

Essay on semesters or quarters

[Education](#), [University](#)



The semester system of university instruction goes back centuries, to the very first established universities in Europe. Currently, about nine out of ten secondary four-year institutions in the United States still use the semester system, while only eight percent (including CSU East Bay) use the quarter system (Oregon University System). It is true that the advent of the online class and of mini-classes, which get a semester's worth of hours into a week, has changed university instruction. While the quarter does increase flexibility in a number of areas, that flexibility ultimately ends up diluting the depth and quality of instruction and is logistically less convenient for both students and faculty members. In order to improve the academic experience of its students, CSU East Bay should change to a traditional semester system.

The most important reasons for changing to a semester system have to do with academics. There are several benefits that switching to a semester system would immediately bring. First of all, students would have a longer period of exposure to each of their subjects. While the classroom time would remain the same, that time is spread over a larger part of the calendar.

While it is true that students would take more classes at one time, the exposure to each of those subjects would be longer. A semester allows for more considerable reflection, giving students time to formulate generalizations and theories. There is also more opportunity for classroom projects, deeper levels of teaching and collaborative research. Given that most textbooks are written with the semester in mind, it is a more natural curricular fit as well.

Looking at this question from the point of view of logistics also makes it clear that the semester schedule would be the better option. Many students arrive

for their first year of college woefully unprepared for the personal responsibility ahead. For the first time in their lives, they don't have parents watching over them and making sure that they get up on time, go to class and complete their assignments; instead, all of these are now choices that they have. Even for the more diligent students, the adjustment can be difficult, because professors are less likely to track down missing assignments, and there is much less attention paid to whether students come to class or not. Professors assume that since the students (or parents) are paying tuition, then they should be motivated to come to class. This can destroy a student's GPA if that first quarter is dismal. The semester time frame gives students a chance to acclimate to the university setting and develop the habits they need to succeed. Other logistical benefits of a semester schedule include greater ease of transfer into and out of other universities; since nine out of ten universities use the semester schedule, transferring credits in and out can be tricky at times. Students deserve credit for the work that they have completed, whether at CSU East Bay or not, and if circumstances require a change of university, that process should be as user-friendly as possible. If a nearby university offers a course that CSU East Bay does not, but the student would benefit from that course, having the same schedule would make integrating that class easier for the student. With these principles in mind, it is important to look at the arguments for the quarter system as well. There are some who argue that the quarter system gives students access to more courses and more faculty members. However, if the academic hour requirement remains constant, and the hours are just spread out over a semester instead of into quarters, the number of courses

that remain the same. Another argument is that students are more likely to try electives that are only ten weeks in length. However, there is scant academic research supporting that claim; one could also argue that a student would be more likely to try an elective over the course of a longer semester, because the student would have more time to engage with the subject.

There are some who argue that students who are less likely to fall behind in a quarter system because they have to keep up in a faster-paced environment. However, particularly in the first years of university study, the acclimation that students have to undergo in order to ensure success may require more patience than a quarter schedule permits. The shorter breaks between quarters are said to help students remain more focused on their studies; however, the longer breaks at semesters often help students earn the money they need to continue studies the next semester. Most universities that are on the semester system offer mini-classes during the breaks for students who want to knock out courses more quickly, so the opportunity to keep moving forward is available.

There are also those who argue that the quarter system is more convenient for faculty members. Many of the international workshops that draw faculty members take place in September, just after the traditional semester has begun, making attendance inconvenient while one is carrying a full teaching load. There is also the argument that faculty members can boost teaching load more for some quarters and then have free quarters to conduct research more easily. My response to these arguments is that teachers can organize their syllabi and teaching activities to dovetail with their schedules

for attending international conferences. While having quarters free for research is helpful, the longer breaks between semesters also afford opportunities for uninterrupted research.

Simply maintaining the semester system because that is the longstanding tradition in academia is not a sufficient reason to urge its use at CSU East Bay. After all, when the first universities were instituted, scientists believed that the earth was the center of the universe (after all, we don't feel like we're moving, and those stars look like they're going around us). One common practice for medical healing involved removing a sick patient's blood to see if that would solve the problem (in the case of George Washington, they ended up taking too much of his blood for him to survive). There were even academics who thought they could turn lead into gold. Universities have changed their methods, their fundamental beliefs about science, their admission policies, and their tuition structures. However, there are strong arguments from the academic and logistical perspectives for making this change. Not only will students' academic experiences be enhanced by the change to a semester system, but the faculty will also find their instruction happens more fluidly and more effectively. Students, faculty and school administrators should all find the change to be an improvement.

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