Transitioning from Quarters to Semesters
Considerations for an Academic Calendar Conversion

Custom Research Brief

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I. Research Methodology

**Project Challenge**  
*Leadership at a member institution approached the Council with the following questions:*

- What is the timeframe for a transition from quarters to semesters? What factors impact this timeframe?
- How do institutions determine the budget for the transition? How much do transitions cost?
- What are the most expensive elements of a transition? How do administrators mitigate the costs of software adaptation and automated management systems?
- What techniques and methods do administrators implement to minimize transition costs? What unanticipated challenges do institutions encounter during a transition? How does institution leadership address these challenges?
- What role do state university system administrators perform in the transition process?
- What measures, if any, do institutions implement to make a transition attractive to faculty? Do institutions incentivize faculty participation in the transition?
- What role do faculty perform throughout the transition process? How do administrators prepare faculty for a transition and manage faculty discontentedness?
- Do faculty workload or advising responsibilities increase due to the transition? If so, how does the administration compensate faculty for this increase?
- How does institutional leadership inform students of the transition to a semester-based calendar?
- Does student advising staff experience an increased demand for services during the transition? If so, how do they accommodate this demand?
- What additional measures does the institution take to advise students caught mid-transition? Do faculty advise students? If so, does the institution incentivize this responsibility?

**Project Sources**

- Education Advisory Board’s internal and online ([www.educationa advisoryboard.com](http://www.educationa advisoryboard.com)) research libraries
- University of Cincinnati Semester Conversion Web site ([www.uc.edu/conversion.html](http://www.uc.edu/conversion.html))
- University of Toledo’s Quarters to Semesters transition documents ([http://www.ohio.edu/provost/u-of-toledo-q2s-documents.cfm](http://www.ohio.edu/provost/u-of-toledo-q2s-documents.cfm))
- Wright State University Semester Transition Advising Web site ([http://www.wright.edu/semesters-advising](http://www.wright.edu/semesters-advising))
The Council interviewed semester transition directors at mid-size to large, public research institutions that recently transitioned from a quarter to semester academic calendar.

### A Guide to Institutions Profiled in this Brief

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Approximate Enrollment (Total/Undergraduate)</th>
<th>Classification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University A</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>25,500/20,400</td>
<td>Research Universities (high research activity)</td>
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<tr>
<td>University B</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>26,200/21,700</td>
<td>Research Universities (high research activity)</td>
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<tr>
<td>University C</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>33,300/22,900</td>
<td>Research Universities (high research activity)</td>
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<tr>
<td>University D</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>22,600/17,800</td>
<td>Research Universities (high research activity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University E</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>18,300/14,400</td>
<td>Research Universities (high research activity)</td>
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</table>

**Source:** National Center for Education Statistics
II. Executive Overview

**Key Observations**

Execution of an effective transition begins with the appointment of a transition director and the assembly of a transition office to oversee the simultaneous execution on all transition elements (curricular revision, software updates, etc.). A transition director, typically a tenured faculty member with significant administrative experience, oversees the entire transition process and monitors the interaction of all components of the transition. The transition office serves as a centralized location for transition administration, where faculty and students can direct questions or concerns.

Process transparency and shared governance guide the most successful and well-received calendar transitions. A transparent transition process that shares governance amongst faculty, administration, and the student body ensures the representation and participation of all constituents of the institution. This results in inclusion of all perspectives and secures campus-wide cooperation.

Transitions expose opportunities for institutional improvement and efficient transition plans allot additional resources to address these enhancements. Academic calendar conversion requires systematic assessment and evaluation of institutional operations (e.g., curricula, classroom scheduling, technology, etc.). This presents an opportunity for institutions to implement significant institution-wide improvements.

Students express little interest in the transition despite the variety of mediums with which institutions communicate transition details to students. Institutions employ emails, Web sites, posters, podcasts, Facebook, Twitter, student newspapers, and recruit student government to inform students about the transition. However, students remain relatively disengaged from the process until the calendar year of the transition, at which point they express concern about the impact of the transition on their academic careers.

Advising is the cornerstone of an effective transition for students; advisors guarantee that the transition will not adversely impact students’ ability to graduate on time nor will they incur additional costs. Institutions design the transition advising process to mitigate student concerns. Institutions guarantee that students who create an advising plan with their advisor and adhere to the plan will not incur additional tuition costs or increased time to graduation. Some institutions reinforce this guarantee by forming a hearing committee of faculty to field complaints from students who incur additional costs or increased time to graduation as a result of the transition. Contact institutions report no such cases.
III. Planning and Implementing an Effective Transition

**Transition Timeframe**

State university systems mandated contact institutions to transition their academic calendars from quarters to semesters; state systems also dictated the timeframe for that transition. Contact institutions conducted all subsequent planning and implementation of the conversion with little to no involvement from state university systems; planning began immediately after institutions received the mandate from the state system.

**Timeframe for Transition Completion across Contact Institutions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>University D</th>
<th>University E</th>
<th>University A</th>
<th>University B</th>
<th>University C</th>
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Most contact institutions note that three years is the ideal length of time to convert an academic calendar from quarters to semesters; they warn that longer transition timeframes risk inefficiency and allow time for more faculty pushback. Institutions developed transition committees and subcommittees consisting of faculty, staff, and student representatives to plan and implement every aspect of the transition while ensuring the incorporation of all institutional perspectives. They also upgraded outdated curricula, developed new software, and improved student advising services, among other changes. Though contacts at University D completed their transition in the allotted 27-month timeframe, contacts report they lacked sufficient time to evaluate and upgrade institutional processes and implement additional upgrades and process changes.

**Developing a Transition Plan**

An Effective Transition is guided by a Transition Office

Contacts emphasize the importance of a dedicated transition office to guide the transition process. Transition offices require at least a transition director and an administrative assistant.

While the primary focus of the transition is the academic calendar (i.e., quarter versus semester scheduling), the transition implicates many institutional elements. Some elements to consider include curricular revision, software updates, classroom use and scheduling, and faculty workload concerns. Institutions must develop these elements in tandem to ensure that changes in one area do not negatively impact another area. A transition director proves invaluable in managing these disparate factors as he or she can address the progress of a particular component in the context of the entire process.

Transition directors at University D and University E, both of whom were appointed to their positions in the middle of the transition, reflect that they could have ensured the simultaneous progress of each element of the transition had they been appointed to their positions at the...
beginning of the transition process. Contacts also note that appointing a well-respected faculty member as the transition director reassures faculty that the transition administration will understand and address their particular concerns.

Institutions Assemble a Conversion Committee and Subcommittees to Create an Effective Transition Plan

An effective transition plan must incorporate insights from all institutional constituents: students, faculty, and staff. Most institutions task the creation of a plan to a semester conversion committee and various subcommittees consisting of faculty, staff, and student representatives. Administrators suggest utilizing existing bureaucratic frameworks, such as faculty senate committees, to maximize efficiency and effectiveness; for example, a standing curricular review committee offers the expertise necessary to execute high-quality curricular revision required of a transition from quarters to semesters.

Contacts at University C organized faculty, staff and students into the following taskforces and subcommittees to coordinate, plan, and implement the various components of the transition:

- **Semester-Conversion Taskforce**: responsible for creation of a comprehensive transition plan that addresses timeline, curricular revision, infrastructural changes, and budget, among other elements
- **Advising Subcommittee**: responsible for recruiting transition advising staff and developing a transition advising plan
- **Calendar Subcommittee**: responsible for converting annual per-term calendar and exam schedule to semester-system equivalents
- **Communications Subcommittee**: maintains communication about the transition including the Web site, press releases and advertisements, emails, blogs, discussion forums, and print items
- **Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Course Subcommittee**: responsible for curriculum evaluation and redesign
- **Information Technology Subcommittee**: oversees modification of existing technology systems (e.g. Blackboard, Bearcat, DARwin)
- **Infrastructure Subcommittee**: responsible for creating new downtime schedules for institutional infrastructure (instructional spaces, administrative services, facilities, finances, athletics, etc.)
- **Policies and Procedures Subcommittee**: responsible for revising institutional dates and policies (e.g., payment due dates, application deadlines) to semester-system equivalents

Local Community Inclusion in Transition Planning

Administrators at University A included representatives from the local chamber of commerce in the transition planning process to ensure that community members who provide services to students (e.g., off-campus housing landlords) remained apprised of transition progress and could synchronize their service schedules with the new academic calendar.
Efficient Transitions Implement Changes Unrelated to the Transition

In addition to converting the academic calendar and performing the attendant changes, institutions use the calendar transition as an opportunity to actualize overdue changes on campus, such as comprehensive curricula evaluation and course catalogue revision. Depending on the scope of these changes, institutions allot additional resources specifically to address these upgrades.

- Contacts at University B developed a software system for evaluating and enhancing curricula alongside their transition. It ensures all institutional curricula adhere to the existing curricular standards and undergo the same approval process.

- Contacts at University C consolidated their 15,000 course catalog into 10,000 courses and standardized their course numbering system across their flagship and regional campuses. This allows identification of courses with similar concentrations, emphases, or modalities across different departments, colleges, and campuses. For example, a standardized course identification code for classes that incorporate a service-learning component helps administrators to understand the breadth of civically engaged academic initiatives across all departments and even across system campuses.

- Contacts at University A rewrote all curricula, eliminated unnecessary courses, and reviewed courses that had not been evaluated in 20–30 years. They also instituted a student course forgiveness policy allowing students who failed courses to retake them and replace the failing grade.

Budget

Advising is Generally the Most Expensive Element of a Transition

Transition budgets range based on institution size, transition strategy, and initiatives unrelated to the transition, such as new software development or curricular upgrades. Most contact institutions spent approximately $2.5 million on the transition. University E spent $2.4 million on their transition and University D spent $2.2 million on their transition. However, due to the large scope of their transition plan, University C spent $13,867,000 on their transition.

University C Transition Budget

Total Budget: $13,867,000

- Advising 37%
- Administration 15%
- Additional Upgrades 28%
- Curriculum 20%

Source: University C Semester Conversion Plan
Elements of a transition budget

- **Administrative costs**: Administrative costs include the creation and staffing of a transition office to manage and oversee the transition process; the most expensive element is typically the transition director’s salary.

  **Administrative Costs during the Transition at University C**

  *Total Administrative Costs = $2,155,000*

  ![Circle diagram showing budget allocations](image)

  ![Table showing budget allocations](image)

  *Source: University C Semester Conversion Plan*

- **Curriculum costs**: Funds for curriculum development cover the costs associated with conversion of courses from quarters to semesters. Institutions spend these funds in a variety of ways, providing course releases, stipends, overloads, or summer work compensation to faculty involved in curricular conversion, or hiring adjuncts to relieve faculty who lead curricular conversion.
  
  - Administrators at University C allocated 20 percent ($2,828,000) of the transition budget to curriculum-related costs.

- **Advising costs**: Advising is the most expensive element of the transition but also the most important; students depend on advisors to guide them through the transition process. Advising costs fund the hiring of additional advising staff and/or the compensation of the advising services of existing faculty and staff.
  
  - At University C, 87 percent ($5,097,000) of advising costs funded the hiring of new advisors.

- **Additional upgrades**: These funds are optional and vary based on the degree to which an institution makes extra-transitional changes.
  
  - Administrators at University C allocated 28 percent ($3,767,000) of the transition budget to software application redesign and system repopulation (i.e., population of advising, registration, and records management systems with data).
**Institutions Minimize Cost by Relying on Internal Resources**

All contact institutions prioritize minimizing the transition’s financial burden on the institution. Institutions save money by relying on existing institutional resources:

**Strategies for Effective Internal Resource Utilization**

- **Capitalize on Faculty Expertise**
  
  Contacts at University D suggest capitalizing on faculty knowledge by incorporating faculty with expertise as consultants in the transition process. For example, transition administrators may consult tenured faculty in the school of business during the budgeting phase.

- **Assess Institutional Capacity for Technological Adaptations**

  Both University B and University E contracted their institutional information technology departments to develop and implement software to facilitate the curricular approval aspect of their transition. However, because of the large scope of the information technology overhaul at University C, administrators determined that outsourcing software development was ultimately more cost and time effective and freed the institution information technology office to address urgent IT problems directly related to the transition.

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**IV. Integrating Faculty in the Transition Process**

**Addressing Faculty Concerns**

Institutions Appoint Faculty to Leadership Roles to Alleviate Faculty Concerns about the Transition

Faculty at transitioning institutions demand representation in the transition process to ensure the transition does not adversely affect their workload or curriculum.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculty Concern</th>
<th>Solution</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Representation Administration might dictate the transition process without considering faculty concerns.</td>
<td><strong>Ensure faculty representation at every administrative level of the transition:</strong> Appointing a respected faculty member as transition director and ensuring faculty representation in every transition committee and subcommittee shows that the administration values faculty input and provides faculty a sense of control over the transition process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workload The transition process and end result might increase faculty workload.</td>
<td><strong>Prioritize a workload-neutral transition:</strong> The transition plan should include a guarantee to faculty that their post-transition workload will not exceed their pre-transition workload. Institutions may reward faculty members with course releases, stipends, or a salary bonus based on their degree of involvement with transition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curricula Converting courses from quarters to semesters could diminish curricular quality.</td>
<td><strong>Assign faculty responsibility for curricular conversion:</strong> Institutions allow faculty to oversee all aspects of curricular conversion, from developing course conversion guidelines to the final curriculum approval. Additionally, adhering to the standard institutional curricular approval process demonstrates commitment to curricular quality.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
V. Preparing Students for the Transition

### Communication

*Institutions Must Employ a Variety of Methods to Communicate Transition Details to Students*

Contacts report that students display little interest in the initial stages of the transition process; students are most concerned with semester-based class registration and scheduling during the final stages of the transition. Transition administrators communicate with students through various methods to guarantee that all students are fully aware of the transition before the final implementation date:

- **Print:** Institutions explain the transition and its projected impact on students in student newspapers, posters, and flyers; administrators send mail to both students and parents and create student transition guide pamphlets.
- **Web:** Institutions that transitioned recently create detailed transition Web sites, send regular emails to students, write monthly e-newsletters, and create Facebook pages and Twitter accounts that supply regular information about the transition.
- **Audio:** An advisor at University B created a podcast to guide students in completing their individualized advising plan.
- **Video:** University B created a dedicated YouTube channel for the transition that contained FAQs, skits, and short informative videos about the transition. Administrators hoped that the channel would appeal to electronically savvy students, but contacts report infrequent student use of these resources.
- **Transition Mascot:** Contacts at University D created a transition mascot to rouse student excitement and awareness of the transition; contacts report this effort proved unsuccessful.

### Advising

*Additional Advising Services are Requisite to Minimize Negative Effects on Students*

Advising is the most important element of an effective transition. Despite institutions’ communication efforts, students generally remain uninterested in the transition until the calendar year of the transition, at which point they become primarily concerned that the transition could adversely affect their academic career. Failure to guide students through the transition process could result in lowered retention rates and ultimately lost revenue for the institution. Hiring and training additional advising staff to guide students through the transition reduces student anxiety and minimizes student discontent. Contacts emphasize that institutions must plan to significantly increase the capacity of advising services during the final year of a calendar transition.

**Sources for additional advising staff:**

- Hire new advising staff, possibly on a temporary contract
- Provide stipends or offer course releases to faculty to compensate for increased advising demand
- Hire retired faculty on contract basis to meet increased advising needs
Accessibility and quality of advising services guarantees student success as advisors guide students through the transition, ensure the calendar conversion does not delay their degree completion, and address any concerns students may have regarding the transition.

**Institutions Pledge that the Transition will be Cost- and Time-neutral to Students**

The cornerstone of every institution’s approach to mitigating student concerns during the transition is the pledge that the transition will not increase a student’s time to graduation, provided that students comply with transition advising protocol. Advisors at contact institutions develop individual advising plans designed to guide students through the transition process. Students chart their degree progress on the advising plan and bring the plan to a transition advising session. During these sessions, advisors forecast students’ academic progress to ensure them that they will not encounter delays to graduation nor incur additional costs as a result of the transition.

Contacts at University E developed an online self-advising plan where students could track and forecast their degree progress; administrators at University D opted for a paper advising plan. Contact institutions guarantee that students will not incur additional costs or additional time to graduation as a result of the transition if students complete the following:

- Meet with their assigned academic advisor
- Create an individual advising plan with their advisor that leads to graduation
- Complete the academic requirements for their intended degree program

Some institutions convene special grievance committees staffed by faculty to resolve problems of students who feel adversely affected by the transition. Contacts at University A and University D report that no students brought grievances to the attention of these committees, but the existence of the committee importantly reflected the institution’s commitment to ensure a positive transition impact on students.

“We pledge that for a student who meets with an assigned academic advisor, jointly creates a plan that leads to graduation, and successfully completes the academic requirements in the timeline specified in the plan, there will be: consistent application of credits, on-time graduation, and no increased costs.”

-Council Interview