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Assessing the Needs of Our Students: Using a Course Rotation Cycle to Increase Well-Being

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Abstract

In an effort to better understand how a decrease in university enrollment has led to a series of campus closures across the United States, this paper of practice proposes a structural change to assist students and departments alike. Using an action research approach and a case study-like format, the author takes a closer look at two departments at St. John's University, Staten Island, New York, USA to better understand the problem, and propose a potential solution in offering a four-year course cycle to assist in cutting costs and meeting student needs. This practice paper highlights the pedagogical practice of a mainly two-year institution to provide relevant insights into what went wrong with the university system. The paper layout includes a literature review highlighting the current state of enrollment concerns in the United States, a closer look at the university in question, an explanation of how Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs can be used as a lens for showcasing university education as a financial need, and explains the strengths and limitations of the proposed solution.

Keywords

action research; case study; college teaching; course curriculum; education; Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs; student needs; theory in practice

In August of 2022, St. John's University in Queens, NY, USA, announced they would be closing their Staten Island, NY, campus directly following the spring of 2024 due to “steady decreases in enrollment for decades that were the result of many factors and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.”¹ This campus was notably utilized as

¹ B. Miller, *St. John's Announces Closure of Staten Island Campus in 2024*, The Tablet, 17 August 2022, <https://thetablet.org/st-johns-announces-closure-of-staten-island-campus-in-2024/> [accessed: 31.08.2024].

a temporary location for some university programs (examples: Advertising and TV/Film) requiring students transfer to the main location in Queens, NY, to complete their degrees. However, some programs allowed students to complete all years of their degree on the Staten Island campus. During the years of operation, the Staten Island, NY, campus saw highs and lows in terms of enrollment cycles, and retention within certain programs remained a problem affecting overall enrollment numbers for some programs. For example, within the Department of Mass Communication, a student had to complete the Public Relations degree by attending courses offered through the main campus located in Queens, NY. A student could enroll in the Public Relations program on the Staten Island campus and after about two years, would then transfer to the Queens campus. If the student wanted to stay on the Staten Island campus to complete their studies, the department saw a mix of alterations, including a request to change majors. Examples include a student either transferring into the English program, or changing their major to Communication Arts because both English and Communication Arts degrees could be started and completed on the Staten Island campus. These transfers and dips in program numbers affected the types of courses offered due to course cancellations resulting from low enrollment. In most cases, if a class does not reach an enrollment of 10 students, the course is cancelled. In these situations, some (particularly adjunct faculty) can be left without work late in the semester cycle. Repetitive course cancellations often lead to adjunct faculty choosing to secure jobs at other universities.

Taking an action research approach to assess the needs of an organization, the following practice paper discusses an analysis of a problem at an institution of higher education, and proposes a potential solution utilizing a case study-like format.² The author uses Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs³ as a lens to better understanding the problem at hand. The analysis provided sheds light on enrollment issues facing institutions of higher education, and hopes to provide a possible solution.

Literature Review

Current State of Higher Education

The higher education system in the United States has seen an unprecedented decrease in enrollment, and with rising operation costs, many schools have had to

² G. Cousin, *Case Study Research*, "Journal of Geography in Higher Education" 2005, 29(3), pp. 421–427, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03098260500290967>; J.R. Feagin, A.M. Orum, G. Sjoberg (eds.), *A Case for the Case Study*, North Carolina 2016.

³ A.H. Maslow, *A Theory of Human Motivation*, "Psychological Review" 1943, 50, pp. 370–396, <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0054346>

close their doors. Since March 2020, about 43 schools have either closed, merged with other schools/campuses, or made one of these two announcements.⁴ While COVID-19 did impact the university landscape tremendously, it is not the only factor fueling campus closings and mergers. One of the additional factors includes underfunding. In some instances, there have been severe cuts in state funding for higher education leading a large part of the costs to be placed on the students by way of tuition increases.⁵

Some assume the enrollment increase is due to a majority of people already holding degrees, and the USA facing a birthrate decrease. This is a myth as only 37.1% of 25–44 year olds have a four-year degree, and of those who are enrolled, about 38% who take out students loans do not finish, adding to the student loan crises.⁶ This decrease in enrollment brings a series of economic issues including adding to the labor shortages long term faced by healthcare and information technology industries due to the potential lack of educated candidates.⁷

St. John's University, Staten Island Campus

As mentioned in the introduction, St. John's University's Staten Island campus announced its closure in an email citing a steady decrease in overall enrollment intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic.⁸ The 16.5 acre campus was established in 1971 in the Grymes Hill section of Staten Island as an extension to the main campus of St. John's University, now located in Queens, NY, USA.⁹ The Staten Island campus maintained strong ties to its main campus and fully represented university values and the mission of pursuing "wisdom, religious values, and human experience."¹⁰ Before St. John's University began utilizing the campus as an extension of its main

⁴ E. Castillo, L. Welding, *Closed Colleges: List, Statistics, and Major Closures*, Best Colleges, 11 August 2023.

⁵ J. Dickler, 'Universities Are Going to Continue to Suffer'. *Some Colleges Struggle with Enrollment Declines, Underfunding*, CNBC, 5 October 2022, <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/10/05/colleges-struggle-with-enrollment-declines-underfunding-post-covid.html> [accessed: 31.08.2024].

⁶ World Economic Forum, *Us College Enrolment Is Dropping, Can This Be Reversed?*, World Economic Forum, 19 January 2023, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/01/us-college-enrolment-is-dropping-can-this-be-reversed-davos23/> [accessed: 31.08.2024].

⁷ C. Binkley, *The Labor Shortage Is Pushing American Colleges Into Crisis, with the Plunge in Enrollment the Worst Ever Recorded*, "Fortune" 2023, 9 March, <https://fortune.com/2023/03/09/american-skipping-college-huge-numbers-pandemic-turned-them-off-education/> [accessed: 31.08.2024].

⁸ B. Miller, *St. John's Announces Closure of Staten Island Campus in 2024*, *op. cit.*

⁹ C.A. Benanti, *St. John's University Celebrates Half Century on Staten Island. Recognize Anyone?*, "Staten Island Advance Newspaper" 2022, 6 May, <https://www.silive.com/entertainment/2022/05/st-johns-university-celebrates-half-century-on-staten-island-recognize-anyone.html> [accessed: 31.08.2024].

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

campus, the property was home to a private Catholic university for women called Notre Dame College. Since St. John's University took over the property and evolved to suit the needs of its students, the campus held 10 academic buildings.¹¹

The campus had a long and successful history overall boasting 50+ years as a community staple. With advertising, branding, and a long line of familial alumni networks, the campus maintained a positive image on Staten Island, NY, USA. This information leads to the questions: So, what went wrong? Why did the university announce this campus closure following Spring 2024?

An email from administration reported a steady decline in enrollment accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic,¹² and some speculate the decrease could be the result of closures of local Catholic feeder high schools.¹³ The Staten Island campus had the ability to support 3,000 students; however, reported an enrollment of around 800 students at the time of the campus closure announcement.¹⁴ Some insinuate the decrease in enrollment occurred over time and could be a result of the slow removal of resources over the years including academic programs, busing services to and across campuses, campus dining facilities, bookstore, and off-campus housing at one point in time located directly behind campus. The university president's speech at the campus' 50th anniversary celebration on 28 April 2022¹⁵ highlighted the positive "footprints" made by the campus and university; however, was void of any future directions for the Staten Island campus and mainly focused on discussing the university as a whole (leading some to speculate the decision to close the campus was made well before the email announcement).

Article Rationale

Universities with multiple campuses face a similar struggle to SJU's Staten Island campus, especially due to the predicted decrease in overall college attendees.¹⁶ To strengthen retention during the first two years to ensure a smoother transition to the main campus, and assist with decreasing student and adjunct faculty anxiety and well-being, it would be beneficial for programs to have organized four-year course cycles. To assist with individuals who are not looking for a full degree, but need some training for labor purposes, universities can benefit from alternative

¹¹ C. Campanile, *St. John's University Puts Staten Island Campus up for Sale – With No Plans to House Migrants*, "New York Post" 2023, 8 June, <https://nypost.com/2023/06/08/st-johns-university-campus-on-staten-island-up-for-sale/> [accessed: 31.08.2024].

¹² B. Miller, *St. John's Announces Closure of Staten Island Campus in 2024*, *op. cit.*

¹³ C. Campanile, *St. John's University Puts Staten Island Campus up for Sale...*, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ *Ibidem.*

¹⁵ C.A. Benanti, *St. John's University Celebrates Half Century on Staten Island...*, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ J. Dickler, *Universities Are Going to Continue to Suffer...*, *op. cit.*

types of education like certificate programs and online courses. A focus on course rotations for degree and certificate programs would also assist with employment opportunities and planning for full-time and adjunct faculty.

Theoretical Framework

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

In 1943, Abraham Maslow proposed a model taking a closer look at the needs and wants of society. The model, visually described as a pyramid, reflects a continuum from its base to its pinnacle. The pyramid of needs reflects behavioral motivations.¹⁷ The eight building blocks of the pyramid from base to pinnacle include: (1) physiological needs (examples: oxygen, food, and water), (2) safety needs (examples: employment, health, and property), (3) belonging and love (examples: friendships, familial bonds, and sexual intimacy), (4) esteem (examples: self-esteem, respecting others, and respect from others), (5) cognitive needs (examples: critical thinking, sense making, and world knowledge), (6) aesthetic needs (examples: presentation and favored appearance), (7) actualization (examples: morality, creativity, and lack of prejudice), and (8) transcendence (example: living your highest potential). Essentially, the model claims that for an individual to make it to the next step, all prior needs must be met.¹⁸ In this case, we would consider education to be a cognitive need. The skills learned by students help to fulfill the need to think critically and make sense of the world around them.

Utilizing Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs model from varying perspectives is not a novel concept. For example, to better understand the healthcare system, Zalenski and Raspa¹⁹ utilized Maslow's²⁰ framework to understand the process of palliative care. Furthermore, some scholars have also utilized Maslow's framework to better understand the educational system like Milheim,²¹ Schulte,²² and

¹⁷ A.H. Maslow, *A Theory of Human Motivation*, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ *Ibidem.*

¹⁹ R.J. Zalenski, R. Raspa, *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: A Framework*, "Journal of Palliative Medicine" 2006, 9(5), pp. 1120–1127, <https://doi.org/10.1089/jpm.2006.9.1120>

²⁰ A.H. Maslow, *A Theory of Human Motivation*, *op. cit.*

²¹ K.L. Milheim, *Towards a Better Experience: Examining Student Needs in the Online Classroom Through Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Model*, "Journal of Online Learning and Teaching" 2012, 8(2), pp. 159–171.

²² M. Schulte, *Adult Learning Degree and Career Pathways: Allusions to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*, "The Journal of Continuing Higher Education" 2018, 66(1), pp. 62–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07377363.2017.1368767>

Abbas.²³ For this particular paper, the model helps to explain how a course rotation cycle provides a sense of well-being by meeting the psychological needs discussed in the model. According to the model, education poses a need that can be found in the fifth section of the pyramid, cognitive needs. Cognitive needs are often targeted in a university setting through course objectives working towards increasing critical thinking skills and sense making through argument building and expanding world knowledge.

According to research on the educational system, it has been shown that forgoing a university degree often results in a 75% decrease in overall earnings.²⁴ However, relinquishing the opportunity for a university degree not only affects a person's earning potential, but it also diminishes the opportunity for educational and psychological advancement in a setting which historically stems from the practice of rhetorical argument. Sadly, people are avoiding college for a multitude of reasons including the difficulty in balancing time and money.²⁵ To take a closer look at this potential educational misstep, the following questions surfaced when analyzing St. John's University's campus problem:

Q¹: How has course planning differed for the Department of Mass Communication and the Department of Business on St. John's University's Staten Island Campus?

Q²: How can a course rotation cycle layout benefit a university and its students and faculty facing enrollment concerns?

Methodological Approach

Using an action research approach,²⁶ the author presents a case study format²⁷ to better assist schools in similar situations. An action research approach allows practitioners to collect information to assist a community in need by considering the needs of that community and its stakeholders. For this project, utilizing a case study format allows for a deeper understanding of a community's issue to hopefully be used as a model to assist other institutions facing similar concerns.

²³ J. Abbas, *Service Quality in Higher Education Institutions: Qualitative Evidence from the Students' Perspectives Using Maslow Hierarchy of Needs*, "International Journal of Quality and Service Sciences" 2020, 12(3), pp. 371–384, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJQSS-02-2020-0016>

²⁴ C. Binkley, *The Labor Shortage Is Pushing American Colleges Into Crisis...*, *op. cit.*

²⁵ World Economic Forum, *Us College Enrollment Is Dropping...*, *op. cit.*

²⁶ D.J. Greenwood, M. Levin, *Introduction to Action Research: Social Research for Social Change*, 2nd ed., Thousand Oaks 2007.

²⁷ G. Cousin, *Case Study Research*, *op. cit.*; J.R. Feagin, A.M. Orum, G. Sjöberg (eds.), *A Case for the Case Study*, *op. cit.*

Action Research Approach to Research

According to scholars Greenwood and Levin,²⁸ it is not only possible, but beneficial to combine the ability to problem solve with the capacity to formulate theoretical understandings. Maintaining a connection to qualitative research and business consulting, action research describes the ability to gather data by allowing researchers to work with practitioners with the hopes of generating knowledge that will help stakeholders to move forward successfully.²⁹ Action research is not a new methodology to the social sciences or community outreach, and has been used in the past to improve schools.³⁰ In the realm of research, this type of methodology allows for scholars and practitioners to participate by working with stakeholders within a certain community who need assistance with determining a problem. The action research practitioner collects information surrounding the problem, the organization, the surrounding communities and other stakeholders involved in order to create a plan to assist with combatting the problem. The component of action research that lends itself to this project is it acts as a learning process instead of a short-term intervention.³¹ The cyclical steps included: reflect, plan, act, observe, and then reflect again.³² Often times, the need for action research stems from recognizing symptoms of a problem, and the act of utilizing action research can allow scholars to pinpoint the problem.

Case Study-Like Approach to Research

In some instances, taking a closer look at the needs of a community can lead to analyzing specific components of a problem within its content, in order to propose a solution. A case study-like format to research is defined as “an in-depth, multifaceted investigation, using qualitative research methods, of a single phenomenon.”³³ This definition is preferred because it extends itself to be used in a variety of situations. For example, depending on the situation at hand, researchers may choose to utilize qualitative methods, quantitative methods, or a mixture of the two styles of data collection depending on the research question(s) or proposed hypothesis(es).

²⁸ D.J. Greenwood, M. Levin, *Introduction to Action Research...*, *op. cit.*

²⁹ H.B. Huang, *What Is Good Action Research?*, “Action Research” 2010, 8(1), pp. 93–109, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750310362435>

³⁰ S.M. Corey, *Action Research to Improve School Practices*, Columbia University, New York 1955.

³¹ D.J. Greenwood, M. Levin, *Introduction to Action Research...*, *op. cit.*

³² L. Dickens, K. Watkins, *Action Research: Rethinking Lewin*, “Management Learning” 1999, 30(2), pp. 127–140, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507699302002>

³³ J.R. Feagin, A.M. Orum, G. Sjöberg (eds.), *A Case for the Case Study*, *op. cit.*

Some scholars propose a condensed listing of case study types like Cousin³⁴ who reported three types: (1) intrinsic (focus is on understanding the situation), (2) instrumental (looking at a scenario as a single instance), and (3) collective (considering more than one case to represent a type of representation, ex. different trips past the same stop sign on a street corner). Other scholars propose a more nuanced list of case study categories including Baxter and Jack³⁵ who report on seven types of case study approaches: (1) explanatory (when looking to answer a question that takes a look at potential causal links related to implemented interventions), (2) exploratory (when an implemented intervention has no clear outcomes), (3) descriptive (better understand a phenomenon or intervention within the context it occurred), (4) multiple-case studies (taking a closer look and analyzing the differences between cases), (5) intrinsic (when the purpose is not to build theory, but to better understand that specific situation), (6) instrumental (helping to build theory), and (7) collective (similar to multiple-case³⁶). Considering the current state of higher education post COVID-19, the downward moving trajectory with college enrollment, and the effects of the St. John's University Staten Island campus closure, this project takes on a more intrinsic format.

To better understand if a case study-like approach is most appropriate, research claims scholars and practitioners consider four key factors. These factors include: (1) hoping to answer research questions containing “how?” and “why?”, (2) behavioral manipulation is not possible, (3) contextual information is very important, and (4) unclear boundaries between phenomenon and the actual context.³⁷ Further, Brown³⁸ explores the need for a case study research format in scenarios where a researcher seeks to focus on a bound system looking to better understand how and why a certain group does what they do. Considering these arguments, a case study-like format was decided as the best method of analysis to suit the needs of the proposed research questions. The questions posed followed a “why” format, with the inevitable campus closure looming at the time of study conceptualization,

³⁴ G. Cousin, *Case Study Research*, *op. cit.*

³⁵ P. Baxter, S. Jack, *Qualitative Case Study Methodology: Study Design and Implementation for Novice Researchers*, “The Qualitative Report” 2008, 13(4), pp. 544–559, <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR13-4/baxter.pdf> [accessed: 31.08.2024].

³⁶ R.K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 3rd ed., Thousand Oaks–London–New Delhi, 2003.

³⁷ P. Baxter, S. Jack, *Qualitative Case Study Methodology...*, *op. cit.*

³⁸ P.A. Brown, *A Review of the Literature on Case Study Research*, “Canadian Journal for New Scholars in Education” 2008, 1(1), https://www.academia.edu/9119242/Canadian_Journal_for_New_Scholars_in_Education_Volume_1_Issue_1_Revue_canadienne_des_jeunes_chercheurs_et_chercheurs_en_education_A_Review_of_the_Literature_on_Case_Study_Research [accessed: 31.08.2024].

behavioral manipulation was not possible, and the context of the campus situation was important to incorporate to understand the bigger picture. These reasons strengthened the argument for diving deeper into this specific case.

Analytical Process

To recognize how the issues with decreased university enrollment played a role at St. John's University, Staten Island campus, the author utilized an action research approach to better understand the problem. According to an action research approach, scholars and practitioners are encouraged to: reflect, plan, act, observe, and then reflect again.³⁹ For the purpose of this project, the author analyzed the problem with the Staten Island campus closure of St. John's University by comparing the enrollment concern found in the Department of Mass Communication with the more consistent enrollment found within the Department of Business at the same campus.

What Happens to Departments During a Campus Closure?

After the announcement of the campus closure, administration began by organizing a task force to assist with the campus "teach out" process. This taskforce allowed for rules such as minimum enrollment numbers to be lifted, especially because students were no longer being accepted onto campus, yet courses were to run for an additional four semesters post closure announcement. However, the problems for administration and students began well before the announcement of the campus closure. The diminishing numbers in the years before led courses to be cancelled if they did not reach an enrollment of 10 students, as the course needs to be profitable to the university to be able to pay faculty and cover other costs.

After comparing the Department of Mass Communication (no set course rotation cycle) with the Department of Business (set course rotation cycle), the author found both programs were successful over the years but recently suffered as a result of the decreasing enrollment. Interestingly, the Department of Business was set up for an easier transition reporting less adjunct faculty casualties along the way due to less cancelled courses. This can be attributed to better estimations in the pre-planning phase of course offerings. And more course cancellations add to a litany of problems for staff and students alike.

In our current financial climate, especially in a post COVID-19 society, one problem our society has seen is an increase in cost of living. Higher education

³⁹ L. Dickens, K. Watkins, *Action Research: Rethinking Lewin, op. cit.*

faculty, particularly part-time/adjunct faculty, have felt the financial disparity for years. According to McKenna,⁴⁰ almost one quarter of all adjunct faculty require public assistance like food stamps and or Medicaid to survive. This struggle is mainly attributed to pay scale variations for adjunct faculty. The average “pay-per-course” varies from less than \$2,000 to a bit more than \$7,000 depending on the university.⁴¹ In a study completed by Flaherty,⁴² 53% of participants reported making less than \$3,500 per course.

While the cost concerns are at the forefront of societal concerns, adjunct faculty struggle with other issues like often being hired a month before the semester begins,⁴³ or the complete opposite circumstance. If a course does not reach the required enrollment minimum, courses can be cancelled at any time before the semester is scheduled to commence. In this situation, some (particularly adjunct faculty) can be left without work late in the semester cycle. The university is required to provide teaching opportunities for full-time faculty; however, adjunct faculty are required to absorb the loss and lack of pay. And repetitive course cancellations often lead to adjunct faculty choosing to secure jobs at other universities, which was the case with a variety of adjunct faculty working on the Staten Island campus of St. John’s University.

The long arm of disparities resulting from course cancellations affect others apart from adjunct faculty. Students may find themselves in situations where they are missing a required course or prerequisite affecting their date of graduation. For example, for students on St. John’s University’s Staten Island campus, this led some students to request an independent study course from a full-time faculty member who did not get paid to teach independent study courses. For example, during the Spring of 2022 five students in the Communication Arts program needed an independent study to graduate due to previous course cancellations, and the foci were based on three different areas. This meant the professor’s course load increased from the three required courses in the professor’s teaching load to six courses to assist the five students needing the independent study courses. The professor was only paid for the three courses on their original list of required teaching as independent studies did not qualify for additional salary. The only silver lining is the five students did receive the required course

⁴⁰ L. McKenna, *The Cost of an Adjunct*, The Atlantic, 26 May 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/05/the-cost-of-an-adjunct/394091/> [accessed: 31.08.2024].

⁴¹ C. Flaherty, *Barely Getting By: New Report on Adjuncts Says Many Make Less than \$3,500 per Course and Live In Poverty*, Inside Higher Ed, 19 April 2020, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/04/20/new-report-says-many-adjuncts-make-less-3500-course-and-25000-year> [accessed: 31.08.2024].

⁴² *Ibidem*.

⁴³ L. McKenna, *The Cost of an Adjunct*, *op. cit.*

they needed from this professor's donated time through teaching the independent study courses to either make the needed transfer to the Queens campus, and/or graduate on their original timeline.

Proposed Solution: Set Course Rotation Cycle

After speaking with faculty and students and learning of issues that were confirmed when comparing the Department of Mass Communication and the Department of Business on the Staten Island campus of St. John's University, the author proposes a four-year course rotation cycle accounting for school requirements, and including flexibility in four courses offered as major-area electives. This course structure can be utilized by schools to provide clarity, ease student anxiety, and condense course offerings to secure and maintain the appointment of adjunct faculty.

The term *course rotation cycle* refers to a planning tool that "allows students to plan their academic programs and allows the department to anticipate staffing needs."⁴⁴ Other titles sometimes used synonymously for this format include *course rotation*, *block courses*, *block course schedule*, *block program*, *set schedule*, or *class cycle*. Some schools provide a list of course requirements and allow students complete flexibility in which classes to take to fulfill those requirements, and others propose set course rotation cycles so students know exactly which classes to take each semester.

For example, on St. John's University's Staten Island campus, the Department of Mass Communication offered different classes each semester that could fulfill student requirements. Each semester provided students with offerings in all major areas including: Advertising, Communication Arts, Journalism, Public Relations, and TV/Film; however, the types of courses differed each semester. To better understand the specifics, Fall of 2018 allowed students to choose from a variety of courses: one Advertising course, six Communication Arts courses, two Journalism courses, one Public Relations course, and three TV/Film Courses. During the following year, Fall 2019 offered a different set of courses to students: one Advertising course, five Communication Arts courses, two Journalism courses, one Public Relations course, and three TV/Film courses. The actual course offerings within each course category varied across semesters. Programs such as this one vary courses in order to offer interesting course content and variety, and to also allow faculty the

⁴⁴ Pennsylvania Western University, Course Cycles, 20 March 2024, <https://www.clarion.edu/academics/colleges-and-schools/college-of-business-administration-and-information-sciences/library-science/course-cycles.html> [accessed: 31.08.2024].

freedom and opportunity to teach different courses; however, a more consistent course cycle may be the key to easier planning at the academic level.

The Business school offered a *block rotation program* for a students' four years in St. John's University college of business. The block rotation program is provided to students upon their enrollment into the college and takes into account all courses students must take to graduate. These courses included the courses offered through other departments, but necessary for graduation. Students are aware of which classes to take each semester until graduation. For example, first year students during Fall of 2018 were permitted to take the following courses: Economics 1301, First Year Seminar, First Year Writing 1000C, Math 1320, and Theology 1000C. The same classes were offered to first year students during Fall of 2019.

The idea of *block rotation programs* and *course rotation cycles* are not novel. Some universities like the University of Maryland have suggested four-year course cycles, but do not make it a requirement for students to follow this path.⁴⁵ The University of Maryland suggests two examples for a four-year course cycle with the first highlighting completing required courses earlier in the process compared to the second example. Towson University offers a course rotation scheme, but also informs students that course offerings can be altered or subject to change at any time.⁴⁶ Flexibility is possible with this format to a certain degree.

Course Rotation Cycle Advantages

The Wabash Center located in Indiana is a center made up of teachers and faculty of theology and religion offering tools for academia for teaching and learning purposes. In 2014 the center released an article on their blog outlining course rotation strategies and how they are beneficial. The details listed in the article coincide with the information uncovered during this project. Essentially, the advantages of a course rotation cycle are numerous for both faculty and students.

The most notable benefit of a course rotation strategy is it removes the guessing for both students and staff/faculty. Because the rotation is created in advance, student know which classes to take when, and staff and faculty know when specific courses need instruction. The only guesswork would be assigned to program coordinators to estimate the number of sections needed depending on incoming student enrollment numbers. Depending on the need, certain courses can be of-

⁴⁵ University of Maryland, *Sample Four-Year Plans*, Department of Atmospheric and Oceanic Science, 2023, <https://aossc.umd.edu/education/undergrad-major/current-students/4-year-plan> [accessed: 31.08.2024].

⁴⁶ Towson University, *Course Rotation Scheme*, 2024, <https://www.towson.edu/fcsm/departments/envirosci/resources/courserotation.html> [accessed: 31.08.2024].

ferred in different formats (in person, online, or hybrid) allowing for an increase in the styles of learning pedagogies.⁴⁷

Flexibility within the course rotation system is still possible. For example, as we see with St. John's University's Department of Business, students are instructed to complete their first major area elective in fall of their junior year, and their first general school elective fall of their senior year. This allows students to take what they like during these course sections providing it meets the criteria for a major area elective or general elective. If a student must retake a course, they can take on the extra course. This may affect their graduation process; however, a course rotation cycle would help to minimize these circumstances from occurring more frequently.

By removing the guess work, a course rotation system allows for less room for error. For example, students will be directed to specific classes allowing program coordinators to know if class minimums will be met. This helps to decrease the number of classes cancelled, and the number of adjunct faculty left without a teaching opportunity so close to the start of the new semester. By keeping adjunct faculty appointed, it will remove the need to have full time faculty take on unnecessary independent study courses that do not provide additional financial compensation.

Course Rotation Cycle and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the fifth building block explores cognitive needs like critical thinking, sense making, and world knowledge.⁴⁸ This need sheds importance on mental stimulation and societal contributions gained in the educational systems. As a society, the competition for college acceptance is increasing,⁴⁹ and once accepted into an institution of higher education students continue to feel stress and anxiety.⁵⁰ There is a tremendous benefit in providing an organized instruction plan to help minimize stress for students and faculty alike.

⁴⁷ Wabash Center, *A Course Format Rotation Strategy*, 2 June 2014, https://wabashcenter.typepad.com/wabash_center_deans_blog/2014/06/a-course-format-rotation-strategy.html [accessed: 31.08.2024].

⁴⁸ A.H. Maslow, *A Theory of Human Motivation*, *op. cit.*; K.L. Milheim, *Towards a Better Experience...*, *op. cit.*; M. Schulte, *Adult Learning Degree and Career Pathways...*, *op. cit.*; J. Abbas, *Service Quality in Higher Education Institutions...*, *op. cit.*

⁴⁹ G. Weiss, *You're Not Imagining It — It Feels Damn near Impossible to Get Into Top Colleges Right Now*, 10 January 2024, <https://www.businessinsider.com/more-competitive-than-ever-get-in-to-college-admissions-2024-1> [accessed: 31.08.2024].

⁵⁰ N.J. LeBlanc, L. Marques, *Anxiety in College: What We Know and How to Cope*, 27 August 2019, <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/anxiety-in-college-what-we-know-and-how-to-cope-2019052816729> [accessed: 31.08.2024].

By providing a course rotation cycle, students will have guidance in planning their course schedules⁵¹ allowing students to focus on their course dedication and performance.

Some research reports a decline in critical thinking overall. For example, Perna⁵² reports how due to COVID-19, some young people report an overuse of survival thinking – or reactive thinking – rather than the process thinking learned in classrooms. This shift away from higher-order thinking is not solely an issue within higher-education, but a worldwide concern.⁵³ Luckily, in a situation where society is grouped together in classrooms, it could be the best way to foster the importance of critical thinking skills in environments where some of the guesswork (like course selection) is removed through course rotation cycles.

Limitations and Suggested Research

While this practice paper does in fact highlight the importance of considering a course rotation cycle, there are some areas requiring a closer look. For example, this project only compared two programs due to the nature of the campus case study. Future projects should look at issues across disciplines and across universities.

This paper highlighted the need for a course rotation cycle to assist students and faculty in the completion of a four-year degree. Unfortunately, more planning would be needed to ensure students hoping to complete a certificate program will have access to the courses they need at any specific point in time. The same would be important for deciding which courses should be offered in person, fully online, or in a hybrid course format.

Also, social science research does explain a need for action research to analyze a problem,⁵⁴ It would be beneficial to take a closer look at comparing programs currently experiencing success to see if the course rotation cycle structure helps to maintain graduation rates, student retention rates, and adjunct employment rates. By comparing these numbers across different universities, the educational system would have a more macro-level understanding of course rotation cycles and the role they play in academic success.

⁵¹ Wabash Center, *A Course Format Rotation Strategy*, *op. cit.*

⁵² M.C. Perna, *Penny for Your Thoughts: Why Quality Thinking Is Declining Worldwide*, 11 October 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/markcperna/2022/10/11/penny-for-your-thoughts-why-quality-thinking-is-declining-worldwide/?sh=17a04f0d4bce> [accessed: 31.08.2024].

⁵³ *Ibidem.*

⁵⁴ D.J. Greenwood, M. Levin, *Introduction to Action Research...*, *op. cit.*

Conclusion

By highlights the pedagogical practice of a mainly two-year institution to provide relevant insights to what went wrong with the university system, this practice paper sheds light on an issue common among the university system. Taking a closer look at the current state of enrollment concerns in the United States helped to better understand the issue with St. John's University's Staten Island campus closure. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs was used as a lens for showcasing university education as a financial need. The author dissected the campus "teach out" through the local press' understanding of the closure, and the issues facing college students and department faculty by comparing two campus programs. Through the action research process, and a case study-like comparison, the analytical process utilized in this practice paper helped point to proposing a four-year course rotation cycle as a solution. While it is too late to assist the university originally in question, it is the job of practice papers like this one to propose suggestions and help spark discussion to hopefully assist other universities from meeting the same fate.

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