

**Strategic Priorities for Course Scheduling and  
Modalities Report  
2023**



**Office of the Provost**

# Executive Summary<sup>1</sup>

UM-Dearborn pursues a governing principle of being “a caring, inclusive, student-focused institution.”<sup>2</sup> To live up to this principle, it is vital that we explicitly and actively overcome and alleviate our students’ course scheduling challenges, which ultimately hinder students’ progress toward graduation and, in some cases, results in students dropping out or leaving to attend another institution.

In an earlier attempt to address these concerns, UM-Dearborn issued a framework document titled, “[Digital Education Strategic Priorities](#),” (in 2017) which set forth the campus-wide goal of providing one-in-five courses (20%) to be delivered in online or hybrid format. Providing a numeric target to gradually move the campus into the direction of offering more online courses — which, when asynchronous, are inherently more flexible — had the beneficial effect of allowing the colleges and disciplines to redesign their course schedules to be more student centered and inclusive.

The Digital Education Strategic Priorities plan served the needs of our campus in setting that achievable north star. However, its singular focus on digital education only partially addressed the core scheduling issues of students. For example, while online course offerings have increased flexible course options for students, they have not necessarily increased students’ ability to complete their programs and degrees efficiently and flexibly. These concerns require a renewed focus on the challenges students face and a rethinking of how we address them, with a strategic eye on the benefits of diverse course modalities, but also other curricular considerations beyond modalities.

UM-Dearborn students reported their flexibility needs in the Fall 2022 Student Experience and Student Needs Survey [quantitative and qualitative reports](#) which reflects similar findings in the EDUCAUSE [2022 Students and Technology Report](#).

It is with this in mind that we have intentionally created a larger frame and scope with the issuing of this 2023 Strategic Priorities for Course Scheduling and Modalities report. Five years ago our campus was still in the early days of building the infrastructure and capacity to support digital education and therefore we consciously held it separately, as a modality, from other types of courses. Now students see combinations of online courses, hybrid courses, and in-person courses as necessary means of flexibility to help them on their path to graduation. Students need scheduling flexibility and course quality in all modalities.

To be sure, in the period since the Digital Education Strategic Priorities plan was issued in 2017, the campus has undergone many changes and continued to show itself to be a student-centered institution. For example, in 2019, the Scheduling Advisory Team issued its [report](#) that provided recommendations to “improve the process of class scheduling and the resulting

---

<sup>1</sup> The Provost Office would like to acknowledge the contributions Dr. Emily Matthews Luxon made in drafting this document.

<sup>2</sup> Mission statement, <https://umdearborn.edu/about-um-dearborn/mission>

schedule of classes.” The committee noted that a flawed scheduling process “[h]ampers students' ability to enroll full-time and minimize time-to-degree.” Many of the recommendations listed in the Scheduling Advisory Team report were acted upon (as described, below). However, more must be done.

Building further on our student-focused mission, this report serves as a guide for all UM-Dearborn campus community members to take a strategic and intentional approach to our course scheduling processes and modes of delivery in order to strengthen our commitment as “a caring, inclusive, student-focused institution.” This call for greater flexibility is not new in higher education. In 2008, the Faculty Focus blog published an article, “[Scheduling Courses for Flexibility and Student Success](#)” signaling the positive benefits of flexible schedules for student success efforts. The American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers produced a [study](#) in 2016 which highlighted best practices and technology around course scheduling for promoting greater student accessibility. That same year, University Business reported on new scheduling policies and practices in its “[Flex Your College’s Courses](#)” article.

Just as an in-person modality does not guarantee a high-quality course, neither does an online modality guarantee a low-quality course. Course quality is independent of course scheduling or modality, and as a campus we need to continue our pursuit of intentionally-designed and high quality courses in all modalities. Research into effective pedagogies and student learning provide clear guidance on what makes for high-quality courses, including faculty presence, regular interactions, a rich and varied learning experience, and a sense of community. These can be actively built into classes of all modalities.

The “[Course Quality: Best Practices and Resources](#)” document offers helpful information pertaining to course quality issues. In addition, faculty can visit the [Hub for Teaching & Learning Resources](#) for additional assistance in the areas of teaching and pedagogy supports.

But high quality courses that students simply cannot take because of scheduling constraints will not help our students graduate.

To enable our students to succeed, our scheduling priorities should focus on curricular pathways to program and degree completion. A pathway is the curriculum journey a student must take in order to complete their degree. It embodies all the general education, specialized, elective, and additional course requirements in their degree program. Obviously, each student’s pathway or journey will look somewhat different in terms of the timing they might take degree courses but every student in a particular program is required to walk the same curriculum path. Discipline faculty — in being responsible for developing and maintaining a degree program, and making decisions about the frequency, day/time, and modality of course offerings — have a significant impact on how flexible a student’s pathway through the curriculum can be.

As a strategic approach, this means encouraging programs and degrees to identify how students with different constraints (i.e. work, child care, etc.) could complete their education – along their own time-constrained “paths” – with our current offerings and schedules, and

identifying which critical courses would need to be offered more frequently, offered on varied days/times, or in diverse modalities to allow students to complete their degrees more efficiently (i.e. by increasing the available “paths” through the degree). And we must continue to improve our teaching regardless of modality, to ensure that we deliver the high-quality courses our students deserve.

To implement a strategic pathways approach, several critical components are required:

1. Disciplines will need to identify and implement a minimum standard of accessibility, inclusivity, and flexibility for program and degree completion. The following [Guide for Evaluating Program Schedules & Modalities](#) (and the [one-page summary](#)) outlines a number of prompts for programs to consider when making course modality and scheduling decisions.
2. We will need a campus-level body to monitor course offerings in the Dearborn Discovery Core program at a global level, to ensure flexibility and accessibility across programs.
3. We must recognize and support faculty who may need to teach any one course in multiple modalities, which will require additional time and effort to implement. This includes maintaining and enhancing the support for continuously improving course quality across all modalities, and improving faculty support and recognition for teaching development and innovations.
4. Campus leadership will need to actively prioritize and support this reorientation towards a strategic pathways approach, and provide the necessary coordination and guidance at the university and college levels to ensure that critical courses are offered flexibly, regularly and predictably, and that students have viable pathways to completion.
5. We will need to maintain — and continually monitor the effectiveness of — our student supports and services to ensure that they are high quality and serve the needs of students, regardless of whether a student is taking courses completely online or comes to campus.

## Background

### Before the Pandemic

Prior to the pandemic, our campus set separate strategic priorities for online, hybrid, and in-person modalities. The underlying assumption was that these courses were intended for different purposes and different kinds of students, and that they were inherently different in our overall course schedules.

In April 2017, the Office of the Provost released a document outlining our campus’ [Digital Education Strategic Priorities](#), with the intent of providing students with more options, flexibility, and accessibility for completing a quality education at UM-Dearborn. The first institutional priority for using digital education to pursue these goals was to “improve access by right-sizing online/hybrid course offerings and programs,” to enable greater access and flexibility, and to help students complete their degrees in four years (in line with the [FastFOURward Campaign](#)).

The associated strategic target proposed that we would work towards offering one-in-five courses online/hybrid (20%). This target was taken up by the colleges for implementation through initiatives such as “Get-to-20” in the College of Arts, Sciences, & Letters (CASL).

While no college had yet reached this 20% goal for undergraduate courses by the beginning of the Winter 2020 semester, all colleges had made real progress towards offering more courses and sections online, with the consequence that an increasing percentage of UM-Dearborn students were enrolling in online courses.<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting here that over the last decade the College of Business, the College of Engineering & Computer Science, and the College of Education, Health, & Human Services have always offered more than 20% of graduate courses online, while CASL had only more recently reached that 20% threshold for graduate courses.



Check out the [Data Appendix](#) which provides a summary analysis of the UM-Dearborn course data from the Fall 2010 through the Winter 2022 with a focus on the fill rates for the different types of modalities the campus has offered to students.

From a strategic priority perspective, our campus had been gradually, but steadily moving towards its stated targets. As noted in the 2017 Digital Education Strategic Priorities document, this approach was optimal as universities that gradually scale up online and hybrid course and program offerings have usually been more successful. Nevertheless, the general approach – focused on a numeric target of 20% online – had both benefits and shortcomings. One of the benefits of the general approach was that faculty who had been more interested in developing online courses were able to move forward, often with financial and instructional support. One of the major drawbacks, however, was that the emphasis on individual-faculty level decisions to move courses online made it much more difficult for our campus and many programs to pursue “a strategic, intentional, and guided prioritization of course selection for online/hybrid development” which is also critical for digital education success (a key element noted in the 2017 Digital Education Strategic Priorities document).

The launch of the Scheduling Advisory Team (SAT) in 2018 set the stage for another commendable effort by our campus to take a more thoughtful and strategic approach to serving our students. With a “student-centric approach” in mind, the SAT group made a number of thoughtful [recommendations](#), including formalizing the SAT role on our campus; full implementation of the course scheduling system; utilization of data in the “scheduler planner” feature of DegreeWorks; reorganization of the dual enrollment process; establishment of scheduling time block distribution standards; and other considerations. Many of the key recommendations have been realized. However, it is vitally important that our campus see that

---

<sup>3</sup> During this period, the UM-Dearborn four-year graduation rate rose six points from 21% (2012 FTIAC class) to 27% (2016 FTIAC class).

the remaining recommendations are either acted upon or given thoughtful consideration by the Registrar's Office.

One unmet recommendation from the SAT Report is the establishment of scheduling time block distribution standards. The successful implementation of such standards would likely have a positive benefit in minimizing course conflicts in students' schedules.

## During the Continuing Pandemic

The pandemic dramatically shifted the campus landscape with nearly all courses moving fully to emergency remote learning. This online pivot forced faculty and staff to gain at least some familiarity with online teaching tools (though it is critical to emphasize that emergency remote teaching is not equivalent to delivering intentionally-designed online and hybrid courses). And it gave all our students experience with what it can be like to take an online class.

Even as the campus has shifted back to in-person learning, many courses have stayed fully or partially online (i.e. hybrid), and there are many new modalities available (i.e. online-synchronous).<sup>4</sup> The effect has been that we have broadly achieved our original digital education target of offering far more courses in online & hybrid modes. But these choices have not necessarily been made strategically, with program and degree completion in mind.

## For the Post-Pandemic Future

The post-pandemic era gives the UM-Dearborn campus community an excellent opportunity to revisit and reconsider its approach to course scheduling and the role different modalities can play in building a flexible, accessible, and inclusive path to graduation for students.

The pandemic has underlined the potential benefits of online learning for providing flexibility and accessibility for our student population. As emphasized in the 2017 Digital Education Strategic Priorities document, our students will be better able to manage and schedule their course loads – with their many other obligations, such as work or childcare – if at least some of the courses they need are offered online.

In parallel, we have become much more aware of the drawbacks of not having a more intentional and strategic approach to selecting courses. Prior to the pandemic, many students still faced difficulties scheduling and completing required courses, and that remains true still. It is difficult to quantify the bottlenecks students face but as our Fall 2022 Student Experience and Student Needs Survey [quantitative and qualitative reports](#) made clear, students are asking for more scheduling flexibility.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Winter 2023 term modalities numbers for UM-Dearborn campus are as follows: 58% CLASS; 11% HYBRID; 26% ONLINE; 2% ONMST; and 2% ONREG.

<sup>5</sup> We realize the term "flexibility" has been used since the beginning of the COVID pandemic to encourage faculty to be more mindful of student needs when it comes to course-level assignments, particularly giving students greater leniency when submitting work or extending grading deadlines. This report is not making a recommendation on course-level matters and, instead, focuses on what can be done at the scheduling

Students struggle with finding classes that are compatible with their work and care responsibilities, and are frustrated when multiple courses they need to graduate are offered at incompatible times. In addition, the lack of coordination in course offerings (e.g., between Dearborn Discovery Core courses and major requirements) has hindered our campus's ability to offer a more diverse portfolio of programs. While several programs<sup>6</sup> have been developing fully online undergraduate majors, they are unable to offer fully online degrees, because – as a campus – we have not strategically prioritized offering critical courses online, such as those fulfilling DDC requirements.

While the benefits of centering individual faculty choices to teach in person or move courses online, and the benefits of pursuing separate strategic priorities for in person vs. online modalities, made sense for our campus prior to the pandemic, it is clearly no longer enough. Simply increasing the number of courses offered online will not, on its own, ensure clear pathways to completion for our students; nor will simply adhering to our traditional approach of offering all courses in person.

Analysis of campus fill rate data, shows that there is still unfulfilled student demand for online and hybrid courses (see [Data Appendix](#)). However, increasing the number of online & hybrid courses offered at the course level will not address students' concerns about schedule constraints and conflicts they experienced during their pursuit of a degree. Instead, we need to *strategically* schedule our course offerings, and *strategically* select course modalities for critical courses, to ensure that our students have the options they need to complete their degrees. It is time for our campus to rethink our strategic targets for course scheduling and course modalities.

Thus, this document provides an inflection point for our campus to shift its focus towards course scheduling and modality flexibility, and away from singling out online and hybrid courses as existentially separate from in-person courses. Many of the teaching resources available so far on campus have been labeled as more relevant for one modality vs. another, but this has been a largely artificial distinction driven by the conception that online necessarily means lower quality. While *implementation* of certain pedagogical principles might look somewhat different online compared to on campus, most of the pedagogical principles hold regardless of modality. Therefore, while many of the current resources in the [Course Quality: Best Practices and Resources](#) are still targeted towards digital education, they apply to education in general and should be supported regardless of modality.<sup>7</sup> And more campus teaching resources, in the future, should be and will be designed to communicate fundamental principles that hold regardless of modality, with examples of how those principles can be implemented effectively in and across different modalities

---

and modality assignment stage. For a recent discussion on course-level flexibility, see Beckie Supiano, "Course Correction: Students expect 'total flexibility' in the pandemic-era classroom. But is that really what they need?" [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#), February 13, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Such as History, Psychology, and English, in CASL.

<sup>7</sup> These resources will be revised to be modality-neutral in the future.

# Pathways, Not Numeric Targets

A more strategic and intentional approach to identifying appropriate course modalities is to focus on **curricular pathways to program and degree completion**. Emphasizing pathways will enable our campus to stay attuned to what really matters: helping our students succeed. What do we need to do to make completing a quality education – in a reasonable amount of time – available to our student populations?

We want our students to complete their education with us, not drop out because of scheduling difficulties we could have prevented. To ensure all our students are successful in obtaining a diploma, we need to provide clear and feasible curricular pathways that enable students to complete all their degree requirements without undue delay.

‘Traditional’ students — who might take all of their courses in person, and/or who have no or few constraints on their time — might not need us to take a strategic approach to our course offerings, both in terms of schedules and modalities. However, many, if not most, of our students have serious constraints on their time and schedules<sup>8</sup> and nearly all spend a significant amount of time commuting to campus. This is our primary student demographic and one that EDUCAUSE notes has been “gravitating toward online coursework.”<sup>9</sup>

Eighty-five percent of UM-Dearborn first-year students responding to the [2022 National Survey of Student Engagement](#) reported spending from 1 to 10 hours commuting to campus during a 7-day week.

To one extent or another, all UM-Dearborn faculty and staff know that our students face challenges. It is now vital for our campus to determine what we all do with this information in taking steps to strategically offer courses in ways that ensure our students can complete our curriculum. We have already sought to offer evening courses, for example. Online and hybrid modalities are another critical way we can offer additional accessibility and flexibility to help our students complete their degrees.

## Ensure Pathways to Program Completion

**Pathways to program completion** will not look the same for every program. However, each program (including majors, minors, certificates, PBL initiatives, etc.) should be able to identify multiple pathways for completion for students with the typical (though varied) constraints faced

---

<sup>8</sup> 21% of University of Michigan-Dearborn first-year students, responding to the 2022 National Survey of Student Engagement, reported that they work off campus 21 hours or more a week with 17% of the same first-year students reporting that they provide dependent care 6 hours or more a week. For responding senior students, 44% reported that they are working off campus for 21 hours or more a week with 30% reporting that they provide dependent care 6 hours or more a week. See [2022 National Survey of Student Engagement](#), pg. 17-18, 37-38.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Galanek and Ben Shulman, “Commuter Students’ Learning Environment Preferences,” [EDUCAUSE](#), May 4, 2020.

by our student populations. For example, could a student who works full time complete the program in 4 years, through a combination of evening and online courses? Could a student with child-care responsibilities complete the program in 4 years through a combination of daytime and online courses? Or, if there is only one class offered in an academic year for a major requirement, and it conflicts with a student's obligations (or other courses), is there an easily accessible alternative option for fulfilling that requirement?

The term "bottleneck" has become a popular and common way to describe the curricular and course scheduling challenges that function as barriers for students in being able to progress to graduation.<sup>10</sup> A report produced by the Coalition of Urban Serving Universities and the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities titled, "Removing Bottlenecks: Eliminating Barriers to Completion," listed the following common causes of bottlenecks:



- Physical Space Limitations and Room Capacity
- Courses with High DEW (Grades of Ds, Es, and Withdrawals)
- General Education Requirements
- Faculty and Student Preferences
- Specialization (Select courses that may be offered on an irregular basis or with a few, particular faculty members. More likely to occur in upper division courses, specialization courses might only be taught by one faculty member or offered on an irregular, "need" basis, making it difficult for students to anticipate changes or plan schedules around so few choices).<sup>11</sup>

Some might argue that these outcomes are just the natural results of managing a complex system, particularly one with many stakeholders and priorities to satisfy. This line of thought might raise the question of why we should take concerted action to address the problem.

The answer rests at the core of our mission to be a student-focused institution. These bottlenecks are a detriment to our campus in the form of untapped student achievement and progression towards a degree, along with the institutional costs of lower retention and graduation rates.

How can UM-Dearborn more strategically position itself to overcome these bottlenecks and evaluate the challenges students face on their pathway towards a degree? The [Guide for Evaluating Program Schedules & Modalities](#) outlines a number of prompts for programs to consider when making course modality and scheduling decisions. For example, programs might offer required courses in several modalities on a regular and predictable schedule. This will

---

<sup>10</sup> For example, see, Richard V. Reeves and Quentin Karpilow, "The College Bottleneck in the American Opportunity Structure," [The Brookings Institute](#), May 2014.

<sup>11</sup> "Removing Bottlenecks: Eliminating Barriers to Completion," [Coalition of Urban Serving Universities and the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities](#), p. 1-2.

require attention not only to which courses are required and available within each program, but also what modalities and schedules are available for students to complete the program in a reasonable amount of time.

We believe this evaluative approach is critical and is a call to action for all faculty to reflect on and reevaluate how their program schedules and offerings align with the core mission of the university to be caring, inclusive, and student-focused. By undertaking such an evaluation, programs will be taking an important step in ensuring that they are meeting the needs of students.

## Ensure Pathways to Degree Completion

While pathways to program completion can be organized and coordinated within a single program, **pathways to degree completion** – particularly for undergraduate degrees – require strategic organization, coordination, and even oversight, across the university. As a top priority, we need to increase accessibility and flexibility for UM-Dearborn students to pursue and complete their degrees.

This **degree completion** priority requires more flexible options, most critically for DDC requirements. We propose that coordination occur in scheduling DDC courses to ensure that a critical or minimum number of DDC courses — in each category — be offered online, especially asynchronously. This is particularly important for DDC categories that currently have very few online courses, including Quantitative Thinking & Problem Solving and Natural Sciences.<sup>12</sup>

Just as an illustrative example, we might increase more flexible DDC offerings by asking each program to try to offer one of their existing DDC courses in each (relevant) DDC category in an online or hybrid modality at least once every two years, where pedagogically possible. In other words, a program that already offers courses in three DDC categories would offer online courses in those three DDC categories at least once every two years. Strategically, the program could potentially prioritize teaching courses that count towards more than one DDC category, for example. Pedagogically, some courses might be better suited towards one modality than another, but other courses might be pedagogically well suited to multiple modalities. This broad approach would increase flexible offerings across programs.

To ensure effective coordination and communication at the university level, a campus-wide body such as the SAT could oversee the scheduling of DDC modalities by identifying holes in scheduling and offerings in each DDC category, and reaching out with support and resources to programs and faculty that could fill those holes.

---

<sup>12</sup> A secondary benefit to ensuring that all DDC categories offer at least some courses online is to enable some programs to create fully online undergraduate degree programs, where it makes strategic sense. Not all degrees at UM-Dearborn either need to be, or even should be, fully online. However, to have **any** online undergraduate degrees requires an expansion of online DDC options across campus, as no undergraduate degree can be fully online without online DDC courses in every category.

## What is Required

From a pathways perspective, focusing on curriculum complexity and bottlenecks is an effective way to increase degree accessibility for our students. This approach integrates our previously separate strategic goals for in person vs. online modalities, and reorients “digital education” as one fundamental and critical tool for achieving our many strategic goals, rather than simply expanding digital education as an end in itself. By strategically focusing on course scheduling across modalities, altogether, we have a real opportunity to ensure flexible and accessible pathways to completion for our students, and make our institution even more inclusive, caring, and student-focused.

A successful strategic-pathways approach will require several key elements.

First, we will need to identify and implement a minimum standard of scheduling accessibility and flexibility for program and degree completion. In other words, which and how many pathways to completion are required for each program to achieve this strategic goal? The answer to how many pathways will certainly look different for each discipline as majors, and even degrees, are unique. Disciplines are strongly encouraged to utilize the [Guide for Evaluating Program Schedules & Modalities](#) to begin identifying potential bottleneck areas which may include specialized courses, prerequisites, subject area/field requirements, and other factors that might be contributing to the impediment of a student’s degree progress.

At a minimum, disciplines should ensure at least two or more pathways that students – with very different time and schedule constraints – can follow as they navigate their degree.

Within pathways to completion, we must particularly identify critical courses that need to be offered in more diverse modalities (including online asynchronous). These will likely include at least some courses such as: introductory, gateway, foundations, specialized, DDC, and ones aligned with key university and college initiatives and priorities.

Second, a campus-wide body can coordinate and provide information on cross-program degree requirements to ensure students can complete their full degrees, and not just their chosen programs. Where critical courses or degree requirements (i.e., DDC categories) are not currently available in multiple modalities, or are not offered regularly enough to ensure reliable pathways to completion, courses that could fulfill those program and degree requirements will need to be identified, created, or modified to be offered in multiple modalities.

Third, we must acknowledge and support the work needed to offer courses in diverse modalities, especially as we dismantle our previously siloed approach to course modalities. A flexible pathways approach may require a faculty member to teach the same course in multiple modalities over a predictable period, i.e., they may need to offer a course both in person and online, on a regular rotation. Given that high-quality pedagogies may require different implementations for online vs. hybrid vs. in-person courses – even while underlying pedagogical principles remain the same – this will take work, and it must be appropriately supported and recognized. Part of this support will include helping faculty continuously improve course quality

across all modalities, as well as increasing faculty recognition for teaching development and innovation.

Fourth, a pathways approach requires strategic coordination, guidance, and outreach at the university and college levels to ensure that those critical courses are offered, regularly and predictably, in modalities that allow more pathways to program and degree completion. Campus leadership — at all levels — will need to actively prioritize and support a reorientation towards a strategic pathways approach. This will particularly include leadership, coordination, and guidance to ensure that critical requirements (especially DDC) can be met online. This will undoubtedly include taking an active role in ensuring that critical courses are offered in multiple modalities and supporting the development of alternatives to critical courses that are not offered online.

Finally, we need to continue to provide robust support for students enrolled in all course modalities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, all student support services pivoted to supporting students in a virtual environment. These virtual support service options remain in place today and we advocate for the maintenance and enhancements of such virtual service options going forward in addition to in-person options that have traditionally existed. To ensure that we maintain high-quality student supports, multiple sources of student experience data should be continually identified and analyzed to ensure our campus is doing all it can to serve the needs of students.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> A good first step in academic affairs was the deployment of the Student Experience and Student Needs Survey (see [quantitative and qualitative reports](#)) in the Fall 2022. The student focus groups set to be offered in the Winter 2023 is another important step to better understand the student experience. Other tools and survey devices abound: the [Healthy Minds Network survey](#); the [National Survey of Student Engagement](#); and the Cooperative Institutional Research Program. Most recently the campus has developed and launched a post-appointment and post-case management survey for all student support offices (e.g., advising, admissions, financial aid, etc.) to utilize in Salesforce.