Early in my career at The University of Montana—Western, I noticed that by the second week of my introductory geology classes, approximately 30% of the students were no longer attending. One day, I overheard several students talking about their plan of action. “You go to the English class, you go to history, and I’ll go to psychology.” It was clear that students were able to divide the responsibility of their academic schedules because my colleagues and I only required them to memorize and regurgitate lecture notes. Even in labs, the canned exercises appeared to inspire the least amount of effort. Students were not active participants in their education; they had no ownership of their education, and our traditional approach instilled little passion for learning.

To kill the apathy, the faculty in the Environmental Sciences Department began to look for active-learning models to engage students in meaningful projects. We threw out the notion that students must know every factoid and term in the book. Unfortunately, as more of the faculty in the department used the longer blocks of time, scheduling conflicts arose. With the administration breathing down our necks, we found a time-tested model to eliminate the scheduling conflicts: teach one class at a time (OCAAT). OCAAT scheduling has worked well for Colorado College and a few other private liberal arts colleges, but it has never been tried at a public university in the United States. In fall 2001, The University of Montana—Western, led by GSA member Sheila Roberts, received a Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education grant from the Department of Education to try the OCAAT model. In fall 2002, 75 freshmen will take general education courses one at a time as the first test of this scheduling model at a public university in the United States. We plan to present the results of Western’s OCAAT experiment at the GSA 2003 Annual Meeting in Seattle.

Alternative scheduling turned out to be the way to overcome our primary obstacle to incorporating experiential learning into the geology curriculum. However, there must be many other solutions to this problem, and we encourage interested colleagues to join us in generating a symposium or session on this topic for the GSA 2003 Annual Meeting. If you are interested, please contact me at r_thomas@umwestern.edu.

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