



UPDATE

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Compressed Calendar Task Force: An Update

by Mary Pierce, Communication Studies Instructor and Task Force Chair

Last spring, everyone in the District was invited to complete a survey evaluating possible alternate semester lengths at SRJC. This was a collaboration between the AFA/ Academic Senate Compressed Calendar Task Force and the Office of Institutional Research, and we were pleased to collect 500 responses from faculty, staff, and administration. We found that 67 percent of respondents are in favor of compressing the calendar, compared with 19 percent who prefer no changes. Fifteen percent had no opinion. Our interest in adjusting semester length mirrors a trend in higher education across the country, and that is to identify optimal instructional timeframes for student success. For example, *Community College Journal of Research and Practice* published a study this year showing that students taking developmental-level courses were more likely to succeed in compressed-format courses than developmental students enrolled in regular-length courses (Sheldon and Durdella, 2010). In California, 54 of our 110 community colleges have adopted alternate calendars, and another 10 are considering doing so, including San Mateo CCD, Mendocino-Lake CCD, and Diablo Valley College. (Click [here](#) to see the official list.)



What else did the survey reveal?

Survey questions were based on the assumption that compressing the calendar means altering the academic schedule from an 18-week to a 17- or 16-week semester without loss of instructional time in the classroom.

- Twice as many survey respondents prefer 16 weeks to 17.
 - 62 percent of faculty respondents prefer to continue teaching two days a week for most classes.
 - 51 percent of faculty respondents prefer to keep spring break in the middle of spring semester.
 - 62 percent of faculty respondents prefer to give finals during the last week of classes instead of having a separate finals schedule.
- A majority of respondents is interested in lengthening winter break, creating the possibility of offering a handful of winter intersession classes when enrollment growth is desired. Many wrote comments identifying concerns and potential benefits of compressing the calendar, so the survey results provide a pretty clear picture of how these changes would affect SRJC. (Click [here](#) to read the original survey, voter's guide, and all the results.)

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What do SRJC students think?

The task force also distributed and collected a student survey during spring semester, 2010. The Office of Institutional Research randomly selected 19 course sections to respond to the survey; this strategy provides 95 percent confidence rating in results. The instructors of these 19 sections were asked to read a brief paragraph of instructions to their students to ensure consistency in how the surveys were administered, and results were scanned and collated by the Office of Institutional Research.

- 62.6 percent of our students are in favor of a compressed calendar at SRJC, compared with 16 percent who prefer the current semester length; 15.4 percent had no opinion.
- 62.3 percent prefer to take finals on the last one or two days of class, without changing class time or duration.
- 67.8 percent prefer classes that meet two days a week.
- 53 percent prefer spring break in the middle of spring semester.
- 37 percent would take intensively scheduled classes during winter break to fast-track their educations (another 33 percent said they might, and 19 percent said they would not).
- 31 percent prefer lengthening the summer session with more/longer classes, again to fast-track their educations.

(Click [here](#) to read the original student survey and statistical results.)

What's next?

With all this data on the table, the Compressed Calendar Task Force is continuing its work this

year to evaluate the possibility of moving to an alternate calendar at SRJC. Last year we focused primarily on instructional issues, identifying discipline-specific preferences for changing or not changing the schedule. We collected a great deal of information, much of which is available on our project Web pages. (Click [here](#) for the Compressed



Calendar Task Force home page.) This year we have broadened our scope to more carefully consider the impact to all areas of the District and identify best practices for implementation. Task Force membership has expanded to include some very insightful participants: Diane

Traversi, Director of Admissions and Records; Doug Kuula, SEIU President and Coordinator for Science Labs; and Robert Ethington, Director of Student Affairs. Fortunately, most of the faculty representatives who served last year are continuing with the project this year. We have invited administrators to participate as well; at this point, the District has proposed using the collective bargaining process to proceed. We hope to identify a model for a new schedule at SRJC that would respond to survey results; provide increased flexibility in scheduling fall, spring, and summer courses; and offer potential cost savings to the District by minimizing use of some instructional facilities during additional weeks of the year.

This November we will be visiting Ohlone Community College in Fremont to conduct first-hand interviews with administrators, faculty, and staff who helped that district shift from 18-week semesters to 16-week semesters in 2006-07. Faculty at Ohlone Community College voted overwhelmingly in favor of an alternate

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schedule at an Academic Senate workshop in 2003; their district acted relatively quickly in response. During our visit we will be seeking general information about the conversion process, what went smoothly, and what they would suggest with the benefit of hindsight. We will also be gathering specific information about their scheduling templates, and how they maximized instructional time in the classroom and preserved apportionment levels from the State. We will be exploring how the conversion affected science labs, vocational programs, tutorial and college skills, library hours and programs, allied faculty schedules, and student life, and many other issues

Is this a done deal?

No, it's just the beginning of a District-wide conversation about some fundamental instructional issues. The task force was formed in response to

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years of anecdotal observations among faculty that an 18-week semester seems too long for our students. We also know that for some of our students, 6-week summer sessions are too short. Once we get accustomed to any particular schedule, we may get comfortable with a routine and forget to ask the questions: What works best for our students? How are they changing, and who are they now? What do they need from us to fit college successfully into

their lives? This project is SRJC's opportunity to address these questions, as so many other districts have done. I hope you will continue to think about these issues, talk about them in your departments, and contact your AFA and Senate representatives to share your views. Check out our Web pages for more information (click [here](#) for the Compressed Calendar Task Force home page)—or contact me directly at mpierce@santarosa.edu.

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Joint AFA/Academic Senate Compressed Calendar Task Force

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*(Stay tuned for an Update in
December re: CCTF's visit
to Ohlone College.)*

