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QUARTERS or SEMESTERS SHOULD UCLA SWITCH TRACKS?

UCLA is like a modern metroliner train speeding down sleek tracks, with many stops and much variety along the way. For about 40 years, UCLA has customized and perfected the ride along these quarter tracks, making it smoother, faster, more agile, technological, stream-lined, challenging and efficient. To change tracks involves reconsidering every aspect of the educational ride from curriculum to majors to units. If a college is starting up, the decision about academic track is more straightforward. But if a university has been on quarters or semesters for decades, it is a different matter entirely. No one would want to make a change of this magnitude without a clear rationale. And yet, debate over this issue for the last 50 years or so points to shifting personal preferences more than evidence or proof that one academic calendar is better than another. Cost analyses of semesters vs quarters have shown that there are no compelling cost savings to either track. The major financial effect of switching to semesters may be a slight drop in book sale profits because fewer courses are offered on a two semester track. More importantly, there are no identifiable educational reasons to choose one academic calendar over the other. Both the semester and quarter tracks end up at the same destination with roughly the same educational experience within the same timeframe.

Why then the endless debate about switching tracks? At the University of Minnesota, the faculty debated changing back to the Semester-Track for 25 years without resolution. In the end, the decision was made for them. The legislature voted for the change, and the Board of Trustees confirmed the decision. At UC the debate has been going on even longer because of the nostalgia factor. The days before 1966, are perceived as golden, when the UC train was firmly on the Semester-Track and achieved a high quality education for students and a high record of excellence in research for faculty, especially at UCLA and Berkeley. Those were the days when one classroom hour was equivalent to one credit; most courses met for three hours each week and carried 3 credits. Students needed 120 units or 40 courses to graduate in 4 years, taking 5 courses each semester. The UC train had become highly customized to this Semester-Track and exploited its potential to offer courses in-depth within a longer semester framework and minimize bureaucracy with two start-ups a year.

In 1966 UC decided to switch tracks. They did so not because of a conviction in educational value but because the state legislature and the University administrators believed that quarters would utilize university facilities more economically on a year-round schedule. A 1966 University pamphlet stated: "Had there been clear evidence of the educational superiority of one calendar over the other, this one factor would have been determining. However... after extensive study ...there was no such evidence. Consequently, the decision to switch calendars was made 'to accommodate a greater number of students and to make more economical use of University facilities'" (<http://chancellor.ucdavis.edu/resource>). But in the late sixties state budget constraints as well as student and faculty resistance to a full summer term worked against implementing year-round education. The chief reason for changing tracks had proven no reason at all within

three years of the conversion when the summer quarter was dropped. Ironically, now there is more interest at UC in year-round education when the university is contemplating a conversion to semesters.

In the years after the decision was made to switch tracks at UC, both UCLA and Berkeley faculty reconsidered the academic calendar over and over because both campuses associated the introduction of the quarter system in Fall 1966 with the beginning of undesirable trends in American higher education: in particular, a weakening of major and other core requirements, a decline in student workload, a tendency towards course proliferation, grade inflation, increasing use of pass/fail grading, and a general decline in the rigor of student programs. Re-uniting also meant that students got more credit for taking fewer courses, and the old gold-standard of one hour of teaching for every unit of credit no longer held.

Both campuses tried to fix these problems by returning to the Semester-Track. UCLA faculty voted in Feb. 1972 to convert back to semesters, but the change never happened. UC wanted to keep all campuses on the same track. Faculty at UCLA voted again in 1976 to convert to semesters. This ten-year mark might have been the turning point. It took UCLA ten years to adjust to the change in academic calendar. During this decade many faculty may have longed for the days before the switch when educational values were high, but another vote in 1977 came out in favor of quarters. By this time labs and classrooms were built for the quarter system. This huge educational enterprise with its multiple divisions within L&S and professional schools as well as a medical school and a hospital, Extension and Overseas programs, had begun to exploit the opportunities of the Quarter-Track: more courses, shorter timeframe, possible sequencing of quarters, easier sabbatical planning, more opportunity to combine quarters for research. By 1977 the debate at UCLA was essentially over. Although there would always be a certain pro-semester sentiment, the majority of faculty preferred to stay on the quarter track.

Berkeley faculty also longed for the old days on the Semester-Track. They, like the UCLA faculty, voted overwhelmingly to change back to semesters in 1976, but they didn't change their mind a few years later. In 1983 Berkeley was allowed to switch back to semesters, but the faculty found a different train on a familiar old track. Conditions had changed, and a switch back to semesters was not necessarily the answer to declining academic values. By 1997, the Berkeley faculty may have begun to realize what had happened. The Davis faculty conducted a poll of Berkeley faculty to see if they would advise Davis to switch back to semesters. The majority of the Berkeley faculty said no, and the Davis faculty voted against switching tracks.

Many Berkeley faculty were undecided in this poll, which demonstrates so clearly why the debate over semesters vs quarters surfaces so often: both tracks have enough elasticity to turn most pro's into con's and con's into pro's, depending on personal preference and experience. A semester track can be nearly parallel to a quarter track or miles and miles apart, depending on the way faculty and administrators set up departments and programs and construct curriculum. That's why personal preference plays such a large role in the debate over academic calendar. There aren't any answers to which track is better; there are only majority preferences.

By first looking at some background material and then a little more closely at two faculty polls, one conducted by the UCLA Faculty Association in Feb. 2003, and one by a faculty member at

UC Davis in 1997 to gauge the opinions of UC Berkeley faculty about conversion, the UCLA FA hopes provide some information to faculty who will vote on this old issue once again this May.

National Conversion Trend

In the last decade many universities have converted to semesters. Conversion in so many would appear to be driven primarily by the belief in these administrative cost savings with semesters:

- higher teaching load
- fewer courses offered to more students in larger classes
- one less administrative start up with semesters

And faculty who have experienced a switch in academic calendars believe that conversion forced long-overdue curriculum revision. Periodically, universities need this kind of infra-structure analysis and renewal.

Shorter Semesters Begin to Look like Quarters

Quarters are generally 10 weeks, and students take 3 terms a year and study for 30 weeks. At UC, this translates into 146 days of instruction. The length of semesters can vary considerably. Berkeley now has 146 days of instruction, but the new length of the semester proposed for this campus is 140 days, 14 weeks per semester, or 28 weeks per year. The University of Virginia has 138 days of instruction, 13.8 weeks per semester, and 27.6 weeks per year. The semester at Harvard is 125 days, 12.5 weeks per semester, and 25 weeks per year. Princeton has 120 days, 12 weeks per semester, and 24 weeks per year. Only 2 weeks of instruction separates the Princeton semesters from the UCLA quarter.

Decline in Student Workload Means Decline in State Funding

During the past 11 years at UCLA, there has been a decline in annual undergraduate Student Credit Hours (SCH). Students taking fewer courses take a longer time to graduate. Only 49% of undergraduates entering UCLA in 1995 graduated 4 years later, but 83 % graduated within 5 years (<http://www.senate.ucla.edu/calendar/>). The percentages are lower for underrepresented students: only 32% graduated within 4 years, 67% within 5. At Berkeley they found that after converting to the semester system in Fall 1983, students had gotten used to the 3-course load of the quarter system and did not want to take 4 or 5 courses a semester, especially at the lower division. When students take only 3 courses, they usually don't earn enough credits a year (30) to graduate in 4 years. But with one less course per semester, they can graduate in 5 years. This decline in student workload results in lower state funding because the state pays UC a set amount per student FTE. After converting to semesters, Berkeley had to enroll more students overall to make up for the decline in student workload. Many Berkeley faculty in favor of the conversion in 1983 were disgruntled to find themselves teaching a larger number of students in the semester system than the quarter system.

AP Credits Can Cause Decline in State Funding

The rise in the number of AP credits students bring with them as they enter UC as freshman can also affect the academic calendar. In 1983 fewer than 40% of new freshmen at UC Berkeley brought in AP units, whereas now over 80% carry some form of AP credit. The average number

of AP units is 20-25. This fact not only affects assignment of class level, it can make the difference whether students take 3 or 4 courses per semester. Those who prefer to take fewer courses can use AP units to make up the difference. Others just take longer to graduation. In any case, the result of students taking fewer units is a proportional decrease in state funding for the University unless it is offset by enrolling more students. The “AP” effect is felt more in a semester system because 1/3 fewer courses are offered (See the discussion by K. R. Wahl, Office of Student Research, UC, Berkeley, Jan. 28, 2000 available at [osr.berkeley.edu/Public/Staffweb /KW/ class.level.folder/leveldef.pdf](http://osr.berkeley.edu/Public/Staffweb/KW/class.level.folder/leveldef.pdf)).

Research

During the past few years, many faculty at UCLA have used the flexibility of the quarter system to extend the time available for research. They concentrate their 4 course teaching load in two quarters, and then focus on research, service, and tutorial teaching during a third, “in-residence” quarter. When this in-residence quarter is combined with the summer quarter, faculty can gain an extended six-month period July-December or April-September. The UCLA Senate academic calendar report notes that during 1999-00, 1,054 faculty FTE were salaried and active (not on leave) on the General Campus at UCLA, and 30% of these faculty had one quarter (or more) with no primary teaching (p. 32). This percentage shows that not all departments allow the 2-2-0-0 academic year, and not all faculty prefer this stacked teaching pattern when it is available.

From the comments UCLA faculty made on the FA email poll, it is clear that creating a 2-2-0-0 teaching distribution is highly desirable to some faculty both for its research potential and its reduction of course start-ups to 2 per academic year. When it is allowed, faculty see it as the (or one of the) major advantages of the quarter system; when it is not allowed, faculty comment on the inconvenience of three course start-ups in the quarter calendar. At Berkeley before the conversion to semesters, stacking quarters was not widespread. If it had been so, some Berkeley faculty report that they would not have supported the conversion to the semester system (<http://www.agecon.ucdavis.edu/Faculty/Quirino.P/Paris2.htm>).

Teaching Load

Workload neutrality under a semester system would mean that faculty would typically teach 3 courses in an academic year ($4.6 \times 2/3$, where 4.6 is the number of quarter courses taught annually and $2/3$ converts the quarter courses to semesters). Many UCLA faculty are worried that despite this assumption of workload neutrality in the discussion of converting to semesters, there will be an increase in teaching load under a semester system. One UCLA Faculty Association member described this potential drawback to the semester system as, “A serious increase in workload, particularly teaching load. When Berkeley converted, its faculty, on average, taught more, and is trying feebly to work back toward a less disadvantageous situation. There is absolutely no chance that our teaching load would be reduced through a shift, and an overwhelming likelihood that it would be increased.” At Berkeley, the teaching load is 3.87 on a semester system, which converts to 5.8 courses on a quarter system (3.87×1.5 where 1.5 equates Berkeley’s semester data with the quarter system), higher than the 4.6 teaching load figure mandated by the state and higher than the predicted workload for UCLA faculty under the semester system.

Graduate Education

Many professors cite the advantages of the longer semester for graduate level work. Clearly, it is difficult for graduate students to develop a topic, do the research in a heavily used library, and write a paper all within ten weeks. Yet these benefits are also offset by one clear advantage to the quarter system in graduate programs: greater variety of courses offered. Over the past 40 years that UCLA has been on the quarter system, graduate programs have geared themselves to the flexibility of the quarter system and developed many fairly specialized courses taught by a variety of faculty. It is difficult for departments to think of changing to a system that requires fewer, more comprehensive courses taught by fewer faculty.