

Equity Semester:

I want to start at the beginning for me:

I moved to LPC from a college in Colorado which had 15 week semesters. When I talked to my old colleagues and told them that my new school had 18 week semesters, the response was fairly universal: Are you crazy? That's crazy!!!

Why is this crazy? Burnout: students and faculty are losing motivation late in the semester. College is challenging in the best of circumstances. It appears that we are making an educational experience harder than it needs to be.

In addition: I've had students who wanted to sign up for LPC, but contacted me a couple of weeks after the semester has started. Initially, I thought these potential students just needed to be more aware of how signing up for college works. With further consideration, I'm realizing that normally college doesn't start in mid August, and that mid-August is a perfectly normal time to be asking about classes. We are likely missing out on lots of students because they're ambushed by an early start date.

There are other practical considerations. An 18 week semester results in 1 month more of class time, annually, than a 16 week semester. This is 1 month's worth of income which is unavailable for students who work. Many of our students are struggling financially, we are creating a major opportunity cost with this longer semester. Imagine for yourself what losing a month's worth of income would feel like. Now imagine that you're making a fraction of your current salary in one of the most expensive regions of the entire planet (and it ain't getting any cheaper, if you hadn't noticed).

Most colleges in the country have a semester which are much shorter than 18 weeks. If they can do a great job teaching the same content in a shorter time, we should be up to the task.

A group of us in the Senate started doing some research into this issue. Thankfully, a variety of colleges have posted their own research and results, so we don't have to start from scratch.

These are some of the things I found out through both my research from items posted by Santa Rosa Junior College and some email conversations with LPC faculty:

In the Student Attendance Accounting Manual, Title 5, Section #55701 which states that an academic year may not be less than 32 weeks per year. This means that a semester may not be scheduled for less than 16 weeks.

As professors, we're mandated to work 175 days, which means that for every week we decrease our semester, we need to make up that balance with FLEX time. This will be a big adjustment.

Scheduling classes at LPC will have to be adjusted. One strategy is to change how often classes are offered. Instead of twice a week, three times a week might be the way to go.

Almost all colleges on 16 week schedule have a winter session. This allows for more classes, and adds to equity of adjunct professors; younger/newer part timers are a more diverse bunch of people, and it gives them more potential for teaching.

“Beachler, J. (2003, April). Results of the Alternative Calendar Survey: A survey of the faculty, classified staff and administrators at California community colleges that have moved from an 18-week semester to a compressed calendar.”

- It was found at the City College of SF with students studying English, Math, and ESL did better when they had more hours per week with a given discipline, rather than a longer drawn out set of times. This was termed a higher “intensity” of learning.

- Shorter terms equate to higher student success. It was also found that students who took more of the same discipline classes at the same time did better in that discipline.

“The Academic Senate for California Community Colleges. (2000, April). Alternative calendars: Recommendations and a progress report.”

- Based on the experiences of two colleges who transitioned right before year 2000. Both Santa Monica and Riverside Colleges reported on their results.

This Document poses a series of questions and considerations when a shorter semester is being evaluated.

A quote from this document: “California’s changing demographics also encourage examination of alternative calendars as a mechanism to accommodate students affected by changes in the welfare law, technology, workplace demands, and career changes necessitated by corporate downsizing. As evidenced by the offerings of proprietary and private schools, many students today seek an alternative to the traditional school calendar of 18 weeks.”

Advantages:

- later start may encourage greater enrollment;
- preferred by many students;
- allows for three intersessions, including two summer sessions;
- allows completion of three semesters' work in one year;
- fewest weeks taught in hottest weather;
- three intersessions may, depending upon negotiations, permit three opportunities for part time professors.
- is closest to many unified school district calendars

- has longer break between two primary (or longest) semesters; and
- lengthened class sessions means no overall class time lost.
- full-time faculty may elect to teach their load in any two of the three, or may teach fewer courses in all three terms;
- is particularly favored by faculty seeking to do post-graduate work at another institutions.

Disadvantages:

- increases faculty contact hours per day, though because the semester is shortened as noted above, the total instructional time remains the same;
- spring semester ends in early June;
- assignments for counselors, librarians and certain classified positions must be carefully reconsidered and perhaps redesigned;
- some special programs and activities (nursing, vocational experiences, athletics, etc) may need to be specially scheduled beyond the shortened semester; and
- increased registration and grade collection periods may necessitate additional classified staffing or complex scheduling; offers fewest number of final exam days (5).

• At some colleges, the handling of flex hours is the most problematic. These calendars favor distribution of flex days or opportunities throughout the year as opposed to a concentrated period preceding the semester as often occurs. Santa Monica, for example has negotiated a single mandated flex day that precedes the start of the fall term.

Would all Colleges in a Multi-college District Have to Agree on a Single Calendar?

No. In fact, an argument could be made that multiple options within a district would increase student options and attract more students to the district as a whole. An alternative calendar may provide a competitive edge to a college in a multi-campus district or in an urban area with neighboring districts. This versatility will be seen, for example, in 2000-2001 within the Los Angeles Community College District. Pierce College, Los Angeles Valley College, and Los Angeles City College have adopted a calendar with a 15-week primary term; West LA College has chosen a 16-week primary term, and all others will remain on an 18-week primary term calendar. In this instance, the negotiated contract permits such options for the contract period and was decided upon first by the local college faculty within a shared governance framework and then was agreed to by the bargaining unit and the chapter chair.

Lets be honest here – if Chabot want to join us, that’s great. But it looks like we don’t need to hitch our wagon to that college with regards to scheduling.

Travenick, Ron. The Ohlone Story.

This document gives an overview of Ohlone's process- they did their transition in a year! I'm sure they had the exact same issues that we might have, but they got it done.

More Thoughts:

In getting feedback with those who are helping with the issue of a compressed calendar, it appears that one of the biggest obstacles to making this happen at LPC is the scheduling of science labs.

For math, the scheduling issue is computer lab rooms, but that is potentially less of an issue now that Building 1000 is open.

Chris Dudzik who is part of the Senate was at DVC when they switched to 16 weeks and said it was a tough transition, and there is effectively less overall lab time.

It sounds to me like the lab situation is bursting at the seams as it is. I'm not familiar with the science labs, but it may be a case where LPC needs to figure out a way to alleviate some of that pressure – possibly find some courses where the lab situation or materials aren't as expensive, and add them to some spaces so that quality of lab time isn't compromised. Do all the classes need exhaust hoods?

At the end of the day, the science department at DVC appears to be doing fine.

There was some discussion about needing to offer courses that end up on weekends. If there's a demand for that kind of thing amongst our student population, and somebody wants to teach on weekends, then that's a great thing to discuss. Personally, I wouldn't want weekend classes imposed on a department unless it's really a great thing for students/departments.

While I understand that shifting to a compressed calendar poses a variety of challenges, at the end of the day I'm of the opinion that this is something that can be done and should be done. From what I've read, and from my conversations with other professors and students, it's the best thing for our student population, which should remain our highest priority.

I think the issue of compressing our calendar is a matter of will. There is certainly more to discuss, but as far as I can tell the pros for a compressed calendar vastly outweigh the cons, which seem mostly logistical and bureaucratic in nature. One thing I love about teaching at a community college is the constant conversation about how we can help our students. We are constantly asking ourselves: What do our students need? How do we help our students succeed? It appears to me that a compressed calendar will benefit our students and is therefore something worth making a priority.