

8 a.m. Classes, A Necessary Scourge

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It comes as news to no one that 8am classes are too early for some students.

A recent study published in *Frontiers of Neuroscience*, and [reported at NPR](#) finds that “the ideal start time would be more like 10 or 11am.” Most traditional-aged college students just aren't wired to be awake and productive at 8am.

Over the last sixteen years, I have taught an 8am class probably about 2/3rds of the semesters.

I like 8am classes. When I taught at Clemson I had a 45 minute commute and four sections crammed into a TTH schedule. Starting at 8am meant I could avoid traffic and finish up the day at a reasonable hour.

I don't mind getting up early and going to bed before 10pm. I'm basically worthless in terms of higher order thought after 6pm. My natural rhythms sync with 8am classes.

This is not true for many students. I became well-familiar with the research when a team of students in an 8am technical writing class tackled class scheduling for their group project. The genesis of their interest was their loathing of their 8am technical writing class, a section they felt they'd been conscripted into because of curricular requirements combined with a shortage of sections. For several, the choice was either take it at 8am or don't graduate.

Easy choice, but as their project – ultimately presented to the provost to no discernable effect – found, 8am courses are tremendously bad fits for cohorts of students who start their homework at 1am.

They also aren't much fun for instructors who are trying to teach these somnambulant students. More than once I resorted to some opening jumping jacks to get the blood pumping.

The mismatch between student and time can have serious negative consequences. I remember one student, a junior who still had not completed my required intro level gen ed course as a junior and could wait no longer. Under normal circumstances, being something of a creature of the night, who routinely went to bed after 4am, they scheduled all classes after 2:30pm. The student started *ending* the day with our 8am class, went to bed after, slept through the day and then got up for the afternoon classes.

It did not work great. Getting rid of 8am's would've been a real blessing to them.

But when I moved on to College of Charleston and once again taught 8am courses, I realized that 8am's are not quite the scourge I previously believed. For sure, there were some students who'd been conscripted into an early class, but there were far more who absolutely *needed* 8am classes.

In most cases, these students had things they needed to do later in the day (primarily work), and early classes solved a logistical hurdle. I've also taught far more “non-traditional” students at CofC, since unlike Clemson, the school is not an island separated from a larger population.

When students are parents, 8am classes may be vital.

The problem with 8am classes isn't so much about the hour itself as the priorities and values that dominate course scheduling.

“Efficiency” and maximization of resources perhaps are and must be the most important considerations. Many institutions are stretched to bursting and space must be utilized.

A second consideration I have witnessed – though I have no idea how widespread it might be – is the privilege of seniority, where those with the most years of service or greatest influence are allowed to pick time slots for themselves.

I suppose I'm agnostic on this provided it doesn't cause too many negative ripple effects for others. I do know that contingent faculty tend to get the leftovers, sometimes getting both early morning and late afternoon sections. One semester I had an adjunct colleague who taught at 8am and then at 3:30pm with night classes at the local community college to boot. She decided to put in a shift at a local coffee shop in that middle period. Making lemons out of lemonade, I guess.

One thing I'm confident of is that the schedule itself tends to be pretty static, the time slots and locations carried over one semester to the next, even as the instructors and students may change.

I'm curious how often schools examine this aspect of operations. Is it possible we need not only 8am classes, but also 7am classes? My wife's gym has a 5am spin class for early morning workers. I have to imagine at the right schools, extra early classes would fill. Extra late ones too, for that matter.

(Does this already exist somewhere?)

There should also be at least some priority to matching instructor and time, regardless of rank. Instructors who are night owls can have as hard a time as students. If college is oriented around learning, maybe putting the people who are engaged with learning in a position to succeed via a sensible schedule should be a consideration of at least equal importance to efficiency.

When I heard the words "college student," I'm as guilty of anyone of assuming 18-22 years old, single, primarily focused on school, but most institutions, particularly public ones, serve a far more diverse group.

Every so often, maybe we can pause and ask them what they need.