Concept Paper:

Balanced Trimester Plan for Purdue University

This concept paper describes a transformation of the university calendar from the current fall and spring semesters with Maymester and a lightly-utilized summer session, to a calendar with three equal trimesters. Each trimester would run 14 weeks of instruction over 15 weeks, with an additional week for finals and a week for preparation, and another week off at the end of the calendar year.

Why make the change?

• The agricultural calendar with a summer break is no longer necessary, as buildings are air-conditioned and there are fewer farm families.
• A balanced trimester schedule would allow for a gradual and relatively graceful transition from two semesters to full-year programming.
• Core courses offered three times per year would allow students to accelerate their degree progress, and would minimize scheduling problems associated with advanced placement credit. Students with means and stamina could complete eight full trimesters in 2 and 2/3 years. In general, more flexibility would result in reduced time-to-degree.
• A balanced trimester schedule would offer more flexible accommodation of co-ops, internships, service learning and study abroad (incl. southern hemisphere opportunities).
• Buildings would be better utilized. Hence, the campus could accommodate more students at a lower cost per student.
• Most faculty members and graduate students are on campus the full year anyway.
• Most faculty members would be able to choose (within scheduling limits) which trimester they would prefer to take off from classroom teaching, or they could elect to teach year-round.

Issues and Challenges

Impact on Faculty Workload: Instead of paying faculty for nine months over 10 payments, and then using external sources to cover summer salary, faculty would be employed on a FY or calendar year basis. The typical tenure-track faculty member would be at 0.75 FTE from general funds, and would receive 12 monthly paychecks. Workload in terms of teaching would be roughly equivalent with what we have today (varies with discipline). For example, a faculty member who teaches three regular courses a year today (say two in the fall and one in the spring), would still teach three. One of those might be during the summer. Salary derived from external sources would be spread throughout the year, a structure that is better aligned with the actual distribution of effort. Faculty members could buy out of teaching as they do today by paying part of their general fund salary from external sources. The number of core courses (courses required by a major field that are
taught every semester) taught each year would increase by 30-50%. Elective courses would not need to be taught every trimester. Faculty would be expected to be in residence all year, except when taking vacation or traveling on university business. Sabbaticals would be similar to what they are today, but could be 1, 2 or 3 trimesters. The university would partially fund sabbaticals, and faculty would not be expected nor encouraged to remain on campus during a sabbatical.

*Cohort synchronization:* The flexibility of the balanced trimester could reduce the synchronization of cohorts, as more students took advantage of the flexible schedule for study abroad, internships, etc. To the degree that synchronization is important to retention, the flexible schedule might be detrimental. It is important to recognize, however, that we already have many students with asynchronous schedules. Today’s Purdue students do not complete degrees following the conventional template of eight semesters in four years. Of the cohort beginning in fall 2004, only 33.4% completed their baccalaureate degrees in May 2008. Only 16.7% finished in May 2008 without attending summer school. Hence, it is a minority of students who stay with their cohort for four years until graduation. By allowing more flexibility with a balanced trimester, the impact of the loss of cohort synchronization will be minimal.

*Schedule Compression:* The balanced trimester schedule would probably require a shift from 15 instructional weeks in a semester, to 14 instructional weeks in a trimester (see appended sample schedule). Thus, each course would need to be compressed by about 7%, corresponding to, for example, an extra 10-11 minutes of class time per week for a conventional 3-credit course. This could be accommodated by extending the typical lecture time by ~3-5 minutes. To maintain a schedule that is similar to today’s, the time between classes would be reduced to 10-12 minutes, which would be a challenge given the size of Purdue’s WL campus.

*Impact on Facilities:* Facility usage would gradually increase as the summer trimester is populated. At full utilization, the campus could accommodate 30-50% more students in a given year. Tuition revenue would increase accordingly. Completion rates should increase, as offerings in the summer trimester would not be limiting. It is important to note that most research-active faculty and most graduate students work on campus year-round anyway. Scheduling construction and R&R would be more challenging. Most large projects cannot be completed in a summer anyway.

*Impact on Staff:* Most staff work year-round today. The principal challenge would be adapting to the lack of a slow season, although that transformation would be gradual. Business offices would need to close out fiscal year during an active semester unless the fiscal year were changed to the calendar year. Scheduling would present challenges in the transition. Admissions would likely retain a fall focus, but would have to evolve to allow for beginners in the winter and summer.
Sample Calendar: For example, in the calendar year 2010, we would have scheduled as follows:

- Prep week from 3Jan-9Jan
- 14 instructional weeks of spring trimester over 15 weeks from 10Jan-24Apr, including one week off for spring break.
- Finals week from 25Apr-1May
- Prep week from 2May-8May
- 14 instructional weeks of summer trimester over 15 weeks from 9May-21Aug, including one week off for holidays
- Finals week from 22Aug-28Aug
- Prep week from 29Aug-4Sept
- 14 instructional weeks of fall trimester over 15 weeks from 5Sept-18Dec including one week for holidays
- Finals week from 19Dec-25Dec* (some special issues with respect to finals)
- Winter holiday from 26Dec-1Jan

Recommended Next Step:

Assign a Provost Fellow and/or form a task force to explore the concept further, including issues such as compliance with state and federal laws, ICHE approval processes, fiscal impact, impact on students, staff and faculty, etc. The Fellow or task force would research current and past balanced trimester models implemented at other universities worldwide to understand the limitations of the balanced trimester. A cursory search revealed only one example, a NY liberal arts college in the 1960s. The experiment failed because the implementation was abrupt and inflexible. The college attempted to admit three classes at three times in the year to retain synchronization of cohorts. Today, we know that such synchronization is not desirable or practical.