

Student Perceptions of Condensed Courses and Motivations for Enrolling: Are Some Students Scared To Enroll?

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Abstract

Condensed courses are now being offered at many colleges and universities. Most research indicates that condensed courses result in equal or better student learning outcomes when compared with the outcomes of full-term courses. However, because all the previous studies only examined students who self-selected to enroll in condensed courses there may be a serious selection bias and their results may not be generalizable to all students. This examined whether there are differences in willingness to enroll in, and perceptions of, condensed courses between students who have taken such a course and those who have not. A survey was given to 102 students, 45 of which had never enrolled in a condensed course. The survey measured general perceptions of condensed courses and assessed the willingness of students to enroll in a condensed course in the future. Students who had never taken a condensed course were found to be less willing to enroll in a condensed course in the future, less interested in seeing more condensed classes offered, and less willing to take a condensed course while simultaneously enrolled in a full-term course. Students who had never taken a condensed course were also found to perceive condensed courses as more difficult than students who had taken condensed courses. These results indicate that there are meaningful differences between students who have taken condensed courses and students who have never enrolled in one. The findings of this study suggest that the findings of previous studies regarding differences in outcomes between condensed courses and full term courses may be impacted by differences in the student population in each course type.

Introduction

Many colleges and universities are now offering options for condensed courses (Daniel, 2000). These courses vary in length of time and semester availability. One review of the literature found condensed courses as short as five days and as long as 11 weeks (Walsh et al., 2019). Faculty members and researchers have presented many concerns about these courses. These concerns include worries that students might not learn the information as well (Carman & Bartsch, 2017), that students might not retain the information learned (Faught et al., 2016), that professors modify the condensed courses in unacceptable ways (Lutes & Davies, 2018), and that the rigor of the condensed courses may not be equivalent to that of full-term courses (Lutes & Davies, 2013).

However, the research on condensed courses has found mostly positive outcomes for students in condensed classes. Walsh et al. (2019) reviewed 20 studies on the effects of condensed courses on student learning, retention of material, and perception of the course. Only three of the studies showed any advantage for the full-term students. The majority of the remaining studies found an advantage for students enrolled in condensed semesters. The rest of the studies found no difference between students who took condensed courses and students who took the full-term courses. Walsh et al. then conducted their own rigorous study that measured student learning outcomes, student and faculty perceptions of condensed courses, and differences in the syllabi between condensed and full-term courses. Their study found that students in the condensed courses had higher final grades and that there were widespread positive perceptions of condensed courses among students and faculty.

Other studies have found similar positive or at least equal outcomes for students in condensed classes. Carman and Bartsch (2017) found that students in condensed courses scored either higher than or equal to students in a full-term course on some exams and on the final course grade. Deichert et al. (2016) found that students in condensed classes scored significantly higher on a multiple-choice test given at the end of the semester than students in a full-term class who were given the same test. Richmond et al. (2015) used the same methodology and found similar results.

These results appear to generalize to online learning as well. Mensch (2013) examined the differences in letter grades between students enrolled in online courses.

He found that students in a five-week compressed course were more likely to receive higher grades, less likely to withdraw, and less likely to fail than students in the 14-week semester. These results suggest that even in an online format some compressed courses are more beneficial than full-term courses. In contrast, a study with more internal validity has been conducted for online learning and found no significant difference in learning outcomes (Simunich, 2016).

However, the aforementioned results showing positive or equal outcomes in condensed courses may be due to lower academic standards in those classes. Lutes and Davies (2013) found that condensed courses are slightly less rigorous than their full-term counterparts. They also found that 34% of instructors reported reducing assignments considerably, or somewhat, for condensed courses (Lutes & Davies, 2018). An analysis of course syllabi also revealed that many condensed classes have fewer graded assignments (Lutes & Davies, 2018). Walsh et al. (2019) found that although students in the condensed courses were awarded higher final grades, they did not score higher on a course-specific pre and post-test than students in the full-term courses. They suggest that reduced grading standards may be the reason for this finding.

Although these findings should not be ignored, it appears that lower grading standards in condensed courses are not the only reason for the positive and equal outcomes. Many of the studies used objective measures to assess student learning and did not rely solely on final grades. Students in condensed classes scored significantly higher than students in full-term courses on a multiple-choice test given at the end of the semester (Deichert et al., 2016; Richmond et al., 2015). Similarly, Faught et al. (2016) found no significant differences in scores on a retention quiz given to students in condensed and full-term courses. Simunich (2016) measured the grade of a large assignment and administered a post-course knowledge quiz and found no significant differences between course formats. Most tellingly, Thornton et al. (2017) examined the scores on a standard business management capstone test and found no significant differences in scores between course formats. These results suggest that student learning outcomes in condensed courses are, at a minimum, equivalent to that of full-term courses.

Research indicates that student and faculty perceptions of condensed courses are largely positive as well (Walsh et al., 2019). Students are more likely to rate their professors as more effective, contributing more to the course (Richmond et al., 2015) and better performing (Carman & Bartsch, 2017) in condensed courses. Faculty members report that students are less stressed and better able to concentrate during condensed courses (Lutes & Davies, 2018), and a majority of students report being less stressed as well (Walsh et al., 2019). Even in the studies that found some negative perceptions of condensed courses (Omelicheva, 2012; Sakalys et al., 1995; Smith, 1987), researchers still found overall positive perceptions among students and faculty.

Overall, the current research indicates that condensed classes do not disadvantage students and should not be discouraged (Faught et al., 2016; Simunich, 2016). Richmond et al. (2015) even suggest that psychology departments may wish to encourage the creation of more condensed classes. However, although most studies have found that students report positive perceptions of condensed classes they have taken, these results may not be generalizable to all students. It is highly likely that some students do not enroll in condensed courses because they anticipate performing poorly or for a number of other possible reasons. If that is the case, then every study comparing learning outcomes between course formats has a serious selection bias. The researchers only examined students who feel that they are able to succeed in conditions of condensed learning. Although researchers in some of the studies attempted to control for differences between the students in condensed courses and students in their control groups, none asked the students in the control group why they did not enroll in the condensed courses.

This study examined whether there were differences in student perception between students who had taken condensed courses and students who had not taken condensed courses. I examined the students' general attitudes toward condensed courses and willingness to enroll in condensed courses in the future. The hypothesis of the study was that students who had taken condensed courses would be willing to enroll in another condensed course and have positive perceptions of condensed courses in accordance with the findings of earlier studies but that students who had not taken condensed courses would be unwilling to enroll in a condensed course and have negative perceptions of condensed courses.

Method

Participants and Location

The project was deemed exempt by the Kean University Institutional Review Board. All the participants were recruited from undergraduate psychology courses taught at the Ocean County location of Kean University. Seven full-term classes and one condensed class were surveyed. No reimbursement was provided for participating in the study. However, some students were enrolled in a class that required them to participate in one or more research studies and received credit for participating. A total of 112 students were surveyed. To ensure anonymity, no demographic information was collected from the participants.

Materials

Student attitudes were measured through a survey created for this study. The student attitude survey consisted of 11 questions. Two questions asked students about the number and location of the condensed courses they had taken. Two open-ended questions asked about the differences between the course formats and their reasons for enrolling or not enrolling in condensed courses. The students were then asked three questions regarding their willingness to enroll in condensed classes in the future. The survey ended with four Likert type scales measuring perceptions of difficulty, material learned, long term retention, and stress of condensed courses. The full survey can be found in the appendix.

Procedure

A researcher entered the classroom during class time and offered the students the opportunity to participate in the survey. Students who agreed to participate were given a consent form to read and sign. The students then completed the student attitude survey and were offered debriefing forms. Because condensed courses can greatly vary in terms of course length, availability, and format between colleges, an attempt was made to reduce the resulting confounding factors by focusing only on the experience of the predicted majority of students. Since a large percentage of students at Kean Ocean (KO) transfer from Ocean County College (OCC) after earning their associate degree, student perceptions were assumed to reflect their experience at KO, OCC, or both.

Therefore, any responses that indicated that students had taken condensed courses only at another institution were not included in the statistical analysis. Any surveys that were missing more than two responses were also discarded.

The responses to the surveys were inputted into SPSS version 24 and analyzed. The multiple-choice responses were analyzed as nominal data and the responses to the Likert scales were treated as interval data. The responses to the open-ended questions were searched for patterns but not statistically analyzed.

Results

A total of 112 students agreed to participate in the survey. Ten surveys were discarded because they were incomplete ($n = 6$) or because the responses indicated that the student had only taken condensed courses at an institution other than Kean University or OCC ($n = 4$). A majority of students had taken a condensed course ($n = 57$). Of the students who had taken condensed courses, 67% took condensed courses only at OCC, 14% took the courses only at Kean University, and 19% took condensed courses at both colleges. The average number of condensed courses taken by each student was 2.58 ($SD = 2.02$) though it should be noted that the mean was skewed by a small minority of students ($n = 5$) who took more than four condensed courses.

There were significant differences between the responses of the students who had taken condensed courses and those who had never taken a condensed course in all the Yes/No/Other questions. A majority of students who had taken a condensed course were willing to take another one whereas a majority of the students who had never taken a condensed course were unwilling to take one in the future. A chi-square test confirmed that these results were significant $X^2 (2, N = 102) = 40.45, p < .001$. A majority of students in both groups were unwilling to take a condensed course while simultaneously being enrolled in a full-term course. However, a greater percentage of students who had never taken a condensed course stated that they would not consider taking the courses simultaneously. The difference in response between the two groups was statistically significant $X^2 (2, N = 102) = 9.478, p = .009$. A majority of students who had taken a condensed course wanted to see more courses being offered while students who had never taken condensed courses were more equally split in their

opinions. The differences between these two groups were statistically significant as well $\chi^2(2, N = 102) = 14.692, p = .001$. A full record of the responses to the Yes/No/Other questions can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

Responses to questions 5,6, and 7

	Yes	No	Other
Take Again			
Taken courses	45	8	4
Never Taken	7	26	12
More Offered			
Taken Courses	43	12	2
Never Taken	18	18	9
Take Simultaneously			
Taken Courses	22	35	0
Never Taken	7	35	3

The Likert scales asked students to indicate their perceptions of condensed courses in relation to full-term courses. The average scores of all students indicated that they perceived condensed courses to be somewhat more difficult ($M = 2.36, SD = 1$), somewhat more stressful ($M = 1.99, SD = .97$), produce somewhat worse retention ($M = 2.57, SD = .91$), and contain the same amount of material as full-term courses ($M = 3.07, SD = 1$). Independent samples t-tests were conducted to find any differences between the two groups of students. Although the means between the groups were different in every scale, only the difference in the difficulty scale was statistically significant at the .05 level, $t(100) = 2.733, p = .02$.

To measure the discriminant and convergent validity of the scales, Pearson's r was calculated for the relationship between each of the scales. There were significant positive correlations between the difficulty scale and the stress scale ($r(102) = .56, p < .001$), the difficulty and the retention scale ($r(102) = .22, p = .03$), and the stress and retention scales ($r(102) = .22, p = .23$). There were significant negative correlations between the material scale and the difficulty ($r(102) = -.56, p < .001$) and stress ($r(102) = -.29, p = .003$) scales. Pearson's r was also calculated to find any relationships between the Likert scales and how many courses had been taken but no significant relationships were found.

The responses to the open-ended questions were grouped together by common themes. The most common reasons that students gave for enrolling in condensed courses were to reduce the time to graduation or to meet the credit requirement to graduate by a specific time (65%), because it fit their schedule better (9%), and that they preferred the format (5%). Most of the students who had never taken a condensed course clearly indicated if they had done so intentionally or not. Forty percent of students indicated that they had actively avoided enrolling in a condensed course because they felt that they would not be able to learn the material properly in such a short period of time (22%) or because they were apprehensive about the stress caused by the condensed format (18%). Another 40% indicated that they had not been intentionally avoiding condensed courses and had never taken one due to scheduling conflicts (24%) because condensed courses were not covered by financial aid (11%) and that they never needed to take one (4%).

When asked to describe the main differences between full-term and condensed courses the most common responses among students who had taken a condensed course were that more information is learned in a shorter time (30%), less learning occurs than in a full-term class (16%), there is a heavier workload in condensed courses (14%) and that condensed courses are more laid back or require less work than full-term classes (11%). The most common responses among students who had never taken a condensed course were that more information is learned in a shorter time (51%), less learning occurs than in a full-term class (11%), condensed classes are more stressful (11%), and that condensed classes are more rushed (8%).

Discussion

The results of this study add some important nuance to the prior literature on the outcomes of condensed courses. Almost all the previous research indicates that condensed courses result in outcomes that are comparable to or better than full-term courses (Daniel, 2000; Walsh et al., 2019). However, as noted in some of the articles, none of the studies randomly assigned students to the condensed and full-term courses. In many of the studies, researchers attempted to control for differences between the two groups of students by collecting demographic information and analyzing them for statistically significant differences (Carman & Bartsch, 2017; Faught

et al., 2016; Sheldon & Durdella, 2009; Walsh et al., 2019). Some of the studies found significant demographic differences between the populations but there were no clear patterns of differences across the studies. However, even if it were to be found that there are no demographic differences, there are many other relevant aspects of the groups, such as learning styles, that can affect the results of the study. Additionally, to this author's knowledge, only in one, older, study (Smith, 1987) were students asked about their general perceptions of condensed courses. Instead, the previous studies focused on student perceptions of specific courses that they had taken. Therefore, although many of the previous studies were valuable additions to the scientific literature, the generalizability of their results is limited.

The findings of this study mostly confirmed the hypothesis. Most students who had previously taken condensed courses were interested in taking another condensed course, and most students who had not taken a condensed course were uninterested in taking one in the future. However, when asked about their perceptions of condensed courses both groups indicated that they had somewhat negative perceptions of condensed courses and only the responses for the difficulty scale showed any significant difference between the groups. Therefore, the hypothesis that there would be differences between the two groups was supported but the prediction that students who had taken condensed courses would have generally positive perceptions of the courses was not supported by the findings. The finding that there are differences between students who have taken a condensed course and those who have not may affect the conclusions drawn by previous studies. However, the effect of this finding depends on the interpretation of the differences.

It is possible to interpret the differences between the two groups in a way that has a minimal impact on the conclusions drawn in previous studies. One could postulate that although many students are unwilling to take condensed courses and believe that the course would result in worse learning outcomes for them, their fears are unfounded. It may be that if the students were forced to take a condensed course, they would attain the same positive learning outcomes as other students. It is certainly reasonable to assume that many students in condensed courses enrolled because they had no choice yet still learned the required material. In fact, some of the open-ended responses clearly indicated that the student had not been looking to enroll in a condensed course but

were forced to do so due to circumstances out of their control. In essence, there is a possibility that student fears do not indicate an actual difference in learning ability, which means that the conclusions of the previous studies remain intact and are generalizable to all students.

However, it is also possible that the results of this study indicate that a serious selection bias occurred in all the previous studies that did not utilize random selection. The open-ended responses of the students who had never taken a condensed course indicated that a full 40% of students intentionally avoid enrolling in condensed courses because they feel that the courses would force them to learn too much information in too little time or were apprehensive about the stress it would entail. Some of the students wrote that they believed their learning styles were incompatible with condensed learning. It is certainly reasonable to assume that at least some of the students are correctly assessing their abilities and would do poorly if they were enrolled in a condensed course. If this is true, then the population of condensed courses differs from the population of full-term classes in a critical aspect; condensed courses contain more students who learn better in such environments. This would mean that every study that found equal or better outcomes for students in condensed courses was using a sample of students that was different than the general population of students. Therefore, the generalizability of their results is extremely limited.

Ultimately, more research with a larger sample size and a more comprehensive survey is needed to draw any certain conclusions. These results indicate that there is a strong possibility that the results of the previous studies are due to a selection bias. However, this does not invalidate the results of those studies. The prior findings strongly indicate that students in condensed courses tend to do as well or better than students in full-term courses. This means that condensed courses are a viable option for students who wish to enroll in them. However, the generalizability of those studies to students who are hesitant to enroll in such courses is in doubt. Since no studies have utilized random assignment, the outcomes of condensed learning on the general population is unknown. As such, until further research is conducted using random assignment, hesitant students should not be told that the research indicates that they should enroll in condensed courses despite their concerns.

The finding that even students who had taken condensed courses had somewhat negative perceptions of condensed courses was not in accordance with the findings of Carman and Bartsch (2017), Richmond et al. (2015), and Walsh et al. (2019). However, Omelicheva (2012), Sakalys et al. (1995), and Smith (1987) all found that students reported finding condensed courses very intense or difficult. A likely explanation of the findings is that students in condensed courses may feel that condensed courses are inherently more difficult and intense but worth the sacrifice. This view of student perceptions would explain the responses of the Likert scales and why the majority of students who took condensed courses are willing to take another one. This would also explain why most of the studies found generally positive perceptions of condensed courses.

The finding that a majority of students who enrolled in condensed courses did so to reduce the time to graduation and not because of any preference for the condensed format is similar to the findings of Smith (1987) and Omelicheva (2012). This finding adds a layer of nuance to the results of previous studies. Anastasi (2007) and Richmond et al. (2015) suggest that since students view condensed courses very positively, universities should consider offering more condensed courses and even consider providing entire degrees consisting of condensed courses. However, this result introduces the possibility that most students view the condensed courses very positively because taking them allows the students to graduate sooner but may not believe that they are learning as much as in a full-term course. If this is true, then colleges and universities should be wary of adding condensed courses solely based on student preferences. To justify adding more condensed courses, institutions which prioritize learning outcomes need to ensure that students in condensed courses are properly absorbing course material.

The open-ended responses may also shed some light on what seems to be a contradiction in the previous research. Some research has found that condensed courses do not contain the same amount of material as full-term courses (Lutes & Davies, 2018; Walsh et al., 2019) yet most of the studies still found objectively equal learning outcomes (Deichert et al., 2016; Simunich, 2016). At first glance, these findings seem incompatible with each other. However, some of the students who took condensed courses indicated that their classes included the same breadth of material

but not the same depth as a full-term course. If this is true across condensed courses, it may explain the seemingly contradictory findings. It is possible that students in condensed courses learn all the main points of the subject and therefore do well on objective measures of knowledge but lack a deeper understanding of the material that is not tested by a simple written test. This explanation would be in line with the findings of Bude et al. (2011) who found that students in a condensed statistics course had a worse conceptual understanding of the material than students in full-term courses. However, it is possible that the previous research can be better explained by assuming that the reduction in assignments and assessments does not affect student learning. More research is needed to determine whether there is indeed a lack of depth in the understanding of material learned in condensed courses and whether the changes to syllabi in condensed courses affect student learning.

A point that should be made about the open-ended responses is that the students who responded that condensed courses have a heavier workload and the students who wrote that condensed courses require less work do not necessarily disagree. It may very well be that condensed courses have fewer assignments than their full-term counterparts but still result in a heavier workload due to the compressed schedule. Indeed, one participant wrote that “the info[r]mation] given seems to be overwhelming but professors are also more laid back when it comes to grading of assignments.”

The finding that most students in both groups did not want to take a condensed course at the same time as being enrolled in a full-time course is both unsurprising and revealing. Walsh et al. (2019) theorized that the lack of concurrent classes may be the reason for the positive learning outcomes of condensed courses and the lower levels of stress they found. The finding that a majority of all students would not be willing to take a condensed class while simultaneously enrolled in another class lends some validity to that line of thought. If it is true that student success in condensed courses can be explained by a lack of competing classes, then the results of studies conducted during intersessions should not be generalized to condensed learning as a whole. At a minimum, these results should give institutions pause in creating condensed classes during full-length semesters.

A general limitation in this area of study is that it is difficult to compare even courses of the same nature with each other. Different professors, classrooms, textbooks, course requirements, and a myriad of other details are all possible confounding factors. When attempting to compare courses that are in different formats, many more confounds are introduced. The condensed courses are generally held between semesters when students may have different work and extracurricular obligations than during the semester. As mentioned previously, condensed courses are also generally not held concurrently with other courses. This may allow students to focus exclusively on the single condensed course they are taking. These factors can affect the internal validity of the results. When attempting to generalize the results of the studies, even more confounds are introduced. Different universities have vastly different definitions of condensed and full-term courses. The studies cited in this article contained at least 12 different course lengths. A condensed semester consisting of one week is likely very different than a condensed semester consisting of eight weeks. Similarly, a condensed semester in English literature is likely to produce different results than a condensed semester in statistics. Therefore, generalizing the results of any study beyond that particular university is problematic at best.

An additional limitation of this study is the small sample size. In addition to the statistical difficulties this poses, the small number of participants meant that similar responses of just a few individuals were treated as a trend. Therefore, the smaller trends should be viewed with caution. A third limitation was that no information was collected about the demographics of the participants. A fourth limitation of this study was that no information was collected regarding the format and subject(s) of the condensed courses that students had taken. It is highly likely that online courses and courses in different subjects lead to different experiences and, by extension, perceptions of condensed courses. A fifth limitation of this data concerns drawing any conclusions about the actual course content and workload. Although the students answered questions about various aspects of the courses, these reports were subjective and more objective measures need to be used to make any claims about the difficulty, workload, and characteristics of condensed courses.

Perhaps the most severe limitation of this study was that participants consisted of students who had taken the condensed courses at Kean, Ocean County College, or

both. Although the survey was designed to assess students' general perceptions of condensed courses it is inevitable that the participants were influenced by the exact circumstances of the courses they experienced. Therefore, the generalizability of this study to even the main campus of Kean University is questionable.

There is a great need for future research in this area. The results of this study suggest that the research needs to be more nuanced than simply comparing the learning outcomes of condensed classes and full-term classes. In order to obtain generalizable results, it is imperative that future studies utilize random assignment to ensure that there are no differences between the two classes. Student learning outcomes need to be examined in a way that assesses both the breadth and depth of their learning. Future studies attempting to assess students' general perceptions of condensed courses should take into account the format and subjects of the condensed courses that students have previously taken. Only with more high quality research will universities and colleges be able to maximize student learning.

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Appendix

Attitudes Toward Condensed Classes

For the purpose of the survey, condensed classes are defined as any class which is considerably shorter than a similar course offered at the same college in the same format. These courses are usually offered in the summer or between the fall semester and spring semester. Please circle the answer that best describes your feelings. After recording your choice, if you feel that the choice does not explain the full picture, please write a comment underneath with more details.

1. Have you ever completed any condensed courses? **Y** **N**

2. If yes, how many and where?

Number of classes taken ____ Location: **Kean** **OCC** **Other** _____

3. What were your main reasons for taking or not taking the condensed class(es)?

4. What would you say are the main differences, if any, between full-term classes and condensed classes?

5. Would you take a condensed class again? **Y** **N** **Other** _____

6. Would you like to see more condensed classes offered? **Y** **N**
Other _____

7. Would you take a condensed class during a full-term semester at the same time that you're enrolled in full-term courses? **Y** **N** **Other** _____

Please turn over

In the next four questions condensed courses are referred to as **CC** and full-term courses are referred to as **FT**. Please circle the statement that you most agree with. After choosing an answer, if you feel that the answer does not represent the full story please write a comment underneath with more details.

8. Difficulty of condensed courses

1	2	3	4	5
CC are significantly more difficult than FT	CC are somewhat more difficult than FT	CC are about the same difficult as FT	CC are somewhat less difficult than FT	CC are significantly less difficult than FT

9. Amount of material in condensed courses

1	2	3	4	5
CC contain significantly less material than FT	CC contain somewhat less material than FT	CC contain as material as FT	CC contain somewhat more material than FT	CC contain significantly more material than FT

10. Long term retention of material learned in condensed courses (how much you will remember after the course is over)

1	2	3	4	5
Retention is significantly worse for CC than in FT	Retention is somewhat worse for CC than for FT	Retention is about equal for CC and FT	Retention is somewhat better for CC than for FT	Retention is significantly better for CC than for FT

11. Stress of condensed courses

1	2	3	4	5
CC are significantly more stressful than FT	CC are somewhat more stressful than FT	CC are about the same stressful as FT	CC are somewhat less stressful than FT	CC are significantly less stressful than FT

Thank you for participating in this study!