

Abstract Title:

Blocked scheduling in Physical Therapist education as a curricular adjustment in response to COVID-19

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Purpose/hypothesis: COVID-19 caused widespread modifications in DPT education, requiring adoption of remote and hybrid instructional models and course scheduling alterations. To decrease student burden and cognitive load associated with managing multiple, simultaneous hybrid courses, our entry-level DPT education program implemented a blocked schedule format for the Spring 2021 semester. A retrospective evaluation based on the Kirkpatrick Model and implementation science principles was performed to assess student and faculty perspectives for the Spring 2021 blocked schedule.

Subjects: 53 (79%) first-year students and 21 (77%) faculty who participated in the Spring 2021 blocked schedule completed the survey.

Materials/methods: Anonymous, electronic student and faculty surveys were distributed upon semester completion. Surveys collected quantitative and qualitative data in domains of satisfaction, fit, sustainability, benefits, challenges, and recommendations. Descriptive statistics were used for quantitative data and qualitative data were analyzed by content analysis. All data from both surveys were integrated via matching through joint display analysis.

Results: Of survey respondents, the majority were satisfied (students:75%, faculty: 66%), felt benefits outweighed challenges (students:75%, faculty: 52%), and welcomed future opportunities for a blocked schedule (students:87%, faculty:67%). However, only 47% of faculty deemed blocked schedule to be sustainable. Fit varied widely between courses (students:56%-98%, faculty:40-81%). Qualitatively students felt better able to “focus” and achieve school/life balance with less “juggling” of other course demands. Faculty observed benefits in student “engagement” and “recall”, however, also expressed challenges of limited “wiggle room” for absences and technology glitches, “providing timely feedback and intervention for struggling students”, obtaining work/life balance and concerns of insufficient student long-term retention and burnout. Recommendations included varying length of the block by course and optimizing consistency between courses.

Conclusions: Faculty and student perspectives differed, but overall satisfaction with the blocked schedule was positive. Findings support the decision to adopt a blocked schedule to address students’ cognitive load of managing multiple courses and support existing evidence outside of physical therapist education of high student satisfaction. However, results suggest the need for less aggressive blocking of higher credit hour courses. Additional work is critical to better understand the benefits and challenges of a blocked schedule in DPT education by evaluating learning outcomes and strategies for optimal execution, sustainability, and satisfaction. This study was a crucial first step in the process of understanding implementation of alternative scheduling structures and providing options for future curricular modifications, while also providing a model for development of an evaluation plan assessing educational innovation in entry-level DPT education.

References:

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