

Higher Ed in Half the Time: A Literature Review on the Shortened Course Format

April B. Kidd, MAT

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ABSTRACT

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April B. Kidd, MAT

April.Kidd@chattanoogaastate.edu

From the Communications Department in the Division of Humanities,
Chattanooga State Community College, Chattanooga, Tennessee.

ABSTRACT

The shortened course, which reduces course length from a full semester, offers a popular higher education format for nontraditional students, especially those at community colleges. The impacts of accelerated learning on both students and faculty have been studied, yet the variety of shortened course lengths makes comparison across studies more challenging. The purpose of this study is to investigate the half semester course length in undergraduate higher education from research published between 2010-2024. The methods used to locate dissertations and articles included searches on Google Scholar and the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga library database using key words such as: accelerated courses, community college, and two-year college and backward citation chaining. Findings revealed an emphasis on student success, faculty and student stakeholder perceptions, strategies for andragogy, application for underprepared students, and considerations for decision-makers. The narrowed focus of this study can help continue conversations of institutional efficiency and effectiveness utilizing undergraduate shortened courses.

INTRODUCTION

For several reasons, college courses taught in shorter time frames than the traditional semester length have become popular. Technological advances, which allow learning opportunities beyond a physical classroom, are a big contributor to the popularity of shortened courses (Orr et al., 2019). The convenience a shorter course offers students is another reason for its popularity (Ferguson & DeFelice, 2010; Krug et al., 2016; Paasch, 2020). Additionally, condensed course formats enable students to concentrate on fewer classes at a time, while still advancing

through their course of study at a normal pace by taking several consecutive shortened course sessions during each semester (Price, 2024; Serdyukov, 2008). Evidence of student success is another reason these shorter courses are popular (Sheldon & Durdella, 2010; Stith, 2023). Initiatives by organizations such as Achieving the Dream (Achieving the Dream) and the Ascendium Education Group (Ascendium Education Group, 2024) have helped spread awareness and support implementation of the shortened course. Campus-wide adoptions of the shortened course format at institutions such as Chattanooga State Community College (Proctor, 2021), Odessa College (Achieving the Dream), and Trident Technical College (Achieving the Dream, 2021) have boosted popularity. This continued popularity of the shortened course format warrants the importance of this study.

The purpose of this study is to review the literature published from 2010-2024 studying shortened courses in higher education. This study will identify various labels for the shortened course format before reviewing the literature focused on the half-semester length. This study will seek to determine the optimal length for the short course. Findings will also reveal perceptions of stakeholders, strategies for andragogy, and considerations for decision-makers.

Terminology

Shortened courses can be described using a variety of terms (Figure 1). The abbreviated course is one label used to describe courses less than the 16-week semester length (Anastasi, 2007; Ferguson & DeFelice, 2010; Paul, 2017). Many refer to the shortened format as compressed courses (Almquist, 2015; Boeding, 2016; Donnelly, 2023; Eagle, 2013; Guillory, 2018; Kops, 2014; Krug et al., 2016; Lutes & Davies, 2013; Price, 2024; Ross, 2024; Sheldon & Durdella, 2010; Tanner, 2018). The intensive course is another label used (Harwood et al., 2018; McDonald et al., 2018; Scott, 1994; Seamon, 2004; Vlachopoulos et al., 2019). Short course is a simplified term used by Lockyer et al. (2005) and Scott (1994). In addition to publication, a label can gain popularity through usage.

TERMINOLOGY FOR THE SHORTENED COURSE

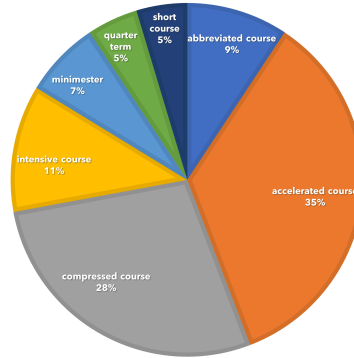


Figure 1. This pie chart shows which terms are used to describe the shortened course and their popularity in this literature review.

The accelerated course is one popular label for the shortened course. The Tennessee Board of Regents labeled classes taught in 7-week terms as accelerated (TBR The College System of Tennessee, 2024). This term is also used by others (Avni & Finn, 2019; Barral et al., 2018; Colclasure et al., 2018; Deichert et al., 2016; Gopalan et al., 2024; Graham, 2020; Guy et al., 2015; Johnson & Rose, 2015; Lee & Horsfall, 2010; Liu & Tourtellott, 2011; Paasch, 2020; Serdyukov, 2008; Wajler, 2012; Wlodkowski, 2003). However, the term accelerated is also used to reference developmental education programs, which may not be shortened (Hodara & Jaggars, 2014; Jaggars et al., 2015; Jenkins et al., 2010; Parks, 2014; Saxon & Martirosyan, 2017; Walker, 2015). Additionally, Patchan et al. (2016) noted the term accelerated could refer to an increase in the amount of information learned instead of the length of time learned. Inconsistency in the usage of the term accelerated can add confusion when studying shortened courses.

Sometimes the course is the same length as the semester or term. Quarter terms can feature courses shorter in length than those which span traditional semesters (Bostwick et al., 2022; Tanner, 2018). Minimester is a term used to indicate a shorter semester of classes typically taught between typical semesters (Gonzalez, 2023; Krug et al., 2016; Paasch, 2020). When the semester is 16 weeks, shorter courses can be taken consecutively.

It is important to note that the designation of a course as shortened does not also distinguish the delivery method of the course. Shortened

courses can be delivered online, face-to-face, or with a hybrid modality (Paul, 2017). Comparing delivery type of the shortened course was a study recommendation by Boeding (2016). Both the lack of consistency in the literature concerning the label for the shortened course and the different options concerning delivery style complicate this study.

Literature Review Methodology

Search Strategy

Electronic databases searched included Google Scholar and The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga library database. Key words and phrases used in the search included accelerated course, community college, and two-year college. Additional articles were located through backward citation chaining of Eagle (2013) and Guillory (2018). The publication date parameters were set to 2010-2024.

Inclusion Criteria

The first layer of inclusion criteria focused on the type of courses. Articles included in this study consisted of college courses taught on the undergraduate level. Courses taught for workplace training or on the secondary level were omitted from this study. Additionally, articles were narrowed to shortened courses lasting seven to eight weeks.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theories Cited in the Literature on the Shortened Course

A variety of theoretical frameworks were mentioned in the studies. Only a couple of theories were repeated across multiple studies. Cognitive load theory, which recognizes a limited mental capacity for learning, was referenced by Almquist (2015), Gonzalez (2023), and Stith (2023). Tinto's retention theory, which seeks to identify why students continue or discontinue college was used by Stith (2023) and Paul (2017). Paul (2017), Stith (2023), and Tanner (2018) all used adult learning theory in their studies. Adult learning theory seeks to understand the intricacies of adult learners (Knowles, 1978). Similar to adult learning theory, andragogy, the practice of teaching adults, was another theory referenced across multiple studies (Paasch, 2020; Paul, 2017; Stith, 2023; Tanner, 2018). Some studies which used common theories also used multiple theories (see Table 1).

Table 1. Theories Related to Learning Found in the Literature on Shortened Courses.	
accelerated learning theory	Ross, 2024
adaptive leadership theory	Almquist, 2015
adult learning theory	Paul, 2017; Stith, 2023; Tanner, 2018
andragogy theory	Paasch, 2020; Paul, 2017; Stith, 2023; Tanner, 2018
behavioral theory	Paasch, 2020
cognitive theory	Paasch, 2020
cognitive load theory	Almquist, 2015; Gonzalez, 2023; Stith, 2023
constructivist theory	Paasch, 2020
doubleloop learning theory	Almquist, 2015
equivalency theory	Scanio, 2021
humanistic theory	Paasch, 2020
inputs-environments-outputs conceptual theory	Boeding, 2016
Kirkpatrick's 4 levels of program outcomes	Colclasure et al., 2018
Kurt Lewin's theory of change	Paasch, 2020
layering of the professoriate	Johnson & Rose, 2015
Levinson's theory of seasons of adulthood	Tanner, 2018
sensemaking and sensegiving	Johnson & Rose, 2015
spacing effect	Deichert et al., 2016
theory of industrialization of education	Scanio, 2021
theory of transformative learning	Paul, 2017
Tinto's retention theory	Paul, 2017; Stith, 2023
understanding by design	Colclasure et al., 2018

Research Methods Used to Study the Shortened Course

Three different types of research methods were utilized in the studies reviewed for this manuscript: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods (see Table 2). Quantitative research was used most often followed by qualitative and then mixed methods. These differing approaches in methodology add variety to the study of the shortened course format.

Quantitative	Barral et al., 2018; Bostwick et al., 2022; Burgess & Medina-Smuck, 2018; Checa-Morales et al., 2021; Deichert et al., 2016; Eagle, 2013; Gonzalez, 2023; Gopalan et al., 2024; Graham, 2020; Guillory, 2018; Lutes & Davies, 2013; Orr et al., 2019; Sheldon & Durdella, 2010; Stith, 2023; Tanner, 2018
Qualitative	Boeding, 2016; Johnson & Rose, 2015; Kops, 2014; Lee & Horsfall, 2010; Liu & Tourtellott, 2011; Ross, 2024; Saxon & Martirosyan, 2017; Wajler, 2012
Mixed method	Colclasure et al., 2018; Krug et al., 2016; Paasch, 2020; Paul, 2017; Scanio, 2021

Major Themes

The most popular theme throughout the literature was student success in a shortened course (Colclasure et al., 2018; Deichert et al., 2016; Gonzalez, 2023; Paul, 2017; Scanio, 2021; Sheldon & Durdella, 2010; Stith, 2023; Tanner, 2018). Much of the research focused on helping underprepared students (Avni & Finn, 2019; Donnelly, 2023; Guy et al., 2015; Hite, 2022; Nix et al., 2020; Parks, 2014; Saxon & Martirosyan, 2017; Sheldon & Durdella, 2010; Walker, 2015). Other research centered on andragogy to inform best practices for instructors (Barral et al., 2018; Burgess & Medina-Smuck, 2018; Eagle, 2013; Gopalan et al., 2024; Kops, 2014; Lutes & Davies, 2013). Understanding student experiences/perceptions was another objective (Boeding, 2016; Checa-Morales et al., 2021; Paasch, 2020; Ross, 2024). Similarly, other studies investigated the faculty experience/perception (Johnson & Rose, 2015; Saxon & Martirosyan, 2017; Wajler, 2012). For administrative

stakeholders, the purpose of deciding whether to make the switch from a traditional format was investigated (Bostwick et al., 2022; Krug et al., 2016). This variety in purpose invites continued study.

The Literature Is Mixed on the Advantages of the Shortened Course

This review failed to uncover a consensus in favor of the shortened course length. Although more studies were in favor of shortened course length (Boeding, 2016; Burgess & Medina-Smuck, 2018; Checa-Morales et al., 2021; Deichert et al., 2016; Gonzalez, 2023; Graham, 2020; Lutes & Davies, 2013; Orr et al., 2019; Paasch, 2020; Ross, 2024; Sheldon & Durdella, 2010; Stith, 2023; Tanner, 2018), other studies supported the traditional semester-long course length (Bostwick et al., 2022; Colclasure et al., 2018; Gopalan et al., 2024). Some studies had mixed results, revealing both advantages and disadvantages of the shortened course (Eagle, 2013; Johnson & Rose, 2015; Liu & Tourtellott, 2011; Paul, 2017; Saxon & Martirosyan, 2017; Scanio, 2021). For example, Saxon and Martirosyan (2017) noted shortened course advantages such as cooperative learning and a focus on essential content, yet also identifying disadvantages such as the fast pace and intense workload. Johnson and Rose (2015) noted both positive and negative outcomes for faculty teaching accelerated courses. While the accelerated format can be a better option for nontraditional students, the 16-week length is better for high school students (Scanio, 2021). This lack of consensus provides evidence for continued study in course length.

Several studies examined different shorter course lengths. Gonzalez (2023), Deichert et al. (2016), and Orr et al. (2019) compared 5-week courses and 8-week courses, while earlier studies by Scott (1994) and Serdyukov (2008) compared 4-week courses with 8-week courses. These studies revealed varying preferences concerning the ideal short course length. Based on test results for an introductory psychology course, Deichert et al. (2016) found 8-week courses preferable to 5-week and 16-week courses. While Gonzalez (2023) studied the same course subject at the same college, the time of year varied since the 5-week length was only taught in the summer. The study by Eagle (2013) covered the widest variety in length by featuring lengths from 4-12 weeks, but did not compare them. As noted by Orr et al. (2019), differences in content, delivery, and recognition support the need for a new conceptual model when making comparisons. Consistent with the result of Almquist (2015),

this literature review failed to determine the optimal length of the short course.

The 8-week short course was the more frequent half-semester length when compared to the 7-week length (Colclasure et al., 2018; Gopalan et al., 2024; Krug et al., 2016; Liu & Tourtellott, 2011; Lutes & Davies, 2013; Paasch, 2020; Paul, 2017; Ross, 2024; Saxon & Martirosyan, 2017; Scanio, 2021; Stith, 2023; Tanner, 2018). Only 3 studies completed by Boeding (2016), Burgess and Medina-Smuck (2018), and Price (2024) focused on the 7-week course, although it is the most popular shortened course length at Chattanooga State Community College.

Research on the student perspective of shortened courses reveals mixed results. Several studies observed evidence of student success in shortened courses (Almquist, 2015; Deichert et al., 2016; Donnelly, 2023; Gonzalez, 2023; Price, 2024; Scanio, 2021; Stith, 2023; Tanner, 2018), but the studies by Gopalan et al. (2024) and Paul (2017) noted higher student success in semester-length courses. One of the studies on developmental shortened courses found that students struggled to succeed in the next course, raising concerns about long-term impacts (Guy et al., 2015). Lutes and Davies (2013) observed students spent less time on shortened courses. Boeding (2016) studied the reasons why students perceive the shortened courses as successful. Student feedback on instructional strategies was also a focal point (Burgess & Medina-Smuck, 2018; Scott, 1994). The studies by Donnelly (2023) and Paasch (2020) reported positive student perceptions of the shortened course. In contrast to those studies, Colclasure et al. (2018), Krug et al. (2016), and Price (2024) found students did not like the shortened course format.

Faculty perceptions range from support to concern regarding the shortened course. The majority of instructors in the study by Scanio (2021) preferred the shortened course length while noting differences in teaching practices, such as the faster pace, increased communication, and quicker grading turnaround. Some studies revealed instructors simplified the course when reduced in length (Avni & Finn, 2019), while others advised against this (Saxon & Martirosyan, 2017). Another repeated faculty perception was that not all students are prepared to take a shortened course due to factors such as lack of maturity, lack of digital literacy, lack of time management skills, or lack of understanding concerning shortened courses (Avni & Finn, 2019; Nix et al., 2020; Saxon & Martirosyan, 2017; Scanio, 2021). A lack of training for most faculty

members teaching a shortened course was noted by Eagle (2013) and Johnson and Rose (2015). When shortened courses are not adopted on a wide scale, instructors reported feelings of isolation from their colleagues (Johnson & Rose, 2015). These findings help raise awareness for instructor support and continued study.

The call for institutional support was repeated in the literature. Some studies recommended faculty professional development (Almquist, 2015; Avni & Finn, 2019; Eagle, 2013; Johnson & Rose, 2015; Krug et al., 2016; Scanio, 2021). Other studies emphasized student support measures (Almquist, 2015; Boeding, 2016; Krug et al., 2016; Nix et al., 2020; Saxon & Martirosyan, 2017; Scanio, 2021). Several studies listed scheduling considerations (Almquist, 2015; Avni & Finn, 2019; Boeding, 2016; Grant, 2021; Paasch, 2020; Paul, 2017; Scanio, 2021). Administrators can help sustain shortened course initiatives through professional development, student support, and scheduling considerations.

Limitations

Several limitations concerning this literature review should be noted. While this study was narrowed to courses with lengths of 7 and 8 weeks, even 1 week can add significant instructional time. The time of year the shortened course was taught in could also be considered a limitation of the study since Scott (1994) found differences in students and student success for courses taught during the fall compared to the summer. The training, experience, and attitude of the instructor are also limitations which could impact study results (Colclasure et al., 2018). Instructors asked to adopt the shortened course format may have a different experience from those who opt to teach in it (Johnson & Rose, 2015). Similarly, the scale of courses offered in the shortened format at an institution could impact results since higher education institutions adopting the shortened course format on a large scale may prevent instructors from feeling isolated (Johnson & Rose, 2015). These limitations provide motivation for continued study.

CONCLUSION

The narrowed, half-semester length focus of this literature review aimed to explore used labels, determine optimal length, understand stakeholder perspectives, and collect practical insights. When considering the shortened course format, it is important to understand student needs, especially those of diverse student populations (Liu &

Tourtellott, 2011; Price, 2024). It is also important to appreciate the faculty experience. Additionally, administrative stakeholders can use the findings from this review in decision-making, remembering recommendations for professional development, student support, and scheduling considerations. Ideally the shortened course recognizes globalization (Liu & Tourtellott, 2011), incorporates technology (Liu & Tourtellott, 2011), and increases access to education (Almquist, 2015; Price, 2024) which are important factors to community stakeholders. The results of this review help inform decision-making concerning the initiation, the implementation, and the sustainability of the shortened course.

While interest in the shortened course continues to grow, additional opportunities for study exist. Differences in the methodology of studies, as noted by Green et al. (2006), add to the limitations in terms of comparability across studies. Given the lack of consensus from this literature review concerning terminology, length, and perspective, more study is recommended to help support the stakeholders interested in the shortened course. A single, standardized term for the shortened course could streamline further study. Future research could also continue to compare various course lengths by subject or course modality. Continuing to study shortened lengths to better understand the student and faculty experience could help inform advising and andragogy. Persistent research can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the shortened college course.

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