
Compressed Calendar Negotiations Task Force Final Report

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AFA/Senate Task Force members (2009-2011): Mary Pierce (Chair), Cheryl Dunn, Robert Ethington, Robin Fautley, Douglas Kuula, Jerry Miller, Nancy Persons, Terry Shell, Audrey Spall, Eric Thompson, Diane Traversi

Background

In 2009, the All Faculty Association formed a Task Force to study the Compressed Calendar Task Force. This group consisted of faculty appointed by AFA and the Academic Senate, with a number of administrators and classified staff invited to participate based on their expertise. This group met, shared ideas, gathered input, and developed a website. (See http://www.santarosa.edu/afa/senate_home.shtml .)

In 2011, AFA and the District revised the task force to study the possibility of implementing a compressed calendar. Because the instructional calendar is a negotiated item that greatly affects faculty, staff, administration, and students, this decision to study the various possibilities required broad input and ultimately would require broad support in order to make any necessary changes. This group concluded its operations in Fall 2012.

Any change to the SRJC Academic Calendar requires Chancellor's Office review and approval. This review assures that community colleges meet the minimum requirements for the number of days and minutes of instruction in order to collect apportionment. (See California Education Code, Title 5, section 55701: Education Division; Division 6: California Community Colleges; Chapter 6: Curriculum and Instruction; Subchapter 8: Academic Calendar; Article 1: 175 Day Minimum Academic Calendar). The number of days of instruction must meet the 175-day rule. All 175 days "must be designated for course instruction and evaluation; professional development; development of learning resources; student personnel services; departmental or division meetings; or other duties as assigned by the District" (Education Code 55724).

AFA and District Negotiating Interests

The District and AFA shared many common interests in negotiating any changes to the calendar, and included the following key concerns:

- The calendar should address the learning needs of students, especially with respect to possible impacts on retention, success, persistence, and engagement;
- Changes to the calendar should not disproportionately or negatively impact particular disciplines and take into account all methods of instruction;
- Any changes should be data driven and validated with sufficient research;
- Changes should assure that faculty working conditions and pay remain the same and that faculty can productively use workdays to meet accreditation standards with regard to curriculum, program review, and student learning outcomes.

Initial Surveys 2010-11

Faculty, Staff, and Administrators Survey Summary

The AFA/Senate Task Force also prepared and implemented two comprehensive district-wide surveys of Faculty, Staff, Administration and Students. (See http://www.santarosa.edu/afa/senate_survey.shtml .) The results showed that every instructional department participated in the survey that went to Faculty, Staff, and Administrators with a total of 505 respondents. The questions covered several key areas: 1) perceived effectiveness of calendar compression; 2) preferences for teaching schedules; 3) preferences for placement of Spring Break and Final Exams; 4) preferences for length of the semester.

The preferences for length of semester showed:

- 22% preferred 18 weeks
- 21% preferred 17 weeks
- 44% preferred 16 weeks
- 12% had no preference

There was one question (number 27) that asked for a general preference for some kind of compression, and responses included:

- 67% of faculty, classified staff, and administrators responded that they were in favor of some version of a compressed calendar;
- 19% preferred no change, and
- 15% were unsure or had no opinion.

Student Survey Summary

The students were asked similar questions with the focus of those questions being the link to their education and career goals; 359 students responded to the survey. While the questions were not the same as those asked of the faculty, the students did respond from their perspective.

In response to a question regarding lengthening the summer break or offering more or longer classes during summer session

- 30.9% of students replied that they preferred lengthening the summer break while 11.3% preferred a longer winter break or an opportunity to take short/intensive classes during winter session.
- 38.7% wished to start each semester a week later and end the semester a week earlier.
- 12.8% had no opinion or were unsure.

Probably the most definite message was to have final exams take place during the last one or two days of classes as 62.3% of students stated that preference. Along those same lines, 62.6% of students were in favor of a compressed calendar of some kind.

While the District did assist in developing and administering the survey, the District Negotiating Team itself was not involved in developing these surveys, and the District Team wishes to go on record that the survey was biased in framing and wording, and the lack of detail regarding a proposed compressed calendar meant that respondents had no real way to judge the impact of compression on student learning and on the scheduling of many disciplines.

Academic Senate Discussion, Spring 2012

In Spring 2012 the Academic Senate devoted a session to reviewing the issues surrounding a compressed calendar, and faculty members were invited to present position papers related to their disciplines. (See <http://www.santarosa.edu/afa/senate/SenateCompCal.pdf>.)

Summary of Arguments in Favor from Position Papers presented to the Academic Senate

- Students become burned out during a long semester
- Research shows that a compressed calendar improves student retention at other campuses in the California Community System.
- A change would align our calendar more closely with our transfer institution and a majority of California Community Colleges who have elected to compress.
- A change would better align our calendar with the CSU and UC systems.
- A shorter semester would allow more preparation time between fall and spring semesters for both Academic Affairs and Student Services.
- Basic Skills students have a high attrition rate, especially as the end of the semester approaches.
- Some disciplines would be capable of dealing with the extra minutes of class time by frequently changing the modes of instruction and by allowing more time for in-depth discussion.

Summary of Arguments Against from Position Papers presented to the Academic Senate

- Diablo Valley College study showed decreased student success for students with learning disabilities, weak students, students with children, and math and science students.
- Care should be taken to not compare community college students with lower division students at UCs and CSUs. Our students are more likely to be underprepared, to work, and/or to be taking care of families.
- Pushing students harder and faster will not decrease fatigue and burnout. Students who need the most time to study and comprehend complex topics will be most severely affected.
- Compression would mean speeding up the pace of learning with longer class times and shorter hours to complete work.
- Students with jobs and families would have a more difficult time balancing longer school days and shorter intervals between tests and assignments.
- Time to process information is essential to learning, especially in math and sciences.
- It would be harder to engage in participatory governance, especially for faculty who teach laboratory classes.
- Nursing and Allied Health already have difficulty coordinating with clinical sites, and increasing the lengths of clinical rotations would make that even more difficult.
- Agriculture/Natural Resources cite various challenges with compression related to the speed of natural cycles and the strain put on animals, such as horses, in a shorter semester.
- Facilities space is already severely impacted. Increasing the number of minutes in a class would limit accessibility even further.
- Laboratory classes requiring staff support would be impacted by a longer day and shorter semester.
- Until a class template is made, it is impossible for faculty members to fully understand the impact compression would have on students, teachers, shared governance, or facilities.

Discipline-Specific Feedback

Beyond the district-wide survey, many departments passed resolutions either in support or against compressing the calendar. Generally speaking departments in the Arts, Humanities, Social, and Behavioral Sciences favored compression while faculty in the Sciences, especially the Lab Sciences, and performing arts were against the concept. Specific comments included:

- Agriculture and Natural Resources was unanimously opposed to the compressed calendar, due to the type of pedagogy, seasonal based curriculum, loss of lab content, and availability of space at Shone Farm, humane use of horses, need for clinical hours in Veterinary Technical program.
- The English faculty supported a compressed calendar while retaining the same instructional time (October 6, 2011).
- Interdisciplinary Studies in Philosophy, Humanities and Religious Studies stated that some members of the department are in favor of compression, but others are neutral; they do not have consensus.
- Nursing and Allied Health programs have unique challenges of coordinator with clinical sites and increasing the length of the clinical day is extremely difficulty.
- Karen Frindell Teuscher, Chemistry, administered a survey to lab faculty in the fifteen departments that offer lab classes; faculty members in 9 of them (60%) returned survey responses. The surveys show a disproportionate impact on lab classes in that the number of labs per day and the number of days for labs would have to be reduced. This would definitely affect students and their ability to move through their programs. Impacts included potential:
 - Loss of lab periods per day
 - Loss of open lab hours
 - Loss of time in between lab sections for breakdown and set up
 - Current problems with inadequate classified staff would be exacerbated
 - Number of days of instruction would be reduced, resulting in the loss of four lab experiments (the content of a lab cannot easily be shifted into the extra 10 to 15 minutes)
 - Review periods might be eliminated

It would seem that a compressed calendar could work very well in some departments and disciplines but would be challenging to implement across the District.

Compressed Calendar Task Force Findings and Recommendations

The Compressed Calendar Task Force considered five options:

Option A: 17-week calendar (16 weeks plus one week of finals)

Option B: 16-week calendar with no separate finals

Option C: 16-week calendar with a separate finals week (15 weeks plus 1 week of finals)

Option D: Remain with the 17.5-week calendar, and repurpose one day for professional development to even out the length of the semesters. (Increase from four to five days of compensated professional development, one of which could be used for department meetings, curriculum development, and SLO dialogue.)

Option E: Remain with the 17.5 week calendar, while exploring a variety of scheduling modes that could benefit students, including 6, 8, 12, and 15 week configurations. Model D and E could be implemented together.

The Task Force discussed the advantages and disadvantages of retaining or eliminating spring break. In the end the Task Force set this issue aside as one that needed further study and could be incorporated or not into any of the models.

In the end, the Task Force decided to focus on two very distinct options:

Option 1: 16 weeks with a separate finals week

The calendar 2013-14 under this option, for example, might theoretically run from August 23 through December 13, and for spring 2014 from January 17 PDA to May 17, 2014. This allows a winter break of almost four weeks. Additional days of professional development, instruction, and/or district work would be required before and after the semester or on Saturdays.

Initially in fall 2011 Diane Traversi, Director of Admissions, Records, and Enrollments found Student Services “overwhelmingly positive” in compressing the calendar and allowing a longer winter break. However, after hearing many of the possibly negative impacts on students, she later concluded that pedagogical concerns were more important than the extra processing time during winter break.

Abe Farkas, Dean of Educational and Support Services, provided a template of what the class schedule might look like with a 16-week Compressed Calendar. Within this template departments and disciplines would schedule the required number of minutes required by the state, passing periods would be sufficient for students needs, final exams would be scheduled in Week 16 for compressed classes, and professional development activities would be scheduled before or after each semester. (See http://www.santarosa.edu/afa/senate/16_Week_Template.pdf .)

Option 2: Add on additional PDA and explore scheduling options

Remain with the 17.5-week calendar, and repurpose one day for professional development to even out the length of the semesters. (Increase from four to five days of compensated professional development; the extra day could be used for compensated department meetings, curriculum development, and SLO dialogue.) In addition, the District would explore a variety of scheduling modes that could benefit students, including 6, 8, 12, and 15-week configurations as well as innovative weekend programs.

Recommendation: The Task Force is not recommending either option, but rather is sending forward both options for a college-wide discussion and consideration by the AFA and District Negotiating Teams.