Quarter System or Semester System?

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Abstract

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What do YOU think?
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MOST STUDENTS favor the quarter system. They offer two main arguments: They “like to be able to go home at Christmas and not have to worry about tests” and they want the greater variety of courses possible under the quarter system.

Iowa State does not actually have a true quarter system. “It's sort of a hybrid,” according to Registrar Gowan. “It incorporates some features of both the quarter and semester systems. A true quarter system is one where you take a few things in more concentrated form.” Far more American colleges and universities operate on the semester than the quarter system in any of its forms. But such large institutions as Minnesota, Northwestern, Ohio State and Stanford use the quarter plan.

Students here feel that under the semester system they would have to study over Christmas vacation in preparation for the final exams soon after they return. They like the idea of starting the new year with a new quarter and new courses, too.

Perhaps the most valid argument concerns course variety. Theoretically, under the semester system the student could take only two-thirds as many different courses. Actually, related material would be combined within a single course in many cases. Then, the defender of the quarter system asks, what would be gained by “stretching” out a course over a longer time? He's made his point.

He argues that there are so many required courses now that there's little choice. “Wouldn't it be worse under the semester system?” he asks. The engineers especially have a hard enough time getting their requirements squeezed into four years. Proponents of the quarter system further argue
that they get the same material in a quarter that students at a semester school get in a longer time, and they believe retention is about the same. For the semester's go-through-a-course-at-a-more-relaxed-rate advantage, the quarter man has a quick outburst. "That's Iowa State's reputation!" he cries. "It means something when you apply for a job, because employers know what kind of students come out of such a concentrated education."

The quarter system is more favorable to some graduating students since they may graduate at the end of the fall or winter quarter when fewer graduates are seeking jobs. Some like to begin jobs at the start of the new calendar year. Education majors graduating in December prefer a short rest before beginning their jobs when high schools re-open for the second semester.

And is it an advantage for high school mid-year graduates to be able to jump right into college work immediately after getting their diplomas, as the semester system would make it possible to do?

The quarter system offers the maximum number of opportunities for students to get started in college. Where sickness or other problems cause a delay in starting to school, the student does not have to wait so long before the next quarter begins. When a student drops or fails a course on the quarter plan he does not have to wait so long to make up the course. When a student fails a course he does not feel as much time has been wasted.

It has been stated that many quarter-length courses have become so filled with material that the student has difficulty mastering it in the time allowed. Some students feel maybe a survival-of-the-fittest policy ought to be applied. They offer it as a possibility towards meeting the enrollment-limitation problem. And what about classroom facilities? Enrollment in courses like Government 315 would be 50 per cent greater under the semester plan, since this course is now offered each quarter. This would be more serious in a course like Agronomy 154, which would require 50 per cent more laboratory facilities each semester than are now required in each of three quarters. Courses like freshman chemistry and English wouldn't have that problem because they're three-quarter sequence courses and the switch to a semester system could be made easily.
There are other arguments students use, too:

Some rural students come only during winter quarter for a special course offered by the Department of Farm Operations. Credits can be applied towards an eventual Bachelor of Science degree or a two-year certificate. These special students are thus able to put in the crop at home during the spring and harvest it during the fall. However, many students rent farmland and still carry on studies at the same time. So far as having to help parents is concerned, farm mechanization has almost eliminated that need. In the spring, oats seeding and corn planting are about the only jobs where students might be needed to help. Each job usually takes only a day or two and students are excused to go home for such work.

Then there are those who want to get a class over with if it’s uninteresting or if they don’t like the instructor. One popular instructor explained it this way: A person will go to a good show and yet he’ll keep looking at the clock to see how soon it’ll be over.

In the fall of 1957, Iowa State Teachers College will complete a switch over to the semester system, and at that time Iowa State will become the only college or university in Iowa still using the quarter system. It is natural to ask then, “Is our administration considering the possibility of switching to the semester plan?” The answer is yes. Registrar Gowan has said, “A review of the situation is being considered and talked about . . . there’s not much activity at present, but I expect that there will be some before long.”

You may ask — Why are we still on a quarter system? We asked, and the reason seems to lie more in the negative factor of “a great inertia to change,” rather than in any positive educational advantage. At this point it may be well to remember that Iowa State doesn’t have a true quarter system. In theory a quarter system is set up to teach a few concentrated courses over a shorter time (such as three five-hour courses in a 12-week period), while a semester system is set up to teach more courses stretched out over a longer time (such as five three-hour courses in an 18-week period). In both cases the total number of class hours and credit hours
are the same. Here, at Iowa State, the vast majority are three-hour courses, except in Veterinary Medicine, Mathematics, Architecture, and Electrical Engineering, and a normal schedule involves five, six, or even seven courses. We feel this is the major fault of our quarter system, since it often forces the student to spread himself too thin. It is evident that even this "thin spreading" is often done too hurriedly and the "pressure" cracks through it. For example, about 2,000 students were on probation each quarter last year.

Well then, what about the semester system? Would it be any different? What would it mean to the ISC student?

Let's imagine a make-believe semester system here at Ames and see how it would be set up. We'd be starting a week earlier, probably about the 15th of September, we'd have the usual Thanksgiving and Christmas vacation, and our first semester would finish with finals about the fourth week in January. Our second semester would begin about the first of February and finish with finals about the first week in June (including a week of spring vacation). Thus the time would be nearly the same, or a little shorter because of one less final week. The number of class hours, credit hours, and courses would be the same in a semester as we now have in a quarter. The number of credits required for graduation would naturally drop to around 130 semester hours. All in all, it would be about the same in vacations, class schedules, and number of courses, as under the present system, but the year would be divided into two 18-week semesters, instead of three unequal quarters (13 weeks, 10 weeks, and 12 weeks).

Students often express the belief that their Christmas vacation would be filled with studying under a semester plan. But is this true? The important point is that the semester plan is not set up with specific assignments over Christmas, so that any studying that is done, would be on a voluntary basis. Of your college friends, at semester schools, how many of them "really studied" over this past vacation? Also ask yourself, how much studying you do over the Thanksgiving vacation?

Another popular belief about the semester system is that it forces you to "suffer through" six extra weeks of a dull course or a poor instructor. However the opposite is also true; you enjoy six extra weeks of a good course or a good in-
structor. To us it seems like a toss-up, unless you don't like any of your courses, and then you're in the wrong curricu-

A third prevalent belief is that a semester plan would cut down the variety of courses you could take. Again, this is true, but how significant would this reduction be? First of all it would only pertain to your "electives," i.e. courses where you are allowed a choice. Many majors allow little or no choice, so that it would be just a matter of reorgani-

zizing the course material along semester lines. In the other majors where "electives" are available, a great deal of ex-

panding, concentrating, and combining would take place. Some desirable one-quarter courses would be expanded; oth-
ers would be combined with related courses to make a se-

mester course. Some two-quarter sequence courses would be concentrated into one semester; others would be expanded or combined with related subjects to make two semester's work. "There would be very few courses entirely eliminated under such a reorganization," is the opinion of Dr. Gowan.

The last intensive study of the situation was made in 1952 and at that time, the faculty was in favor of the semes-
ter plan, according to the results of a detailed questionnaire sent to each faculty member. They felt that the semester system would be more effective in presenting subject mat-
ter, in learning subject matter, and in using efficiently the time of the faculty and student. In other words, our teach-
ers feel we would get more out of Iowa State under a semes-
ter system. If we are here to get "an education," what stronger argument could there be? The study committee felt that, "switching to the semester system would improve the scholarship of the students. There would be fewer fail-
ures and fewer people on probation." With approximately ¼ of the student body on probation this factor becomes quite important.

You may justifiably ask, why would the semester system be of such great advantage? There are probably five major reasons. First of all, it would allow a more relaxed and less hurried pace. The major fault of our quarter system is the hurried, rushed, almost desperate type of education. At present the student carrying a normal load of six courses, will perhaps be taking tests in two of them, letting two slide, and catching up on the other two. With a semester plan,
there would be less chance of cramming too much into one course. The present variation in the length of quarters, requires that 13 weeks of work taught in the fall be squeezed into 10 weeks of winter quarter and 12 weeks in spring quarter. With the semester plan of two equal 18-week semesters this would not be a problem.

Second, with a longer period to study a particular subject, we would learn more completely and thoroughly. Undoubtedly more specific detail of interest to the student will be included, while at the same time he will acquire a better understanding of the principles of a course. Our general educational objective in any course is to acquire a "working knowledge" and this could be better achieved under a semester plan.

Third, the semester plan would give the student a longer time to orient himself and to recover from a possible bad start (particularly after Christmas). Conversely it would give the instructor a better opportunity to become acquainted with his students and to evaluate their work.

Fourth, the vast majority of textbooks are designed for the semester system and correlate better with it. This fits in with the less hurried tempo of learning mentioned earlier, since it reduces the pressure of trying to get through a semester text in a quarter's time.

Fifth, there would be fewer tests. Obviously finals would be reduced by ½, while in other courses the length of time between tests would probably increase, resulting in fewer tests over the year. The normal student when studying for a test tends to let other courses slide. The Iowa State student seems to be studying constantly "for tests", rather than "for a working knowledge." This situation would be corrected to some extent with a semester plan, since there would probably be fewer tests per week.

Conclusion

Should Iowa State change to the semester system even though it would necessitate a great deal of work and re-organization? Should we as students have an interest in this issue? The answer, we feel, is YES to both questions. What do you think?

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