Comparing Student Perceptions of Accelerated versus Regular Course Types –
A Multi-Institutional Study

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Abstract

The tech industry is experiencing a growing demand for skilled professionals, leading to the emergence of accelerated courses as a potential solution to the talent shortage. To address the increasing number of vacant information technology (IT) and cybersecurity positions, educational institutions have begun offering accelerated courses and programs aimed at reducing the time needed to obtain an IT degree. This qualitative research study aims to examine student perceptions of accelerated (8-week) courses compared to regular (16-week) courses. The study surveyed 82 students from three universities in New Mexico, Alabama, and Florida. The findings highlight unique concerns such as scheduling, focus, stress, workload, and content coverage in accelerated courses, while course difficulty favored regular courses with longer durations. Common themes favorable to both course types include retention, preference, and pace.

Keywords: Student perceptions, Accelerated course, Regular course, Comparative study.

1. INTRODUCTION

The U.S. tech industry is struggling with an unprecedented shortage in qualified personnel with more than 197,000 open IT roles (Peralta, 2022) and 700,000 open cybersecurity positions (Lake, 2022) compared to a year ago. Although some of the roles will get filled up in the course of time, the demand exceeds supply that educational institutions offer. Recently, more

than 600 leaders of nonprofits, universities, and tech giants such as Amazon and Microsoft have requested an increase in the number of computer science graduates who can be employed from the school and university system (Kenkare, 2022).

Accelerated courses have been gaining popularity amongst institutions worldwide. Accelerated courses have been part of the curriculum often known as summer courses that help students "make up" for courses they were unable to fit in their schedule during the academic year, or lighten their load during the academic year (Kretovics et al., 2005). However, due to the lack of qualified workers, educational institutions have been offering accelerated programs that shorten the time required to obtain a degree by half. For instance, a four-year bachelor's degree can be obtained in two years (Sakariassen, 2022).

Accelerated learning has been usually conceptualized in reference to "time," where a course is delivered in a shorter length of time than "normal" (Anastasi, 2007; Daniel, 2000). However, the timeframe for accelerated learning could vary from being a shorter period of time than existing delivery (Anastasi, 2007; Scott, 2003) to a specified number of weeks or days (Davies, 2006). The benefits include the ability for students to maintain their full-time status as well as their financial aid (Ruf, 2021). Additionally, non-traditional students have the ability to balance their work, family obligations (Daniel, 2000; van Rooyen et al., 2021) and complete their courses faster (Clinefelter & Aslanian, 2016). Certain schools also promote accelerated learning by providing priority registration and advisors to help manage the workload (Wyllie, 2018).

Prior research has compared the two course types over specific student factors such as course choice, success (Sheldon & Durdella, 2009), time spent on the course types (Lutes & Davies, 2013), learning (Herrmann & Berry, 2016), achievement (Aydın & Michou, 2020), and engagement (Prince, 2019). Additionally, research has studied the teacher perspective with findings such as the need 1) not to compromise on rigor and learning outcomes (Crowe et al., 2005), 2) change in assessment (Kretovics et al., 2005), and 3) communicating commitment to students (Lee & Horsfall, 2010). Previous studies, however, have not been comprehensive enough to unearth factors that are common or unique to the two type course durations. Studies have mainly focused on survey methods (Persaud & Persaud, 2016) and have remained isolated to understanding perspectives from a single

educational institution. Thus, to fill the research gaps, we study the phenomenon through a multi-institutional perspective with a focus on the perceptions of students in the information systems area. Additionally, keeping the industry concerns for a more qualified workforce, our research uses a qualitative approach to holistically understand student perspectives about the two course types.

We explore the phenomenon through semi-structured questions to identify factors that are both unique and common for courses offered in 8-week or 16-week duration. Using respondents who are "convenient" to the three co-authors, we surveyed 82 undergraduate and graduate students from three universities located in New Mexico, Alabama, and Florida. Our results show that scheduling, focus, stress and workload, as well as content coverage are unique concerns with accelerated courses while course difficulty meant students preferred 16-week over 8-week long courses. Some of the common themes favorable to both course types include retention, preference, and pace.

In the next section, we review the literature followed by sections on methodology and results obtained from this study. We discuss the results and provide managerial and theoretical implications as well.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A number of studies have found that retention among students is comparable between short and regular term courses (Anastasi, 2007; Daniel, 2000; Martin & Culver, 2009; Seamon, 2004; Wlodkowski, 2003) though students earn better grades in 16-week courses (Brandt, 2021). Scott (2003) found that accelerated courses were usually delivered using collaborative problem-solving methods than the usual lecture mode and more suitable for mature-age students who are highly motivated and have a background in the area of study (Daniel, 2000; Wlodkowski, 2003). Additionally, mature students provided more positive feedback for compressed courses (Kasworm, 2003). However, research by Vreven and Mcfadden (2007) found that cooperative learning did not encourage student performance in time compressed courses of 3-week duration. Lee and Horsfall (2010) raise an interesting point that retention of course material might be higher for intensive courses since the assessment is conducted closer to the time when the material was taught. Students reported better social experience and feedback about their courses in the short form of the course (Lee & Horsfall,

2010; Lowenthal & Trespalacios, 2022) while faculty were concerned that academic standards had to be lowered to meet time constraints (Marques, 2012). A study by Tatum (2010) found that most research comparing course durations was not rigorous.

From a faculty perspective, Kretovics et al. (2005) report that 47% of faculty members had adapted teaching methods of their full-length courses to suit short-length courses. Changes were recommended particularly for essays, class presentations and projects to be assessed throughout the compressed semester rather than an end term project (Daniel, 2000; Scott, 2003), which was preferred by students who felt that frequent tests were manageable in compressed courses (Scott, 2003). Faculty members tried as much as possible to keep their course content, teaching style, and assessment methods similar across both course durations (Hyun et al., 2006).

Courses in all disciplines can take advantage of accelerated learning and are only dependent on how the curriculum is designed along with suitable teaching methods (Daniel, 2000; Davies, 2006). While Scott (2003) favored core concepts and depth over breadth, there is conflicting evidence on whether skill-based content is better to teach over conceptual courses (Davies, 2006). While Swenson (2003) advocates embedding tasks that require reflection in accelerated courses, Eraut (1995) recommends assigning different types of reflection tasks depending on the length of the course.

Workload is another issue and it has been found that faculty face pressure in teaching accelerated courses along with year-round teaching load (Baldwin & McInnes, 2002). Instructors have complained of fatigue teaching compressed courses (Daniel, 2000) and conflicted with demands from administrative and research efforts (Baldwin & McInnes, 2002). There has been research that recommends limiting the number of compressed courses a student can take (Hyun et al., 2006) since Daniel (2000) reports that students have expressed fatigue and are less satisfied with their grades compared to normal length courses. Gornish (2021) reports that students were less willing to enroll in an 8-week course if they had not done so in the past. Additionally, some students in compressed learning courses are saddled with greater family and employment responsibilities (Walvoord, 2003). Institutions benefit from year-round utilization of the facility but might be difficult for cleaning and maintenance personnel to keep the infrastructure in shape for such use (Baldwin & McInnes, 2002).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

We adopted a qualitative research method to examine the student perception differences between regular full-semester (16-week) courses and accelerated (8-week) courses. The qualitative approach involves inductive reasoning that uses a grounded theory approach to elicit the perceptions from students on regular full-semester and accelerated courses (Eisenhardt, 1989; Orlikowski, 1993). Grounded theory uses a systematic approach to discover concerns of people in the context of the study and often results in an inductively derived theory or framework about the phenomenon being studied (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

We gathered data from both undergraduate students and graduate students at three American universities using a semi-structured questionnaire to better understand their perceptions about accelerated and regular full-semester courses. Some of the questions were open-ended, providing students an opportunity to express their perceptions about taking an accelerated or a regular full-semester course as expressively as possible. The survey (Appendix A) included questions such as "If given the choice, would you prefer a regular full-semester (16-week) course or an accelerated (8-week) course? Why?" and "What were your motivations in taking an accelerated (8-week) course over a regular full-semester (16-week) course?" and "Did taking an accelerated (8-week) course have an impact on what you learnt from the course? Please explain." The students were convenience samples since they were students who were offered extra credit for taking the survey. All three researchers of this study conducted a thematic analysis by coding the answers provided by the students independent of one another. The researchers discussed the provisional themes discovered from their analysis with each other until an agreement was reached on the common themes elicited from the data (Elo & Helvi, 2008; Polit & Beck, 2004).

4. RESULTS

Five major themes emerged from the coding process for the accelerated (8-week) course type. These included scheduling, focus, stress, workload, and content coverage. For the regular full-semester (16-week) course type, course difficulty emerged as a single unique theme. However, retention, learning, preference, and pace occurred as themes common to the two

types of courses. Students showed an equal preference and were mostly positive about their reasons for signing up for both types of courses. Eighty-eight percent of the students felt that difficult courses should be taught only as 16-week courses. The percentages were calculated by tabulating the number of students who preferred each course type for the questions asked.

Additionally, neither the pace of the course nor the ability to retain course content deterred the students from taking the course type of their choice. The pace of the course did not matter for 63% of the respondents, while 90% felt that the course type did not impact their retention capability. The themes and supporting quotes from the students are shown in Table 1.

| Accelerated (8-Week) Courses	
Theme	Example Quotes
Scheduling	• It was the only course offered. • It was the only class left available when I went to make my schedule. • Originally, I missed the registration date and classes had already started but I was still able to take the second 8-week classes and this really helped me out.
Focus	• One of the main reasons is it allows me to have more freedom after completing the class. As well as making the class a faster pace and at least for me easier to focus on because you spend more hours in a week working on the one class. • My motivation for the 8-week course was that I needed to focus better. Knowing there is not a lot of options to make my grades better, allows me to focus and put in the necessary efforts needed to be successful the first time. • Complete a class sooner in the fast pace.
Stress	• I feel like I learned less in an accelerated course and it felt very rushed to me and stressful • It didn't have an impact on what I learnt but it was more stressful.
Workload	• Less work to do in a shorten 8-week course. However, more time is devoted to get the necessary work done. • More work at your own pace to get all of it done within 8 weeks. • Double the work load but less reviewing.
Content Coverage	• The pace was opposite, one is more focused on important info, while the regular is everything about that class. • Material had to be conjoined with each other- deteriorating the quality of each chapter learned. • 8-week courses deliver information more direct and teach the main points. 16-week courses can feel dragged out with useless tasks.
Regular Full-Semester (16-Week) Courses	
Themes	Example quotes
Course Difficulty	• 16-week course. Too much content to cover in 8 weeks. • 16-week course. I feel like all of the content was overwhelming at some points so I think it'd be even more difficult in 8 weeks. • It depends on the course. Some courses do not require a lot of time spent studying due to their level of ease. Therefore, these courses could be shortened into accelerated courses.
Common Themes – Accelerated vs. Regular	
Theme	Example Quotes
Retention – 8 Week	• 8 week accelerated course because material remains in my memory for a short period of time so being tested on material will be better if the class is shorter. • 8 weeks easier to retain course information. • I personally feel I retain the information better because I'm not having weeks in between. • Yes, I felt that retaining information was harder. • Yes, because sometimes I am rushed and I do not have the chance to retain all the information. • I think it helped in the short run because the amount of time between learning the material and taking tests was shorter. This means I did not have to memorize information for as long. It probably does not help in the long run because it does not promote or facilitate long term retention of the information learned.

Retention – 16 Week	• 16-week course because the accelerated courses feel like they go too quick and you don't remember anything as well as you would in a course you can take more time on. • 16-week. While I like the idea of finishing a class faster, realistically I don't retain the knowledge from a rushed 8-week course.
Learning – 8 Week	• I think it did, the coursework was extremely heavy and having to keep up with the work allowed me to learn the information better. • I feel like I am learning more. • If it did it was for the better as i feel it made me focus more as due dates were sooner. • I find 8 weeks the material is fresh for exams but has similar outcome as 16 week long. • I don't believe so. I think I was still able to learn the adequate information without too much added stress. • It did not impact me on what I learnt.
Learning – 16 Week	• 16-week course because it gives me more time to thoroughly learn the material. • A 16-week course it allows the time to understand and learn the curriculum. • Regular full-semester because it will give me a better chance to understand the material and learn from the course. I feel like 8-week courses are to rushed and so much information is given that some professors expect too much out of us. They make the class hard to pass and they do not provide opportunities to pull our grade up if we fail one 1 exam.
Preference – 8 weeks	• An 8-week course, because I have personal preference of getting tasks and learning done so it's out of the way for other tasks and learning. • I like completing courses faster and having less at a time. For example, last semester I took 3 8-week classes, then 2 8-week classes. That was WAY better than trying to take 5 16-week courses.
Preference – 16 weeks	• 16-week, more time, and can handle more courses at once. • I would prefer a regular full-semester. The accelerated semester was not manageable. There were way too many assignments, papers, and discussion posts assigned in such a short period of time. • 16-week course because it gives me more time to actual cover the materials provided. Without enough time I cannot read every chapter of a textbook in the given timeframe.
Pace – 8 weeks	• 8-weeks, I prefer the information and the course to be intense and fast. No reason to drag it out over 16 weeks. • I like 8-week courses because the pace is faster and more gets done in less time. It is also nice to get classes done in the first part of fall and take the second 8 weeks off. Or you can take different combinations of classes together and there are more options. • Yes, in an accelerated course, the concepts were rushed. There was no time in between assignments to study the concepts. • Yes, it was hard to keep up with chapter readings, discussions, and schedule since it feels like a 16-week course crammed into 8 weeks. • It's too rushed and hard to manage everything on time.
Pace – 16 weeks	• 16-week to fit all the content and not have to rush. • 16, 8 week seems to move to fast. • I would prefer a full semester course. A full semester course allows for easier pacing and some room to breathe.

Table 1: Themes and Supporting Quotes

5. DISCUSSION

Students have a choice of course types in the colleges and universities they are enrolled in. Our research shows that students have a few unique perceptions about 8-week courses compared with 16-week courses. Some of the factors that support 8-week courses include scheduling where some students discover that the 8-week course is the only one available for them to enroll in. Though students found 8-week courses to be stressful with double the workload compared to the regular ones, it helped them better focus on the subject matter. However, the opinion around content coverage was mixed since some students found only relevant material being taught, but some others thought the materials were not logically laid out leading to a deteriorating quality of content with each passing chapter. However, only one theme stood out in the case of the 16-week course which was unanimously preferred if the course was perceived to be difficult. Moreover, themes such as retention, learning, preference, and pace had support from students for both the 8-week and 16-week courses. The word cloud as shown in Figure 1 represents the perceptions of the students from which the themes were aggregated.

The common themes across 8-week and 16-week courses describe the perceptions of student preferences about such courses. Students can be on both sides of the aisle regarding retention and learning since some of them are fast learners who may benefit from the pace of being in an 8-week course and the 16-week could help students who take their time understanding the material.
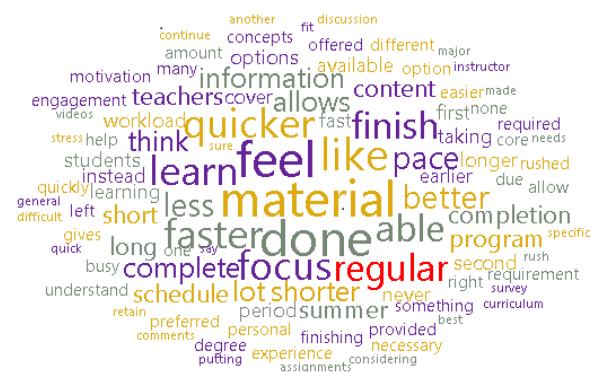
Figure 1: Student Perception Themes – Word Cloud

6. IMPLICATIONS

Our study shows that students have different views on learning and retention which leads them to prefer the pace of either an 8-week or a 16-week course. Thus, if given the choice, students are confident in their learning and retention capabilities in either scenario. However, our study results reveal that educational institutions should consider the difficulty of the course before offering it in the accelerated format. In cases where there is a lot of content to be covered in a short period of time or if they are assignment driven, students prefer that such courses are offered in the regular full-semester format. This could be applicable to higher level courses with complex concepts giving them enough time to appreciate and connect the concepts to create a deeper understanding of the material. It would be advisable that students are not forced to take a higher level (difficult) course in the accelerated format because of scheduling since it could force students who prefer the 16-week course type to take the difficult course in the hopes of graduating sooner. Such a decision could lead to stress and perceptions about deteriorating quality of content coverage as the accelerated session progresses. Students are capable of learning and retaining information in both course types. However, institutions should ensure that difficult courses are not only offered in the accelerated format so that students are not forced to enroll due to lack of choices. Such a lack of option would lead students to feel stressed out or feel that there is double the workload with less time for review. Thus, retention and learning are not an issue with students either with the accelerated or the regular session type as long as they have the ability to choose either kind.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Our study was limited to students mainly doing their undergraduate or graduate studies in the information systems area in the three American universities. Future studies could look at students of other majors or departments for more insights on how accelerated courses compare with regular full-semester courses. Our study did not make a distinction on course difficulty. Future studies could differentiate courses as either skill-based or knowledge-based as parameters to measure course difficulty. Future research could look at perceptions of students about asynchronous and synchronous courses, a distinction that we did not make in this study. Additionally, the perspectives of the professors about teaching accelerated vs. regular courses can add to a richer understanding of this phenomenon.

8. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we identified and compared student perceptions about taking accelerated vs. regular

course types. Through a qualitative study of students in the Information Systems program across three U.S. universities, we found that accelerated courses raised concerns regarding scheduling, focus, stress, workload and content coverage while course difficulty had students preferring regular length courses. However, students showed preference, the ability to retain course information and felt comfortable with the pace offered by both course types. Given the shortage of qualified IS professionals in the industry, our research provides an insight for stakeholders into how students perceive accelerated courses compared to regular length courses.

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APPENDIX A
The Survey Instrument

This survey is about your perceptions of semester long (16-week) courses and accelerated (8-week) courses. Please answer all the questions as accurately as possible. Note that your responses will be totally anonymous. We appreciate your time and effort. Thank you.

1.If given the choice, would you prefer a regular full-semester (16-week) course or an accelerated (8-week) course? Why? [short answer]

2. What were your motivations in taking an accelerated (8-week) course over a regular full-semester (16-week) course? [short answer]

3.Did taking an accelerated (8-week) course have an impact on what you learnt from the course? Please explain. [short answer]

4. For each of the following engagement styles, please indicate how strongly you agree with the statement "this engagement style is suitable for an accelerated (8-week) course". Choose from Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree.
- Engagement style 1: Lecture (e.g., watch long videos and take quizzes)
- Engagement style 2: Discussion (e.g., read material and write discussion posts)
- Engagement style 3: Hands-on (e.g., review examples and write working code/create computer files)

5. For each of the following engagement styles, please indicate how strongly you agree with the statement "this engagement style is suitable for a regular full-semester (16-week) course". Choose from Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree.
- Engagement style 1: Lecture (e.g., watch long videos and take quizzes)
- Engagement style 2: Discussion (e.g., read material and write discussion posts)
- Engagement style 3: Hands-on (e.g., review examples and write working code/create computer files)

6. Compare your recent accelerated (8-week) course with a regular full-semester (16-week) course.
- a. What changes did you notice in the instructor's practices (e.g., pace of delivery)? [short answer]
- b. How much do you feel you learned in the accelerated (8-week) course compared to a regular full-semester (16-week) course? [short answer]
- c. How successful do you feel in the accelerated (8-week) course compared to a regular full-semester (16-week) course? (select one)
  - ☐ I feel more successful in an accelerated (8-week) course than I do in a regular full-semester (16-week) course
  - ☐ I feel just as successful in an accelerated (8-week) course as I do in a regular full-semester (16-week) course (no difference)
  - ☐ I feel less successful in an accelerated (8-week) course than I do in a regular full-semester (16-week) course.

7. Do you have any other comments or feedback about accelerated (8-week) vs. regular full-semester (16 week) courses? [short answer]