

A Brief Examination of Literature
Related to Academic Calendar Models

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During the Fall 2014 and Spring 2015 semesters, a proposal to change the academic calendar from a 16-8-16-5 model to a 16-12-16 model was presented to the campus for discussion. The proposal suggested the extension of the summer session to twelve weeks and the elimination of the winter intersession. The impetus of the proposal was to increase student access to classes and increase FTES. In a later discussion with administration, ensuring a proper sequencing of courses that would facilitate higher completion and success rates was added to the purpose of the proposal.

The intent of this paper was to report on an examination of the effects of transitioning from one academic calendar model to another, specifically, from the current calendar consisting of a 16-week spring and fall semester, an 8-week summer session, and a 5-week winter intersession (16-8-16-5 model), to a calendar that consists of a 16-week spring and fall semester, a 12-week summer session (with the option of two 6-week sessions), and the elimination of the Winter intersession (16-12-16 model).

While there appears to be very little literature specifically addressing the actual effects caused by a change between two academic calendar models, there is significant discussion on different calendar models and the pros and cons of each. And so what follows is a *very* brief synopsis of some of the discussions as they might pertain to student success, retention, and persistence at Antelope Valley College. This review is not comprehensive but does suggest some of the more prevalent notions presented in the literature.

Several points quickly surfaced in a review of the literature, but the most striking was the effects of too many options for students enrolling in college. Students entering community college may have too many pathway choices and would benefit from some form of guided pathway through college (Jenkins, D., 2014; Bailey, Jagers, and Jenkins, 2015a).

Guided pathways appear to produce results. Students entering community colleges have access to career services and advising through counselors, but often do not take advantage of the services, which then leads to an unstructured attempt at program completion (Jenkins, D., 2014; (Bailey, Jagers, and Jenkins, 2015a). Bailey et al. contend that

“Students are more likely to complete a degree in a timely fashion if they choose a program and develop an academic plan early on, have a clear road map of the

New calendar model supports guided pathway by greater access and completion program

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courses they need to complete a credential, and receive guidance and support to help them stay on plan.” (Bailey, Jagers, and Jenkins, 2015c)

Hirschy, Bremer, and Castellano (2011) examined CTE student success and came to a similar conclusion that students who continually modify their course selection do not persist equal to students who follow a direct path. Miami Dade College has successfully implemented a comprehensive guided pathways program, but it required a systemic change and a shared ownership buy-in from faculty, staff, and administration (Bailey, Jagers, and Jenkins, 2015a).

Along with guided pathways, the length of a course and the time spent in the classroom are also factors in student success. Shorter summer and winter classes have as much, if not more, success than longer term courses and are often preferred by students (Blumenstyk, 2013; Anastasi, 2007; ASCCC, 2000). The literature also reveals that shorter courses often compete with their longer counterparts on success and retention, and both students and faculty tend to prefer the shorter version (Blumenstyk, 2013; Anastasi, 2007; ASCCC, 2000); with one possible exception in a calendar model that splits summer into two sessions. In a survey addressing such a model, only 30% of faculty appeared willing to teach in the late session of a two session summer (Carley, 2002).

In a report published by the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges (ASCCC), the use of shorter courses, also referred to as intersessions and included both summer and winter, was a benefit to students (ASCCC, 2000). With regard to the inclusion of a winter intersession, the report suggests that

“a winter intersession improves student success because it allows an accelerated completion of a course sequence or allows unsuccessful students to repeat class in sequence without losing time or that sequence” (ASCCC, 2000, p.6)

It bears noting here that according to the California Community College Chancellor’s Office, the winter intersession at Antelope Valley College has grown by 35% over the past four years from 261 FTES in 2013 to 403 FTES in 2016

(<http://datamart.cccco.edu/datamart.aspx>). Interestingly, during the same period, the number of sections offered only increased by 19% from 128 in 2013 to 158 in 2016. This would suggest that more students are opting to take advantage of the winter intersession and that a focused effort on scheduling could provide even more opportunities for students.

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Carley (2002) examined the transition from an 18-week semester to a compressed 16-week semester and in the process conducted two surveys, one for students and one for faculty. The surveys included questions about summer and winter intersessions along with the semester courses. According to Carley, 70% of the students surveyed indicated a willingness to take summer classes if the right ones were offered, and 60% suggested they would be willing to do so during the winter. When faculty were asked a similar question about teaching two 5-week summer courses and a 5-week winter session, more than half indicated a desire to teach the first of two 5-week summer sessions and the winter session, and only 30% indicated a willingness to teach the late summer session (Carley, 2002).

The literature also suggests that scheduling significantly impacts student learning and satisfaction (Loveland and Bland, 2013) and there are multiple issues related to changing academic calendars, but simply changing a calendar does not by itself ensure student access and success (Bair and Bair, 2010; *Alternative Academic Calendar Committee: Report to Faculty Senate, 2011*).

Boise State University, in an *Alternative Academic Calendar Committee Report to Faculty Senate*, discuss the notion of a 12-week summer session and provides both pros and cons to its existence (2011, *Alternative Academic Calendar Committee: Report to Faculty Senate*). Among the pros of such a session is that 12 weeks might work well for online classes, align better with other schools and districts, and not overwhelm high school graduates with a shorter summer college course straight out of high school. As for the cons, the report suggests that although the 12-week length may offer flexibility in course length and thus be a pro argument, the flexibility could still cause confusion and inefficiency by offering options of 5, 6, 8, 10, or 12 week sessions. The report also suggests that changing the calendar alone is not an effective method for increasing student success, and that the length of summer courses is not a driving factor for students or faculty (2011, *Alternative Academic Calendar Committee: Report to Faculty Senate*).

A study that examined the switch from a semester model to a trimester model for a high school in Michigan, revealed that such a switch may have negative impacts on students who are already struggling or at risk of failure but could be beneficial for the more advanced students. (Bair and Bair, 2010). Bair and Bair suggest that “the fast pace of trimester,

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without adequate “soak time,” hurt students who were already at risk of failure. They do, however, enable advanced students to move ahead, potentially exacerbating the achievement gap” (p. 90). Additionally, Bair and Bair also report that a block schedule and trimester model appear to benefit science classes more than a traditional schedule (Bair and Bair, 2010).

As the literature suggests, switching between two academic calendar models is a major undertaking by any standard and there are always multiple issues to consider beyond the initial intent of the proposal. There is evidence and arguments to support all the common academic calendar models, and arguably, not all models work for all colleges. The literature clearly suggests that shorter courses can be just as effective as longer courses and that some subjects work better in a shorter format and others in a longer format. Increasing student access, student persistence and success, and increasing FTES cannot be achieved by simply changing from one model to another, many other issues must come into play such as what classes will be offered and when. With what appears to be a significant potential to encounter unintended consequences through a shift in academic calendar models, it would seem prudent to first closely examine class offerings versus student needs in the current model before switching to a new model; perhaps such an examination could be achieved through the implementation of a focused class scheduling strategy that would provide students with a clear path to completion

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