

REPORT BY DTF TO ANALYZE COSTS/BENEFITS OF SEMESTER SYSTEM FOR EVERGREEN

After weeks of discussion, pondering, data-gathering, hearings, polling the community, we find ourselves reaching a peculiar and perplexing conclusion. We find the DTF members mixed in their judgements on the subject. Most believe that the arguments for switching to semesters are stronger than the arguments for making no change. A minority believe the balance is more even or leans to staying on the quarter system. Furthermore, we wonder if a change is feasible given the resistance we have found in students and the lack of strong enthusiasm in faculty. On the other hand, we are unsure of this estimate of community sentiment since we could get only small returns on our poll: about one-seventh of students came out roughly 2.5 to 1 against a change; about one-third of the faculty came out roughly 3 to 2 in favor; and about one-third of the staff came out more than 3 to 1 in favor.

Let us spell all this out in more detail:

There are many cogent arguments on both sides. We have tried to list all we could find in an appendix to this report (our questionnaire plus a few additions). But in the end, we believe that the college's decision must really boil down to only a few crucial factors and that these factors ought to be educational rather than administrative or bureaucratic. That is, even though we find the evidence convincing that semesters would make life markedly better for staff, would either save money for the college or allow functions now foregone (e.g., research) to increase, and would benefit enrollment and retention of students, we don't think these factors ought to have a primary effect on our decision. If Evergreen were in the business of producing an administratively convenient or publically attractive institution, we would have to consider ourselves even more incompetent than our worst detractors consider us. We are in the business of producing a better environment for teaching and learning.

Here are the educational arguments that make us definitely lean toward semesters even though we also feel some definite tugs in other directions:

- Semesters would provide more time for teaching and learning, at least two weeks a year. We'd have only two evaluation weeks instead of three; 4 academic fairs instead of 6; and we'd have only two opening weeks instead of three -- weeks in which things don't quite get going and students wander in and out of programs.
- Semesters would give a longer time to develop an interdisciplinary theme fully and to get more threads into the fabric.
- Semesters would reduce seminar sizes over what we now have in the fall (and sometimes winter too) in order to make up for the extraordinary spring quarter drop in enrollment and drop in FTE load per student enrolled. We now have to take about 2 extra students per seminar in the fall. Semesters would even out the FTE load.
- Semesters would give us a month-long winter break which would relieve the mid-year February-March burn-out we now see. The second half of the school year would start with a full load of genuinely new energy. Present vacations don't give much time and don't give students a good chance to make up incompletes if they have them. And the month break would relieve SOME of the pressure on individual contracts in that weak contracts are often the result of students just wanting a relief from a program and wanting to do something more restful and wanting to do a little bit of investigation of something that interests them individually. Some students will be able to meet this need in the long winter break.

--Semesters would give some assistance with what we see as one of Evergreen's most crucial long range problems: faculty burnout and lack of time for research and publication. The following things would help: The month-long winter break, fewer evaluation conferences and evaluations to write, and the probable use of down weeks at mid-semester while students work on an exam, long paper or project. (Down weeks in mid-semester are more relaxed because there are no scheduled meetings yet they are times of intense integrative learning. It's hard to have such down weeks in our 10 week quarters since the first and last weeks are already "down" with respect to productive teaching.) We find it difficult to imagine how this institution, or any other can be first-rate if the faculty is not better enabled to write and do research than we presently are at Evergreen. We are living off the capital of research we did before coming here.

--Semesters would improve year-long programs. At present we plan year-long programs and largely fail in our goal since most students don't get the learning experience we plan.* Now maybe we should just take this fact as handwriting on the wall and make a curriculum with only one-quarter and two-quarter programs.

But we suspect that a semester system would not so much be a mere bolting shut of the March escape hatch but would rather give an entirely different shape to the year that would in fact better serve the conflicting needs that we see reflected above: the need for students to bail out of long programs; and the need for faculty to construct some learning experiences that are so meaty and interdisciplinary that they require a whole year to develop. It's almost impossible, now, to plan a year-long experience so that any one-quarter or two-quarter segment of it is coherent and complete in itself. But we think that a semester system would permit year-long programs that are strongest for students who take the whole year but which are nevertheless made up of two distinct semesters which are also coherent and complete in themselves. In short, semesters might permit us to have long programs which satisfy the needs of students who are willing to take the long ride but which will not be harmed so much as at present by those students who insist on taking short rides.

--Semesters would make curricular planning more coherent and give more real choice to students. Students often opposed semesters on the grounds that they would decrease the choice but we think they are mistaken in this feeling. That is, if our curriculum were made up entirely of one-quarter long programs, a translation of it into semesters would indeed reduce the number of choices. But since most of our programs are more than one quarter long, it turns out that a translation of it into semesters would yield a greater number of feasible paths among and between our programs.

Semesters would permit you to get from more Xs to more Ys than you now can do-- where now it so often happens that X runs till March but Y began in January--or X runs till Christmas but Y doesn't begin till April and there's nothing satisfactory to do in the meantime. We now suffer particularly from students getting out of something in March (or bailing out), finding very little to do, and therefore either quitting school or taking (not-very-strong) individual contracts.

*According to Kirk Thompson's study of a couple of years ago, only 38% of students enrolled in year-long programs actually stayed in for the entire year. And this wasn't just a case of poor programs obscuring good results in good programs: no program kept more than 52% of its students. And we know that some of the students who are allegedly "in a program" in the spring are really just manning a one-person satellite that orbits the program at a distance.

- Program designing in May instead of September would not just help attract new and returning students by giving them a full and accurate picture of what the fall programs will do. It would also help us teach better by letting us know at the beginning of the summer what we are actually going to do week by week in the fall. Even if we don't want to do reading or preparation, the plan will soak in and we will get good ideas and insights just by percolation. We'll have time for second thoughts or to anticipate disasters and have a chance to make a change when we come back in September. At present, conscientious faculty members have to use summer time doing unpaid work since not all planning can be put off till mid-September.
- Arguments that the early start will diminish enrollment, especially in part-time students, seem to be answered by the happy experiences of other colleges that have made the switch: either no drop or only a one-year drop.

Here are the arguments that give us pause and make us doubt whether the change is feasible:

- Most of all, student resistance. We think the student feeling that semesters will diminish choice is mistaken, but the feeling can still be a powerful deterrent. And there is no answer to the other primary student objection: that psychologically speaking, 16 weeks is simply too long a period of time to maintain current intensity. One needs a change after 10 weeks. Perhaps 13 weeks is more than we can ask and any attempt to do so will just blow up in our hands.
- A related argument which we find very persuasive: students who are mismatch with a program will suffer the consequences for one-half of a year under the semester system compared to one-third of a year under quarters. Such mistakes, under semesters, therefore have a higher negative impact on the student.
- Some faculty members said that more short units are better: that in the long run, the benefits of school on students depends on fertile seeds taking root, not on all the ramifications getting articulated--and that therefore the opportunity for more fertile seeds to be dropped is what we need.
- Some faculty and students said that more evaluation periods are a good thing. Students need it. They don't get enough evaluation. Quarter breaks provide an opportunity for more frequent reassessment of programs and (in year-long programs, at least) more opportunities for students to have input into the planning process.
- One of the main student arguments against semesters is that they wouldn't provide frequent enough opportunities for change; and one of the main faculty arguments against semesters is that we should give students that escape hatch in March or we'll be stuck with dead and resistant students who will thus ruin the programs in the spring.
- Some faculty have suggested that the change would reduce the number of one-faculty group contracts, an important source of advanced work at present. They suggest that a semester is too long a time for one faculty member to be responsible for the entire academic commitment of a group of students. Adding a second faculty member means redesigning the offering and the necessity of attracting twice as many students.

A fact that this whole issue should be seen in the light of: This is not a matter of life and death. We function perfectly well on a quarter system; plenty of colleges function well on semesters; one of our members who experienced the change from quarters to semesters was most struck by how little difference the change made in the essentials of the institution.

RECOMMENDATION:

Get our report to faculty, staff and students and see if by any chance they are (or could become) enthusiastic about a change to semesters. If not, drop the matter. If so, then before the April retreat, use Specialty Area meetings to discuss what such a change would look like in the planning of each area. Also, hold one or more widely publicized open meetings to discuss the issues and further assess the community's sentiments in the matter (before the retreat).

Attachment: Questionnaire

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REGISTRATION