

## Revised Academic Planning Council Workgroup on Systemwide Academic Calendar

### Introduction

The University of California operated on a common semester calendar until 1966 when all UC campuses converted to quarters in response to a surge in enrollment and state funding for year-round operations (YRO). The college-going years of the baby boom generation and rising rates of college matriculation resulted in student demand for more seats than the University of California (UC) or California State University (CSU) could provide. Accordingly, the need for year-round operations (YRO) over four quarters (F, W, Sp, Summer) was pronounced.

However, UC never fully implemented year-round operations as the state funding was cut for YRO just a few years after it started. By 1983, the common calendar began to break down: UC Berkeley converted back to a semester system, with the campus citing opportunities for improved academic preparation and student success.<sup>1</sup> UC Merced opened in 2005 with a semester calendar.

It is time for the University to consider what an optimal calendar would look like, foregrounding the student experience and broad measures of student success in this deliberation. Why now?

- The experience of the pandemic brought to the fore concerns about student mental health and staff burnout that had been building for many years beforehand. Student affairs leadership have recommended that calendar reform be considered as one avenue of reducing this stress.<sup>2</sup>
- The increasing concern of legislators (and 2024 state audit reports) over insufficient rates of transfer, especially from our community college partners, lends some weight to considering ways to smooth that transition, including a common calendar.
- Post-college labor market pathways are growing increasingly difficult<sup>3</sup>; prior exposure to professional workplaces (via experiential learning, co-ops and internships) helps UC students navigate this transition. Academic calendars impact access to these opportunities in the summer and the fall.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Minutes of the Regents Educational Policy Committee, June 18, 1981, p.6.

<sup>2</sup> In 2002, UCLA considered the possibility of moving from quarters to semesters. Graduate students voted 47% to 37% in favor of this option. Their divergent perspectives are included in Appendix A.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/05/business/economy/jobs-college-graduates-unemployment.html#:~:text=For%20recent%20graduates%2C%20ages%2022,unemployment%20rate%20is%20still%20low.>

<sup>4</sup> [https://theconversation.com/internships-are-linked-to-better-employment-outcomes-for-college-graduates-but-there-arent-enough-for-students-who-want-them-230625#:~:text=A%20study%20in%20Spain%20found,hadn't%20had%20an%20internship.https://www.chronicle.com/article/for-students-on-the-quarter-system-landing-a-summer-internship-can-bring-complications/.](https://theconversation.com/internships-are-linked-to-better-employment-outcomes-for-college-graduates-but-there-arent-enough-for-students-who-want-them-230625#:~:text=A%20study%20in%20Spain%20found,hadn't%20had%20an%20internship.https://www.chronicle.com/article/for-students-on-the-quarter-system-landing-a-summer-internship-can-bring-complications/)

Our goal as a system is to promote academic excellence, reduce gaps that arise from inequalities of prior educational experience and household resources, support timely graduation, and enable fulsome preparation for post-graduation life. These goals hold for students who begin their UC lives as first year students and for transfer students, who make up a significant proportion of our community. We must be mindful of the stresses they experience balancing school and work, the pace of academic demands, and the desire for deep learning as well as variety in their exposure to multiple fields of study.

The crafting of an optimal calendar should simultaneously engage the needs of our faculty for research excellence/productivity and support the important work of teacher-scholars to create rich and rewarding classroom experiences. Our colleagues are distinguished academics, responsible for the generation of new scholarship on a nearly unlimited set of topics. For them to remain at the forefront of their fields in a manner that allows them to contribute most effectively to student success and other aspects of the university's mission, they require time to focus on their research and the ability to balance its demands with their roles as teachers and public servants.

The committee's charge is to describe an optimal academic calendar that would promote these goals and to consider whether it would be desirable or feasible to migrate toward it over the next three to five years.

## **Background**

Today, most US universities operate on a semester calendar, with dozens of individual institutions and university systems having shifted from quarters to semesters, including Association of American University (AAU) institutions like the Ohio State University and University of Minnesota. Excluding UC campuses, around 90 percent of AAU campuses in the United States are on a semester calendar. In addition, our primary transfer partners are similarly semester-based for the most part: 113 of the 116 California Community Colleges and all California State Universities (CSU) are or will be on semesters<sup>5</sup>.

Yet even within semester (or quarter) calendars, campuses vary start and end dates, observed holidays or study days, and include variable numbers of instructional days or session lengths. For example, UC Berkeley established a "reading, recitation and review" (RRR) week for each semester that resulted in setting aside 10 of the 146 instructional days for RRR with no new instructional content delivered. Other institutions have a longer winter break to provide time for academic recovery support or unique educational programs and research projects. Some institutions end early in the spring term to provide students better access to summer

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<sup>5</sup> Five CSU campuses recently converted from quarters to semesters, with CSU San Luis Obispo – the last CSU quarter campus – expected to operate on a semester calendar in Fall 2026.

programming, jobs, internships, or research opportunities and faculty a longer summer interval for research and other activities.

The University of California has periodically considered the value of returning to a common calendar.<sup>6</sup> There are pros and cons to semester and quarter calendars, with some of the strongest reasons for semesters being calendar alignment, articulation with Master Plan partners, expanded summer opportunities and mental health support for students, and fewer academic and administrative cycles. Advocates of quarter calendars point to the larger variety of courses students can take during their university years and the value of reducing the impact of a faltering performance in any given course on their summative grade point average.

There are considerable one-time costs and time commitments associated with a calendar conversion of any kind, particularly the course, curriculum, and major program revisions that would be led by faculty (including those serving on relevant senate committees). Other aspects of university operations that would be affected include advising services, administrative support (e.g., registrar, financial aid), and information technology modifications to systems. Understanding this workload and the investments necessary are critical when evaluating the costs and benefits of any transition to a common calendar.

### **Workgroup Charge:**

In partnership with President Drake, UC Chancellors and UC Executive Vice Chancellors and Provosts, Provost Newman is collaborating with Academic Senate leadership to create an Academic Planning Council workgroup on the consideration of a systemwide academic calendar for UC general campuses. The workgroup shall examine the following key questions:

1. What would be gained or lost from UC having a common calendar?
  - What are the pros and cons to a common calendar?
2. What would be gained or lost from UC retaining the current mixture of campus-determined calendars?
  - What are the pros and cons to the status quo?
3. What are the key features of an optimal or preferred academic calendar?
  - What is the appropriate number of instructional days, use of RRR periods, or other calendar features that would facilitate learning objectives and support student wellbeing?
  - How would that ideal compare to the calendars of other research institutions and segment partners and in support of UC's teaching, research and public service mission?

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<sup>6</sup> In 2005, the UC adopted [common start dates](#) for the quarter campuses as well as separate common start dates for the semester campuses.

4. What investments and supports would be essential to ensuring a successful transition to a common calendar?
  - What lessons can be drawn from the experiences of other selective institutions that have considered and acted on academic calendar transition?
  - What timeline would be recommended for any transition?

The workgroups members will be directly responsible for the first three questions and opine on what information should be collected in response to question four. Based on APC workgroup input, a separate workgroup composed of UCOP and campus leaders will collect the requisite information to respond to question four and provide information for the APC workgroup to incorporate into their report/recommendations.

The Provost will work with Academic Senate leadership on the appropriate timing and process to collect its input (e.g., 90-day comment period, Academic Council and Assembly input). In addition, the Provost will work with the UC President and Chancellors on a similar effort to collect administrative input. The findings of this collaborative process will inform future steps.

Academic Senate and campus administrative review will follow the end of the committee's deliberations.

**Workgroup Membership:**

Academic Senate Representatives including the Vice Chair of the Academic Council and representatives of key systemwide senate committees (e.g., CCGA, UCEP, UCORP, UCAP, UCPB) and other Senate representatives to ensure balance among campuses and across academic disciplines.

Administration Representatives including an Executive Vice Chancellor and others across key administrative areas (e.g., budget, academic personnel, student affairs, registrar, institutional research) with undergraduate and graduate education expertise.

Undergraduate and graduate student representatives.

Appendix A: Excerpt from the Joint Academic Senate/Administration Committee to Study the UCLA Academic Calendar.

### **Graduate and Professional Student Issues**

The President of the UCLA Graduate Students Association (GSA), Mr. Charles Harless (M.S. candidate in Engineering), held discussion sessions with GSA officers, led focus groups, and surveyed graduate students on the spring 2002 election ballot. He reported that more graduate students who voted favored the semester calendar. In the spring election, 1,448 graduate students voted (15.5% of the population), the results showed that 47.2% favored semesters, 37.2% favored quarters, while 15.6% did not have a preference.

Mr. Harless also presented a brief discussion of the issues that students had identified in favor of the semester calendar:

- Under the quarter system, many graduate students must take an “incomplete” grade because they do not have sufficient time to work on term papers. Graduate students thought that this practice would decline under the semester system.
- Under the semester system, graduate students believed that not only would they be able to complete assignments but that there would also be more time to allow ideas to ‘maturate,’ allowing them to better integrate new knowledge with prior knowledge.
- Graduate students who were TAs thought that the workload (grading papers and fostering relations with students) would be less intense under the semester system; accordingly, they would be able to make more progress towards their degree while being a TA.
- Because the year ends so late under UCLA’s quarter calendar, many graduates find that they are less competitive for internships and are often unable to attend national or international conferences held in the spring (i.e., late May or early June). This is particularly true for students in the Anderson School of Management, which is one of the reasons faculty in this School are beginning to consider a shift to the semester system (see Section 5).

Graduate students who favored the quarter system made the following points:

- The quarter system offers a variety of academic offerings.
- The quarter system runs at a faster pace.
- In the natural sciences, graduate students are required to be a TA two quarters; a change to semesters might delay their full attention to research (although many on north campus would welcome full annual employment).