



Date: December 15, 2008

To: Timothy Gerber, Chair, ad hoc Committee on Semester Conversion
Christopher Highley, Chair, Arts and Sciences Committee on Curriculum and Instruction
John Roberts, Interim Dean, Colleges of the Arts and Humanities
Harald Vaessin, Member, Senate Fiscal Committee

From: Richard E. Hughes, Chair, MAPS Curriculum Committee

Re: Issues to consider on conversion from quarters to semesters

While we applaud the evaluation process that is currently underway for the potential conversion to semesters, we are concerned about the timeline for this process. If a report is not due from the evaluation committee until spring 2009, but the implementation date remains as autumn 2012, then all curricula decisions and SIS implementation would need to be completed by January 2012.

Thus, a go/no-go decision by spring 2009 leaves little time to completely orchestrate the complex changes needed for a conversion to semesters. This is particularly true with regard to the GEC requirements across the Arts & Sciences and especially for those departments that are involved in service courses to the entire university. While a conversion to semesters would provide an excellent opportunity for revolutionary changes in curriculum, we need to do this carefully in order to avoid adverse effects on our student population.

The following represents critical issues for MAPs in the conversion process, in order of importance. We hope the committee will be able to address them in their deliberations.

1) Length of semesters

Specifically, will semesters be 13 or 14 or 15 weeks long? Will both autumn and spring semesters be the same length? In terms of available days of instruction, our current 3-quarter academic year is roughly equivalent to two 14 week semesters. We encourage the committee to preserve the total days of instruction per year in the conversion.

2) Advantages of half-semester length courses

This is used by a number of our peer institutions (Penn State, Illinois, and Minnesota), and could be advantageous in a number of instances (for offering graduate courses, for example. In principle, the summer term could be one-half as long as a semester and

could provide flexibility for offering compressed courses (either graduate or undergraduate).

3) Standard credit hours/course

There needs to be a decision about the standard number of credit hours per course. Credit hours should reflect contact hours: 3 credit hours should equal 3 contact hours per week. We anticipate that the default credit hours should be 3 per course, and greater than 3 credits should be treated as exceptions (e.g. lecture plus lab courses). In addition, days of instruction are particularly important for introductory level sequence courses, and they may need to carry more credit hours as a result.

4) Credits/courses required for degree

The minimum number of credits for graduation with a B.A. and B.S. degree would presumably translate to approximately 40 courses (120 credit hours). How these courses are distributed across the number of major courses, GEC requirements (required laboratory sequences?), language requirements, etc. need to be decided promptly. Indeed, the GEC curriculum requirements needs to be decided as quickly as possible.

5) Correlation of semester credit hours and budgets

The new semester scheme must take into account the cost-of-instruction, particularly for laboratory courses. This aspect must be done very carefully.

6) Classroom space utilization:

Consistent and mandatory use of specific time slots throughout the week will ensure optimal use and scheduling of our classroom space.

Items (1) through (3) are needed as quickly as possible to help guide us in converting our current courses (particularly service courses) from quarters to semesters. Items (4) through (6) are next in importance, as they impact the overall design of our major curriculum. Item (4) will be of differential importance for certain units, and is critical for our planning purposes.

The conversion timeline appears to be quite compressed; we are urging the committee to provide indications of their thoughts on the above items as early in their deliberations as possible. Finally, we note that MAPS departments provide many service courses to a wide variety of majors outside of our college, and thus the conversion to semesters must be implemented simultaneously across the university.