumption is good for the environment and good for our employees on an individual level," John Beaghan, vice president for finance and administration, said in a statement.

Montgomery said there was an environmental component to the university's policy.

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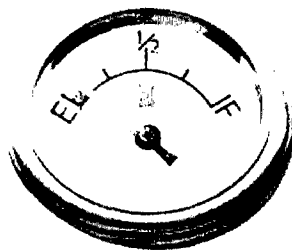
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"We have a little smaller carbon footprint," he said.

While some colleges have resorted to a four-day week, campuses nationwide have seen a spike in online course enrollment as gas prices have risen. Several West Virginia schools, including West Virginia University, Fairmont State University, and West Virginia Wesleyan College, experienced sharp increases in online course enrollment as gas eclipsed \$4 a gallon.

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*Avoiding a round-trip commute to and from campus every day has proved irresistible for many students."*



and from campus every day has proved irresistible for many students. A spokesman for Fairmont State University said the college has bolstered its online offerings recently. This past summer, the school offered 72 online classes for 1,451 students. This fall, the university will offer 109 online options for about 2,300 students.

University administrators in Tennessee also have noticed an increasing interest in classes that keep students off the road. Dan Lattimore, provost of the University of Memphis, said more than 1,000 students are taking online classes this summer, compared to less than 700 in 2007. Administrators said while students can save gas money by taking online courses, these classes require self-discipline, because students learn and study from home, not a lecture hall.

Colleges and universities aren't the only schools considering four-day school weeks. K-12 school systems in Kentucky, Minnesota, Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah are among those that have eliminated Friday from the work schedule during the past year.

In K-12 districts that have adopted the nontraditional schedule, school days are lengthy. In the rural White Pine School District in Nevada, seventh- to 12th-grade students start school at 7:30 a.m. and leave campus at 3:36 p.m. For grades 1-6, the day runs from 7:41 a.m. to 3:36 p.m. This more than compensates for the absence of a fifth school day, said Superintendent Bob Dolazel.

Rex L. Facer, an assistant professor of public finance who has studied alternative workweeks at Brigham Young University in Utah, said school officials

began exploring nontraditional work schedules when employees' daily commutes began to have a major impact on their finances. But the numerous studies—including published work Facer has helped research—that show employee production and contentment rises with the option of a four-day week has made the decision easier on many campuses.

"The big driver is gas prices from the employee's perspective," said Facer, a member of the Brigham Young faculty for seven years. "From the campus perspective, it's all about energy costs ... since local schools districts and higher education are huge consumers of energy."

Despite a slight drop in gas prices late this summer, Facer and school officials nationwide don't expect the alternative schedules to disappear. Facer said it wasn't until gas prices were considered dire that employers and schools embraced nontraditional work hours.

"It appears that \$4 a gallon was a magic point," he said. "The interest really did skyrocket at that point."

Facer said his research showed that about one-third of people surveyed pre-

ferred a four-day workweek, while one-third preferred coming in on Fridays. The other one-third of those surveyed said they did not have a preference.

Conversations about implementing a four-day week at Brigham Young University are in their "formative stages," Facer said—a move that would mimic the state government's four-day week policy. Utah reportedly became the first state government in the country to stray from the traditional five-day week early this summer.

The order issued by Republican Gov. Jon Huntsman will affect about 17,000 out of 24,000 executive-branch employees. It will not cover state police officers, prison guards, or employees of the courts or Utah's public universities.

Turning off the lights, the heat, and the air conditioning on Fridays in 1,000 of 3,000 government buildings will save about \$3 million a year out of a state budget of \$11 billion, according to the governor's spokeswoman, Lisa Roskelley. The state also will save on gasoline used by official vehicles, but authorities have not figured out how much.

The Department of Environmental Quality estimated employees in six buildings alone will save themselves more than \$300,000 spent on gas to commute to work.

The four-day workweek also could be good for the state's environment.

"We feel like we can reduce the CO2 or the ozone by around over 3,000 metric tons, as well as have an impact on our air pollution," said Kim Hood, executive director of the Department of Administrative Services.

In addition, the governor said the new schedule could help recruit younger workers who prefer a three-day weekend.

State officials will evaluate the program after a year and decide whether to extend it.

*Material from the Associated Press was used in this report.*