

## Notes on the Semester vs. Quarter Debate

GARY Y. OKIHIRO, *Ethnic Studies*

The semester vs. quarter debate has over a decade of history here on campus. After a quiescent period of some three years, new life has been infused into the issue by the current statewide assessment of the quarter system in terms of cost-savings. Most of the discussion heretofore has been conducted on an elevated plane and largely limited to "educational" reasons. While that focus may reflect an ideal situation, perhaps a more realistic perspective is the practical one. A brief history of the debate illustrates this.

The following is a chronological summary of events which transpired on this campus in the semester vs. quarter debate.

c. January 1965 – President Siemens decides to convert to the quarter system beginning in Fall 1967.

May 26, 1966 – The Academic Senate unanimously approves a resolution which includes the following:

- (1) not to convert to the quarter system in Fall 1967;
- (2) when funds become available for year round operation, to convert to the 18-18-12 pattern; and
- (3) postpone conversion to Fall 1968.

September 1967 – Humboldt converts to the quarter system.

March 14, 1969 – Strahan, Academic Senate Chair, appoints an "Ad Hoc Committee to Study the Advisability of Return to the Semester Calendar for H.S.C."

May 5, 1969 – The Ad Hoc Committee submits its report.

- (1) The report weighed the issue on "educational

merits" and not, for example, on administrative ones.

- (2) A majority of the committee (4-1) found the semester system "slightly preferable" to the quarter system. The lone dissenting member, Cranston, favored a modified semester system called the 4-1-4-3 plan.

- (3) The report included a faculty poll conducted April 1969. The poll showed that

52.1% indicated a strong preference to return to the semester system,

13.8% indicated a preference to return to the semester system,

5.7% indicated no preference,

18.0% indicated a preference to retain the quarter system, and

10.4% indicated a strong preference to retain the quarter system.

May 15, 1969 – The Academic Senate adopts the Ad Hoc Committee's report (passed with one negative vote and three abstentions) and proposes that serious consideration be given to Cranston's 4-1-4-3 plan.

May 22, 1969 – President Siemens responds to the Senate's resolution of May 15. In his letter, he points out that in c.1961, the State legislature in its Master Plan for Higher Education agreed that both CSU and UC "should" move to the quarter system, and that both the Trustees and Regents had concurred. It thus became "state policy" to implement that conversion by the mid-1970's, and therefore "I am not free to approve any plan different from 3-3-3-3."

January/February 1973 – A faculty poll finds that 124 or 37.5% favor the quarter system, and 183 or 55.3% favor the semester system.

February 22, 1973 – An SLC sponsored poll of students indicate that

1,038 or 79% prefer the quarter system, and  
273 or 20% prefer the semester system.

April 18, 1974 – The Senate appoints an “*Ad Hoc* Committee to Study a Return to the Semester System.”

February 4, 1975 – the *Ad Hoc* Committee submits its report which

- (1) accepts the general validity of the faculty poll of January/February 1973;
- (2) recommends a more thorough faculty referendum on the issue;
- (3) recommends waiting for a student referendum on the issue; and
- (4) recommends that the Senate adopt a resolution urging a return to the semester system in the event that the faculty and student polls indicate such a preference.

February 20, 1975 – The Senate adopts the report of the *Ad Hoc* Committee.

March 1975 – The SLC sends a communication to the Senate opposing a return to the semester system.

Spring 1975 – A student referendum (N = 1,230) indicates that  
1,013 or 82% favor the quarter system, and  
217 or 17% favor the semester system.

October 1975 – A “scientifically” designed student survey (N = 127) indicates that 73% prefer the quarter system while 27% prefer the semester system.

February 22, 1979 – The Senate recommends that HSU continue on the quarter system.

For many, the issue of semester vs. quarter was complicated by the current reality of declining enrollment, Proposition 13, a budget which has not

kept pace with inflation, and a ten percent cut. Perhaps in earlier euphoric times, when year round operation was being proposed, the semester vs. quarter issue could have been debated on purely educational merits alone. Under present circumstances, however, when there is a freeze on curriculum development and discussion of laying off faculty and eliminating entire programs because of economic strictures, the economic impact of returning to the semester system held decided educational implications.

While the brief history outlines above points to the divided nature of the academic community, both within the teaching profession and between faculty and students, it also illustrates the reality that the institution can choose to function undemocratically. It is ironic that the original mandate to change from a semester to a quarter system was justified in terms of economics and the efficient use of the physical plant, while the most recent proponents of the return to the semester system have also justified that in terms of cost-savings. Apparently educational concerns become secondary to economic ones in the light of “fiscal responsibility.” Perhaps from that perspective, the most effective line of resistance against such a return would be the economic impact and not the reasoned educational benefits. In any case, from the practical lessons of history, if there is to be a return to the semester system, it will likely transpire because of a “recommendation” (mandate) from the top down.