

# CTL Bulletin

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## Faculty Portrait:

**Dr. Suzanne Benson, ELAD & Coordinator Weekend Institute**

This is the second *CTL Bulletin* portrait of a faculty member on our campus. Our interview with Dr. Benson focuses on her role with NEIU's Weekend Institute for Professional Development, which she has directed since 2003. Dr. Benson has had a multi-faceted career that started as a high school English and swimming teacher. She then moved on to the College of DuPage, first with the Business and Professional Institute and then later as COD's Director of Development. Prior to coming to Northeastern as a faculty member in the Human Resource Development Program, Suzanne was the Executive Director of the Graduate School of Management at Lewis University. The following is a summary of Dr. Benson's responses to our questions.

### *What was the main idea behind creating the Weekend Institute at NEIU?*

Several faculty and administrators got together approximately six years ago with the purpose of providing another opportunity for NEIU students to have access to an education. The organizers felt this was needed because some of our non-traditional students cannot attend classes during weekdays or evenings; so the weekend seemed the logical alternative. Given the target student population, the Weekend Institute was established with two tracks: An Education Track that provides the *coursework* required for admittance to the College of Education and a Professional Track that is essentially business-related with courses selected to enhance students' skills in both business and organizational life. Having run a graduate business program that included five campus locations with evening and weekend courses before joining Northeastern, I had experience with this kind of programming and was asked to roll out this new initiative.

### *How has this program developed over the first three years of its existence?*

Originally we were held to a total of ten courses in each track that were offered at El Centro, the Center for Inner City Studies, and the Main Campus. These courses were taught on Friday evenings and Saturdays (8 a.m. to 5 p.m.) -- times that classrooms were underutilized. The model first had to prove its merit before we expanded our offerings. This fall, we were authorized to offer more courses and new formats. We are now offering the first two Sunday afternoon classes and have doubled our courses since the program began in the fall of 2004. At the combined locations, the program has served a *headcount* of almost 2500.

### *What's different about the Weekend Institute?*

The students that we are attracting to the Weekend Institute are adult learners, who don't have time or can't (for other reasons) attend college during the week. They may also be somewhat fearful of committing to college and the long time it takes to get a degree as part-time students. Attending classes during the weekend, where it does not conflict as much with these adults' other commitments helps overcome the

emotional hurdle for enrolling in college. Once they realize that they can be successful and balance family, work, and school, they continue (we hope) to that full degree. But, the Weekend Institute is not a fast-track program. Students still have to take all the hours and fulfill all the requirements that are required of all of our other traditional programs. We just provide more flexibility in course offerings.

### ***What do you mean by "flexibility"?***

In addition to the traditional once a week 2 hour and 40 minute format on the weekend, we try different time frames for our courses. Department Chairs and I discuss possible new formats, and then we try them out. We don't necessarily restrict ourselves to a 15-week semester and 160-minute class sessions. In the summer, we have tried an immersion approach with some classes: longer hours but fewer meeting times and will be offering more of these in the future. It's important to play with varying class hours rather than always staying with the pre-defined time slots that determine traditional courses during the week. One of our very successful offerings was a whole-day class (9 hours) on Saturdays for a total of five meetings; with one class session about every three weeks.

Myth 1: People will never take Friday evening (6:00 – 8:40) classes, or late Saturday afternoon (2:00 – 4:40) classes.  
Reality: Not true, classes in both these time slots have been very well attended.

Myth 2: People will not attend classes on Sunday (from 12:30 – 3:10). Reality: This fall was the first semester for these offerings, and these classes were also well attended.

### ***What about the faculty teaching these unconventional courses?***

The faculty members that teach on the weekends find it to be a very good experience. Faculty often have the same types of constraints that the students have. Being able to have alternate opportunities to teach is very positive for them. Many also enjoy the chance to try different formats for their courses! Of course, just as some students don't need or want to take courses on the weekend, some faculty don't want to teach during this time frame either.

### ***What do you see as the main hurdles for this program?***

The biggest hurdles of the Weekend Institute are: program awareness by prospective students, faculty, and staff; the willingness to try new and innovative programming by students and faculty; monetary issues; and infrastructure concerns. For example, as the program continues to grow it will be absolutely necessary to add program staff and enhanced student services; right now WI staff includes me and two graduate assistants working out of my faculty office.

The Registrar's Office with auxiliary services is open the first two or three Saturdays of each semester as is the Information Desk and the Bookstore, and three Saturdays are adequate for now. One or two department offices are open the first couple of Saturdays too, but it would be very helpful to have more of them open at the beginning of each semester – this might be the greatest need at this time. Students have many questions and concerns when the semester begins; the same that our traditional day students have – and everyone knows what the first week is like during the day. We need to have adequate offices and staffing to answer questions and assist our Weekend Students.

### ***What are your goals for this program in the next five years?***

Other Weekend Colleges/Institutes offer all their institution's General Education courses on the weekend. I would like to see that happen at Northeastern too, at least for most of the Gen-Ed courses. I would also like to continue with more creative programming, in particular more immersion-type programming. Eventually I would like to see full degrees offered on the weekend. But we won't try anything before we have done a needs and competitor analysis to make certain there is a need for specific new programs in the geographic area that we are serving. Students really are happy and some are actually thrilled that we have provided the additional courses and time frames for them – I want to see that continue and expand.