

CHANGING STUDENT ATTENDANCE
TO A THREE TRACK SYSTEM: A REPORT TO THE
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Editor's note: Stephen Ott's report was compiled and presented to the Presidents Council in 1995 as the college explored ideas for increasing Summer School enrollment and admitting more students.

Several months ago, a committee researched possibilities and suggestions for admitting more students to Ricks College. The committee looked closely at the possibility of implementing a “three-track” system of attendance. Several of the benefits and problems were discussed by the committee. The culmination was a report that included data on the background of prospective Ricks students, as well as those students’ feelings on being admitted in one of the “alternate” tracks (see the report by Steven J. Davis, “A Study of the Perceptions and Plans of the Ricks College Prospective Applicant Pool,” Fall 1995).

This paper is a follow-up to that study. I have further explored the feasibility of converting to the three-track attendance system by seeking input from various college departments that might have information pertinent to its performance. In this study, I will explain the structure of the possible three-track system as outlined by the previous committee, including a theoretical impact the system could have on the total attendance at Ricks College. Then I will specify the conditions that would be needed to convert to the three-track system, identify the benefits and problems associated with conversion to it, and finally identify some recommendations in light of my exploration.

DESCRIPTION

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Traditionally, students attend Ricks beginning in the fall semester of each school year and continuing through the end of winter semester. A significantly smaller portion of these students choose to attend part or all of the three summer sessions. For purposes of identifying these students in the new three-track system, I will assign this traditional attendance schedule as “Track 1.” Since this is the current attendance schedule, the college would not need to modify application deadlines for the students who would be assigned this schedule on the three-track system. If the three-track system is instituted, the majority of the students (over two-thirds) would still be admitted to attend the college on this schedule.

Some Ricks College applicants would be assigned to “Track 2” under the new three-track system. These students would be accepted

for attendance only during the winter semester and summer sessions. A portion of the fall applicants that were denied admission to Track 1 would be assigned to this track as the only way they could attend the college. Other individuals who apply to begin in winter semester could be assigned to this track. None of the current application deadlines would need to change.

Other Ricks applicants would be assigned to Track 3 (probably the same number of students that are in Track 2). Students placed in the Track 3 attendance schedule would be accepted for attendance only during the summer sessions and fall semester. Again, some of the fall applicants that were denied admission to Track 1 could be assigned to this track and some of the winter applicants could also be assigned to this track.

The numerical impact of this system on total attendance at Ricks can be seen on Table 1. This table shows the total number of students attending during each of the main semesters and summer sessions. In order accurately to compare the total overall increase in student attendance during the four-year implementation period, I have kept the total number of students attending during the Fall and Winter to 7,500. I have also assumed that no students in Track 1 (the traditional Fall/Winter schedule) would be attending during the summer. Notice that in the first year, 100 students are assigned to Track 2 and 100 to Track 3. If the three-track attendance system is adopted, it would be advisable to begin with a small experimental sample of possibly 100 students. During this first year, any bugs can be worked-out of the program. A small experimental sample also allows an estimate to be made of the number assigned to Track 2 and Track 3 who actually show up. This will be useful in admissions planning. The impact on attendance is shown in this table: 100 additional students (beyond the hypothetical 7,500 cap) can be accepted to Ricks College. During the second year, a total of 300 students are assigned to Track 2 and 300 to Track 3. Notice that at no time does the number of students attending in a given semester go over 7,500, but because of the required summer attendance, the total number of students attending goes up to 7,800

Table 1		Fall	Winter	Summer
FIRST YEAR	Track 1	7,400	7,400	
Total Students	Track 2		100	100
(on campus)	Track 3	100		100
7,600	Semester Totals	7,500	7,500	200
SECOND YEAR	Track 1	7,200	7,200	
Total Students	Track 2		300	300
(on campus)	Track 3	300		300
7,800	Semester Totals	7,500	7,500	600
THIRD YEAR	Track 1	7,000	7,000	
Total Students	Track 2		500	500
(on campus)	Track 3	500		500
8,000	Semester Totals	7,500	7,500	1,000
FOURTH YEAR	Track 1	5,500	5,500	
Total Students	Track 2		2,000	2,000
(on campus)	Track 3	2,000		2,000
9,500	Semester Totals	7,500	7,500	4,000

during the second year. That increase adds up to 300 additional students above the 7,500 ceiling. Likewise, the total number of students attending during the third year jumps to 8,000, but never goes over 7,500 at one time. 500 students have been assigned each to Track 2 and Track 3. The fourth year has over 25% of the students during each of the fall and winter semesters on either Track 2 or Track 3. (i.e., 2,000 students out of a total 7,500 in fall semester are on Track 3.) The total number of students who attend Ricks, however, is 9,500 during the school year. That would raise the ceiling at Ricks high enough to make it an open-enrollment school again.

A more accurate look at the three-track system is probably shown on Table 2. This table takes into account about 1,500 Track 1 students

Table 2		Fall	Winter	Summer
FIRST YEAR	Track 1	7,400	7,400	1,500
Total Students	Track 2		100	100
(on campus)	Track 3	100		100
8,350	Semester Totals	7,500	7,500	1,700
SECOND YEAR	Track 1	7,200	7,200	1,500
Total Students	Track 2		300	300
(on campus)	Track 3	300		300
8,550	Semester Totals	7,500	7,500	2,100
THIRD YEAR	Track 1	7,000	7,000	1,500
Total Students	Track 2		500	500
(on campus)	Track 3	500		500
8,750	Semester Totals	7,500	7,500	2,500
FOURTH YEAR	Track 1	6,000	6,000	1,500
Total Students	Track 2		1,500	1,500
(on campus)	Track 3	1,500		1,500
9,750	Semester Totals	7,500	7,500	4,500

Note: When a student attends one semester (or 3 summer sessions), it is counted as one-half of a school year. I arrived at the number of 9,750 students in year four of Table 2 by totaling the students in the three semesters and dividing the number in half.

(Fall/Winter attendance) who voluntarily attend during the summer sessions. Note that the number of students assigned to either Track 2 or Track 3 goes from 2,000 (on the fourth year of Table 1) down to 1,500 students. The total number of students attending during the year increases from 9,500 in the fourth year of Table 1 to 9,750 students in the fourth year of Table 2. This is due to a student population of 4,500 during the summer sessions. That number is probably close to the maximum possible students that the school could handle during the summer, considering faculty restrictions and desires for teaching during the summer. All of these numbers do not take into account that there are usually more than 7,500 students enrolled in the fall and winter semesters. Table 2 outlines a method of serving a full-time student body of more than 9,750. I have not taken into account any dropout rates for any of the attendance

tracks. I am going to assume that as the system matures, dropout rates could be predicted and offset by additional student admission.

CONSIDERATIONS TO CHANGE TO THE SYSTEM

1. *Assignment to a Track*—An initial modification to institute this 3-track system involves a method of assigning and following students in the three attendance tracks. The present random selection admission

system could be modified to assign some of the students to the alternate tracks. The same computer that is used for student registration could be programmed to follow the students assigned to the alternate tracks, and those students would not be allowed to register for the semester in which they are locked out.

Another important reason for identifying alternate track students involves a readmission policy of the college. Students who miss a fall or winter semester must re-apply to return to school. The policy would need to be modified in light of Track 2 and Track 3 students who would be required to bypass a major semester.

The college could make it clear that applicants who wish to be assigned to one of the alternate tracks could receive some type of preferential admission. What this preferential admission would involve needs to be included in application instructions.

2. *Financial Incentive*—Ford Stevenson was the chair of the Spring/Summer task force at BYU in 1993 that likewise considered increasing summer enrollment. He identified the three main reasons against summer attendance as finances, lack of curriculum offering, and student burn-out. His report stated that “The most important variable in whether students attend or not and how many hours they do take if they come is finances.” How much financial incentive is needed to make up for students not going home and earning money? Almost 1/4 indicated that a reduction of \$100 (from about \$750) would have a “great” influence in their decision to attend during the summer. The same survey indicated that almost 60% indicated that a \$200 decrease would have a “great” effect on whether they attended or not, and almost 86% of the students at BYU answered that a \$200 decrease in tuition would have a “moderate or great” influence on whether they would attend during the summer. Many students must work during the summer to pay for schooling, but significant numbers felt that the \$200 reduction would make it financially beneficial to put work aside and attend school instead.

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BYU set aside one million dollars for each of three summers to award as scholarship money to summer students. Even though this had an effect of increasing the summer attendance, the students also answered in the same survey that reduced tuition would be more likely to encourage them to attend summer school than would an increase in the number of scholarships.

Communication needs to take place with the students and parents long before the students arrive, pointing out to them that there could be large financial benefits if a student lives at home and works full time during the fall or winter semester when the majority of high-school and college students would not be available for full-time positions. If summer tuition were reduced, that would also provide financial encouragement.

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3. *Curriculum Offerings*—According to the earlier committee’s research, almost all subject areas will accommodate summer enrollment. “Most majors could be provided with some expansion of summer offerings with a 5 or 10 week commitment from the faculty.” About 25% of the student body in past years have not declared a major. Assigning general-studies students to the alternate tracks would also minimize the need for students to take sophomore-level classes during the summer, which would ease the demand on faculty during the summer.

Faculty teaching loads would necessarily increase if summer school increased. Secretarial and other staff support would need to be increased to meet the demands of additional students. The college would have to commit to additional pay for faculty, staff, and secretarial work. Steve Davis’ report said that the added tuition payments would more than cover this increased cost, but it was not clear if this coverage would include just faculty pay or also additional staff and secretarial support.

4. *Student/Parent Attitudes and Perceptions of Summer School*—The BYU committee minutes stated that “the only way to get freshman students here spring/summer is to get the students right from high school to attend summer.” The minutes further stated that after freshmen have attended school for a year, the vast majority would rather return home than stay to continue attending school.

Since the majority of the students that Ricks recruits are freshmen, a positive advertising campaign that emphasizes the benefits of summer attendance has to take place. Financial incentives, smaller class sizes, and desirable climactic conditions should be emphasized.

5. *Housing*—An increase in summer attendance would substantially impact the housing market. College housing informs me that current on- and off-campus housing is almost entirely filled each summer, with only 100-200 empty beds during any summer session. The scenario in Table 2 suggests that there would be 4,500 students during the summer months. Two thousand extra beds would be needed to accommodate the increase.

The Chamber of Commerce relates that the Sunbird program utilizes every apartment unit in those complexes which rent to Sunbirds. If new complexes are not built as more students attend during the summer, additional complexes must switch to students in place of renting to the Sunbirds. Chamber members feel that since the students pay more money, the apartment owners would probably prefer renting to students over Sunbirds. Chamber members also feel that although the Sunbirds probably spend more money on businesses such as restaurants, the overall financial impact on the business community would probably be minimal.

One large concern of apartment managers would be insufficient time for substantial cleaning at least once a year. With the current back-to-

back three-session summer, significant breaks between schooling periods are lacking. A look at affording more time during the summer session would be needed.

The students would be concerned with the apartment contracts in the new three-track system. Since over 1,000 students would be required to leave at the end of the fall semester, many would be stuck trying to sell rental contracts. Even though the assumption is that the Track 2 students would purchase these, it would be burdensome to require a significant number of students to enter a financial contract that the college would insist be prematurely terminated. Apartment managers would resist a change to semester contracts, since it is more financially secure to require a student to commit to 8 months rather than 4 months.

6. *Financial Commitment for Extra Social Activities*—Also of concern would be the importance in added social activities during the summer. This would require additional financial commitment from the college. Ford Stevenson related that students feel that social activities that they can participate in are much more important than any sports programs that they could attend.

The ASRC Student Activities department informs me that they have plenty of activities (at least a dance every weekend) during the summer, but since only the off-campus activities are even significantly attended, an increase in expenditures would have to take place to accommodate more students, particularly more travel accommodations and supervisors.

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RECOMMENDATION

Having studied the different difficulties involved in implementing the new three-track system, and realizing the advantages that some form of the system would have on increasing the total attendance at Ricks College, I would like to outline a recommendation that I feel would be of maximum benefit to the college with a minimum amount of hassle.

First of all, the college should consider providing financial incentives to attend during the summer. Summer tuition could be reduced and fall/ winter tuition could even be increased. Saving money during the summer has been shown to be the biggest motivation to attend summer school.

Next, Ricks College should advertise the financial incentive to prospective students, along with incentive for preferential admission to Ricks for volunteering to be assigned to one of other of the alternate tracks. Ricks could become an open-admissions school again with the stipulation that a student can always be accepted if he/she volunteers to skip a main semester and attend during the summer. The advertisement should remind parents and students of the advantage of students seeking full

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time work during the fall or winter when most other high-school and college students are attending school.

In order to make return to school easier for students in the alternate tracks, Ricks College needs to revise its readmission policy, at least for the alternate track students.

The on-campus and off-campus housing contracts need to be changed for the alternate track students. The off-campus housing owners need to agree that if a student can verify that he/she cannot attend during one of the main semesters, he/she should be allowed to sign a semester contract. ☺