Transitioning from Quarters to Semesters: Associated Structural Changes and Implementation Considerations

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I. METHODOLOGY & RESEARCH PARAMETERS

Sources
- Advisory Board’s internal and online (www.advisory.com) research libraries
- Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) http://www.eric.ed.gov

Additional Reading
- Ohio University transition materials: http://www.ohio.edu/provost/q2s.cfm (Ohio University is currently undergoing the transition from quarters to semesters and is not profiled in this brief)

Research Parameters
- Several of the institutions profiled in this brief transitioned from quarters to semesters over ten years ago; therefore, in some instances, contacts at these universities were unable to recall specific details of the conversion.
- University E followed University A’s model when transitioning to semesters. Both institutions are profiled in this brief.
### A Guide to Universities Profiled in this Brief

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Enrollment (total/ undergraduate)</th>
<th>Approximate Year of Conversion from Quarters to Semesters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University A</td>
<td>Rural; Fringe</td>
<td>46,045/36,072</td>
<td>1992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University B</td>
<td>Town; Remote</td>
<td>14,515/12,816</td>
<td>1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University C</td>
<td>City; Large</td>
<td>24,434/17,964</td>
<td>2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University D</td>
<td>City; Midsize</td>
<td>16,246/10,796</td>
<td>2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University E</td>
<td>City; Large</td>
<td>19,767/16,527</td>
<td>1997</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: National Center for Education Statistics; Council interviews
II. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Project Challenge

The requesting member institution, a public university located in the Midwest, is preparing to transition from an academic calendar organized by quarters to one that is organized by semesters. The member approached the Council with the following questions for other institutions that had completed the process of transitioning from quarters to semesters:

- How did other institutions restructure teaching loads, course offerings, and classroom space utilization when they transitioned to a semester schedule?
- Did other universities find it necessary to hire additional faculty as a result of the transition?
- Did other institutions experience a spike and/or drop in student enrollments proceeding or after the transition?
- What were the most costly aspects of the conversion process?
- What are the broad implementation considerations/challenges that a university should be aware of when beginning the transition process?

Key Observations and Recommendations:

While contacts stated that the total number of students enrolled at their institutions did not change as a result of the transition, at some contact institutions junior and senior students did increase their course loads slightly in the terms just prior to the conversion. Contacts attributed this small increase to students’ efforts to graduate before the switch to semesters occurred.

Despite the rise in students’ course loads pre-transition, the majority of contact institutions advised that they did not find it necessary to make significant structural changes—such as increasing classroom space, hiring additional faculty, or restructuring teaching loads—in order to accommodate these students. Instead, students’ increased course loads were accommodated through slightly higher class sizes in select courses. In general, contacts stated that their faculty and space needs remained relatively constant throughout the transition.

With the exception of offering bridge courses during the first year of the semester schedule, contact universities did not need to increase the number of course offerings during the transition. In fact, several contacts explain that it is common for universities to decrease the number of offerings following a conversion because faculty and administrators take advantage of the “culture of change” on campus and evaluate curricular offerings, merge similar courses, and eliminate others.

Contact institutions did not incur significant costs due to the transition from quarters to semesters. In general, contacts commented that the most costly aspects of the transition resulted from additional changes on campus that purposefully coincided with the conversion (e.g., implementing a new student information system).

In order to ensure a successful transition from quarters to semesters, it is essential to engage faculty in the transition process. All contacts agree that it is important for faculty to participate in the conversion and stay informed of impending changes. Common ways to encourage faculty participation include asking faculty members to sit on transition committees and tasking departments (as opposed to university-level administrators) with making the necessary curricular revisions. In addition, faculty buy-in can be achieved by giving faculty opportunities to ask questions and provide informal input, and by educating faculty about the benefits of the semester system.

Educating students about how the transition will affect the curriculum and financial aid is crucial to the success of the conversion. Contacts suggest beginning to discuss the changes with students as early as three-years prior to the transition. Strategies include holding one-on-one meetings between students and advisers and publishing extensive materials about the transition in (e.g., creating transition-specific newsletters, submitting information to the student newspaper, and sending information to students at home during the summer months).
### Structural Changes

The tables below outline the changes that the universities made when converting from quarters to semesters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>Average Student Course Load</th>
<th>Total Credit Hours Required to Graduate (undergrad)</th>
<th>Academic Credits per Course</th>
<th>Increase in Course Offerings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University A</td>
<td>Quarters: 15 credits per term</td>
<td>Quarters: 180 credit hours</td>
<td>Quarters: 3 credits</td>
<td>No—the number of courses offerings decreased</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Semesters: 15 credits per term</td>
<td>Semesters: 120 credit hours</td>
<td>Semesters: Gen ed. and sequence courses are 4 credits. All other courses are worth 3 or 4 credits (determined at the departmental level)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University B</td>
<td>Quarters: 16 credits per term</td>
<td>Quarters: 196 credit hours</td>
<td>Quarters: 4 credits</td>
<td>No—some departments redesigned curriculum, leading to a decrease in offerings; in general, the amount of course offerings remained constant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Semesters: 16 credits per term</td>
<td>Semesters: 124 credit hours</td>
<td>Semesters: 3 or 4 credits (Faculty can choose between offering 3 or 4 credit courses. Most choose to continue offering 4 credit courses)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University C</td>
<td>Quarters: 16 credits per term</td>
<td>Quarters: 176 credit hours</td>
<td>Quarters: 4 credits</td>
<td>No—the number of courses offerings decreased</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Semesters: 16 credits per term</td>
<td>Semesters: 128 credit hours</td>
<td>Semesters: 4 credits</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University D</td>
<td>Quarters: 12 credit per term</td>
<td>Quarters: 120 credit hours</td>
<td>Council unable to obtain this information</td>
<td>Council unable to obtain this information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Semesters: 12 credit per term</td>
<td>Semesters:** 120 credit hours</td>
<td>**Under the quarter calendar at University D, credit hours were tracked by semester hours as well, so the transition did not cause the total number of credit hours needed to graduate to change</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University E</td>
<td>Quarters: 15.5 credits per term</td>
<td>Quarters: 186 credit hours</td>
<td>Quarters: 4 or 5 credits</td>
<td>No—the number of courses offerings decreased</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Semesters: 15.5 credits per term</td>
<td>Semesters: 124 credit hours</td>
<td>Semesters: 3 or 4 credits</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* University C is a cooperative education school, making the undergraduate experience five years long. Under the quarter system, after the completion of the first-year, students rotated between a quarter on campus and a quarter on co-op. When University C converted to semesters, the institution also transitioned to a more typical academic schedule with 8 semesters. However, converting from 11 quarters to 8 semesters resulted in an unusual conversion ratio.

**Under the quarter calendar at University D, credit hours were tracked by semester hours as well, so the transition did not cause the total number of credit hours needed to graduate to change.
## III. Structural Changes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>Teaching Load</th>
<th>Hired Additional Faculty?</th>
<th>Faculty Vote to Determine Conversion</th>
<th>Faculty Satisfaction?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| University A | Quarters: 2x2x2 (6 credits per term)  
Semesters: 2x2 (6-8 credits per term) | No; However, contacts comment that the university hired additional advisers during the transition | Yes | Contacts comment that the transition was not contentious and faculty understand the benefits of the semester schedule |
| University B | Quarters: 3x3x3 (12 credits per term)  
Semesters: 3x3 or 3x4 (12 credits per term) | No | No | Contacts did not comment on faculty satisfaction levels |
| University C | Quarters: 2x2x2 (8 credits per term)  
Semesters: 2x2 (8 credits per term) | No | No | Contacts report faculty have a high level of satisfaction with the transition |
| University D | Quarters: Information not available  
Semesters: 12 credits per semester (for a faculty member whose primary responsibility is teaching) | No | No | Contacts report faculty have a high level of satisfaction with the transition |
| University E | Teaching load varies between departments. Faculty members’ union contract stipulates that their time must be allocated by the following parameters:  
- Teaching: 40% to 70%  
- Research: 20% to 40%  
- Service: 10% to 30% | No; In some cases additional faculty were hired, but it wasn’t on a “wholesale” scale | Yes | Contacts comment that due to internal politics the initial vote by the faculty senate did not pass; however, the senate did pass the transition plan that was written by a committee of faculty members |

### Space Considerations

While it is common for upperclassman to increase their course load during the terms prior to the transition in order to graduate before the transition, in general, these increases were not so significant that contact institutions needed to increase classroom space, course offerings, or teaching loads to accommodate students. For example, at University C, the institution was able to account for the increase in students’ course loads by increasing class sizes by approximately three students per class. Similarly, University E experienced some class size increases, but not on a broad scale.
IV. IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

Implementation Considerations

Over the course of research, several overarching areas emerged as the most important for universities to focus on when converting from quarters to semesters. The information in this section outlines each of these areas.

Gaining Faculty Buy-in

All contacts stress that gaining faculty buy-in to the semester conversion is essential for a successful transition. Below are several strategies universities employed to engage faculty in the transition.

- **Involve faculty members on transition committees:** Including faculty members on transition committees signals that the change is not being imposed upon the faculty but instead that they are leading the effort, which helps faculty to buy-in to the process. For example, the transition steering committee at University A was chaired by a professor and included several additional faculty members. At University D, transition subcommittees were heavily comprised of faculty. Committees included:
  - Calendar Committee
  - Communication Committee
  - Core Curriculum Committee
  - Unified Curriculum Committee
  - Student Advising Committee
  - Information Systems Committee

- **Charge academic departments with curricular revisions:** Asking faculty members to restructure departmental curriculum in order to comply with the guidelines of the semester system gives faculty control over the processes and therefore aids in garnering faculty acceptance of the conversion.

  **Spotlight: University E**

  Under the quarter system at University E, several departments had two-course sequences, which could not be reduced by the necessary 2/3 to convert to a semester schedule (converting a two-course sequence to the semester system would lead to sequence that was one and one-third courses). The university allowed each department to decide to round up from 1 1/3 and continue to offer two courses or to round down and condense the sequence into one course. This freedom of choice placed faculty in control of their department’s curriculum thereby increasing their satisfaction with the conversion process.

- **Recognize faculty members’ contributions to the conversion process:** Small acts of recognition help to keep faculty motivated throughout the transition process. For example, at appropriate times faculty members at University C were thanked for their efforts with a note and/or small gift. University E took recognition a step further and recognized faculty with a monetary bonus or course release. Details of this recognition program are outlined in the table below:
Gaining Faculty Buy-in through Incentivizing Participation

**Background:** Each department at University E had one or two faculty members who oversaw the development of their department’s transition plan. Derived from this pool of departmental coordinators, each college had a faculty committee that oversaw the college’s transition. Finally, out of the pool of faculty on the college-level committees, there was university-wide committee of faculty members that lead the transition at the institutional level. Below is the incentive structure for each level of committee.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Faculty Committee</th>
<th>Incentive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Department</td>
<td>$1,500 or one course release</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>Additional course release in addition to that given for duty at the departmental level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>Paid over summer months in addition to course releases afforded through participation on other transition committees</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Educate faculty about the benefits of a semester versus quarter schedule:** University C educated their faculty about the following benefits of the semester system:
  1. Fewer “start-ups” and “shut-downs” per year (resulting in less exam preparation, for example)
  2. Working on a calendar that is comparable to other universities makes it more feasible to attend conferences throughout the academic year
  3. The opportunity to create a course that involves experiential learning (under the quarter system, there are not enough weeks to cover academic material and engage in learning outside of the classroom)
IV. IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

Educating Students about the Transition

For a successful transition, students must be educated about the ways the transition will affect them and the steps they should take to prepare for the semester schedule. Below is an overview of several steps universities took to educate and guide students through the transition.

- Help students understand how classes and course requirements change under the semester system: Many universities published a workbook listing each course offered at the university and how each course would change as a result of the conversion. The table below is an excerpt from the “Degree Planning Workbook” at University D:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quarter Course</th>
<th>Hrs</th>
<th>Conversion Notes</th>
<th>Semester Course</th>
<th>Hrs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SPA 101: Introductory Spanish</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Students who do not complete the SPA 101-102 sequence under quarters will be required to take SPA 101 under semesters</td>
<td>SPA 101: Introductory Spanish</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPA 102: Introductory Spanish</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Develop bridge opportunities that allow students to complete sequence courses after the transition: While students should be encouraged to complete sequences prior to the conversion or wait to begin these courses until after the semester schedule begins, it is not uncommon for students to be in the middle of a sequence at the time of the transition. Two strategies to “bridge” these gaps are outlined below:

  **Transitioning Students Enrolled in Sequence Courses**

  **Develop Bridge Classes:** For the first semester following the transition to semesters, several universities, including University A, continued to offer sequence courses as they were organized under the quarter system (most commonly the third of a three-course sequence continued to be offered). University A continued to offer specific transition courses under the quarter system because, without this opportunity students taking the last course in a sequence under the semester system could end up repeating information that they learned in a previous course.

  **Allow Students to Enroll in the Last 1/3 of Semester Sequence Courses:** University E created transition courses that were offered during the first year of the semester schedule. (Transition courses were typically the second course of a two-course sequence under the semester system, and therefore covered material that was previously taught in the second and third course of a three-course sequence under the quarter system.) The benefit of transition classes was that students who had completed the first and second sequence courses under the quarter system were allowed to join the transition class after the first exam, and therefore only enroll in the last 1/3 of the course. This meant that students did not have to repeat already learned information and were in class only when new material (that of the third sequence course) was covered.

It should be noted that one contact institution found it possible to convert to a semester schedule without creating bridge or transition courses. Contacts at University D explain that, as a result of a successful education campaign, students planned their sequence courses accordingly (completing the sequence prior to the transition or beginning after the transition) and the university did not have to offer bridge classes.
IV. IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

Educating Students about the Transition (cont’d.)

- **Make students aware of how the conversion to semesters will affect tuition:** Students are often dismayed to see the increase in the amount of tuition dollars they pay under the semester versus quarter system (this phenomenon was described by one contact as “sticker shock”). While the total cost of education does not change, students who transition to a semester schedule at a university that charges a flat rate tuition are suddenly asked to pay tuition in two increments as opposed to three, resulting in more dollars being paid at a time. Similarly, students at universities that charge per credit hour will pay one-and-a-half times as much per credit hour under the semester system than they paid under the quarter system. One contact cautions that universities that charge by the credit hour may lose money each fiscal year because many students who were enrolled as full-time students decide not to take a full course load every semester in order to reduce incremental tuition costs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spotlight: University D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To educate students about the changes to tuition bills, University D created an online calculator that allowed students to calculate how the cost of semester tuition would affect their monthly budget. This prepared students for the financial changes associated with the transition and, as a result, students did not reduce the number of credit hours they took per semester.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(In addition, the university created a “time to degree” calculator so that students could determine when they could expect to graduate as well as a “study time calculator” to help students budget their time under the new academic schedule.)

- **Continuously remind students about the transition:** In addition to the educational tools mentioned above, contacts described numerous methods for communicating information about the transition to students. University C had a full-time staff member to coordinate the various methods of communication, which included:
  - The university website
  - Dedicated transition newsletters
  - Information printed in the student newspaper
  - Information printed in the university newspaper
  - Meetings with student reporters
  - Post-cards sent to students at home over the summer
  - Orientation information sessions
  - Two meetings with almost every department on campus

- **“Err on the side of students:”** Due to changes in course credit, and as a result of general confusion associated with converting from quarters to semesters, all contacts agree that universities making the transition should “err on the side of the student” when giving credit and working through conversion issues that may arise. For example, University E tended to round students’ course credits up to ensure that they could stay on track to graduate. Additionally, University E had a designated grievance committee to address student complaints about the transition process (about financial aid or mis-advisement, for example). Similarly, University C dedicated a staff member to addressing student complaints; this staff member was given full power to solve student issues in any way he saw fit. Interestingly, though Universities E and C instilled processes to address student grievances related to the transition, University E did not have a single student compliant and University C had very few.)
IV. IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

Planning for the Transition

- Allow sufficient time to plan for the transition: Contacts agree that the most successful transitions occur over several years, with three years emerging as a common timeframe (note: University E completed a successful transition in closer to two years). University C structured the conversion process around the following timeline:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year One</th>
<th>Revised and re-wrote curriculum in each college/department</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year Two</td>
<td>Approved curriculum at the university level and developed transfer plans for each class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year Three</td>
<td>Advised students - the university’s goal was to have every student sign a transfer contract that outlined their academic path under the semester schedule</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Note: Not all institutions re-write curriculum during the transition; contacts at University C explained that the conversion from quarters to semesters gave them the ideal opportunity to do so).

Beginning the transition process several years in advance also allows administrators time to schedule events such as athletic games, summer session, and commencement in keeping with the new schedule.

**Additional Considerations**

In addition to the broader implementation considerations noted above, contacts shared several more specific areas that universities converting to semesters should be aware of.

- Prepare for a condensed summer break prior to first year of the semester schedule: Contacts at the University E caution that the summer before the start of the semester schedule is shorter than typical summers, which limits the number of weeks students can work. To give students the opportunity to work for an additional week, University E canceled the first three days of classes (classes typically resume on a Wednesday) and began the fall semester one week later than usual. In addition, the shortened summer necessitates the compression of summer classes. University E condensed classes to three weeks and two days and increased the number of hours each class met per day.

- Maximize classroom space by requiring that departments distribute their courses throughout the week and throughout the day: Several contacts noted that the transition can afford universities the opportunity to more efficiently schedule classes by requiring that departments:
  - Do not cluster classes during the most popular times to teach
  - Offer a proportional number of classes that meet two and three times per week

- Be cognizant of “credit creep”: If the total number credit hours required to graduate is reduced as a result of the conversion, and individual course credits are not proportionally reduced, there is the possibility that individual courses will become worth a greater percentage of the total required credit hours under the semester system than they were worth under the quarter system. For example, a four credit course under a semester system where a total of 124 credit hours is required for graduation is worth proportionally more than the same four credit course under a quarter system where a total of 186 credit hours are required for graduation.

- Consider renumbering all courses after the transition so that student transcripts clearly reflect the change: For example, some universities change all course numbers from three to four digits.
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