

Compressing the Calendar at SRJC:

A Voter's Guide

We know you're busy, so we've written this handy guide to help you respond to the SRJC Compressed Calendar Survey. We have listened to arguments in favor of and against shortening the semester length and summarized our findings to help you make your choices.

This survey is geared towards identifying best instructional practices; non-teaching faculty, staff and administrators should answer the survey with the students' best interests in mind. Allied faculty and many other employees at SRJC have asked how their schedules might change if we compress the calendar; these issues will be addressed by our bargaining units if the survey reveals an interest in pursuing a compressed calendar at SRJC.

1) Length of Semester

The essential question of this project is whether or not SRJC should shorten the length of its semesters. At SRJC, shortening the semesters would not result in reducing overall teaching time in the classroom, nor would it result in a reduction of pay or benefits. It would result in a reconfiguration of our teaching template: classes would be slightly longer each day but the semesters would begin later and/or end earlier.

Reasons for Keeping the Current Semester Length

Our complicated curriculum across many disciplines puts a strain on facilities, faculty, and staff. Restructuring the teaching template would require many changes. Faculty would have to restructure courses to fit the new template. Here are reasons some might vote to keep the current semester length.

- Current semester length allows for maximum number of labs to be offered in conjunction with lecture classes; shortening the semester could mean canceling one or two labs or combining related activities
- Shorter class and lab times may make it easier for students to stay focused
- Instructors have more time between exams and assignments to grade and return papers
- Students have more time to process information and complete assignments
- Faculty have a shorter overall teaching day, making it easier to participate in college service activities
- Shorter classes and having assignments farther apart may make it easier for working students and parents to keep up with their studies
- Under a compressed calendar, departments that work in facilities that are already fully booked would have to make difficult adjustments to courses and other instructional activities

Reasons for Compressing the Semester Length

Colleges across the United States are converting semesters to 16 or 17 weeks. In California, 54 Community Colleges have reduced overall length of semesters and 9 additional colleges are considering doing so. No college has ever applied to revert back after the change.

- Studies show that shortening the semester length does not negatively impact student retention or success; in fact, most studies show a small but statistically significant increase in those factors. (Link to References section)
- Longer classes and lab meetings would allow more time for active learning and discussion
- Longer summer and winter breaks would help students who need to work while not in classes
- Shorter semesters more closely align with UC and CSU formats
- Shortening the semesters would offer an opportunity for a longer summer session or inclusion of winter intersession (when FTES growth is desired)
- Longer winter break would allow faculty more opportunities to make changes to spring classes; the current 3 week break is not enough time to incorporate meaningful changes during the holidays
- Classified and support staff would have more time to complete projects, tend facilities and instructional equipment, catch up, and rest between semesters
- Admissions and Records, Financial Aid and Scholarship Offices would have more time to process students paperwork
- Students would benefit by having more time to meet with Counselors and other student services between semesters
- SRT would be guaranteed the 12 weeks it needs to complete its program without impacting fall and spring semesters
- Fall semester could end at least one week before seasonal holidays; spring semester could begin after Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday
- With a compressed calendar, floating PDA days could be moved to the days before the semester begins, reducing disruption to instruction

2) Impact on Summer/Winter Breaks

Some colleges with compressed calendars start the spring semester much later than we do and offer a Winter Intersession (short courses between semesters). Some colleges are not currently offering a winter intersession but have left space in the schedule for this option when growth is desired. Some colleges opt for a longer, more flexible summer session.

Reasons for Lengthening Summer Session

- Compressing the calendar can result in a longer summer break without lengthening summer session
- Compressing the calendar offers the potential for a 10 week summer session, while continuing to include 6 and 8 week sessions

- Longer summer session may allow some departments to offer additional courses during this time, providing students with more options

Reasons for Lengthening Winter Break

- Faculty can use more time off between semesters to rest, recharge, and prepare for spring classes
- Students can use more time to rest, recharge, and/or earn income
- Classified and support staff would have more time to process grades and prepare for spring semester.
- Compressing the calendar offers the potential for a short winter intersession when FTES growth is desired
- Compressing the calendar offers more time for facilities maintenance between semesters
- Several departments have expressed interest in offering short, .5 or 1 unit preparatory courses that complement our traditional, semester-length offerings

3) *Teaching Schedule*

Compressing the calendar would allow us to re-include Fridays as a teaching day if desired. Some disciplines wish to offer shorter classes more frequently, particularly at the basic skills level. Other disciplines prefer to offer longer classes less frequently, and do not wish to re-include Fridays. We have an opportunity to offer both teaching templates and leave the choice up to departments based on best teaching practices. This would create a more complex teaching template than we currently have, and would be dependent on facility availability.

We do not have to re-include Fridays as a teaching day to compress the calendar. Some colleges on compressed calendars do, some don't. Some colleges use the compressed calendar as an opportunity to develop weekend college and fast-track programs, using Fridays, Saturday, and Sundays for various courses. This survey will help us identify the preferences at SRJC.

Points to consider as you complete the survey:

- Some disciplines wish to offer shorter classes more frequently (for example: Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday)
- Some classes (particularly with labs) may be too long for students under a compressed calendar and will need to be divided into more days per week
- Some disciplines prefer the current model of teaching longer classes on fewer days
- Offering more classes on Fridays would result in better facility utilization, as many classrooms are empty on Fridays

4) *Spring Break*

Some colleges have determined that student motivation is negatively affected by spring break and have opted to move the vacation days to another time. Some colleges have shortened their semesters but continue to offer spring break.

Reasons to Keep Spring Break

This time-honored tradition gives faculty and students a chance to rest before completing spring semester.

- Currently we hold spring break half way through spring semester, which is important for short-term classes
- Students use spring break to catch up on projects; instructors catch up with grading and preparation
- Students, faculty, and anyone else taking the week off benefit from the chance to rest and enjoy seasonal changes

Reasons to Change Spring Break

Many faculty have noticed that spring break can have a negative effect on student performance and motivation. For this reason, some colleges have opted to move the vacation days, adding length to summer or winter break.

- Spring break can negatively effect the momentum of a class and student retention and success
- Timing of spring break remains controversial; moving the vacation days out of the instructional semester aligns spring and fall semesters more closely
- Classified staff and administrators who wish to take spring break could continue to take personal vacation days if desired
- Instructional faculty might make better use of the week as part of summer or winter break: preparing for classes, teaching intersession courses, rest, travel

5) Finals Schedule

This project gives us an opportunity to evaluate how we give final exams. Currently, some instructors give a comprehensive final exam that requires the full 2 hours and 45 minutes to complete. Instructors who teach labs could offer such exams during lab time. Some instructors give cumulative finals that can be given in a shorter time frame, or split between two class periods. Some instructors require presentations, which could be split between two class periods.

Reasons to Continue Scheduling Separate Finals Week

Currently we end instruction after 17 weeks and have a separate finals week during the 18th week of the semester. Instructors are required to give a final during finals week and some instructors use all the time available for test-giving. Exams are spaced apart on a template that tends to give students a break between exams.

- Some instructors prefer to give a comprehensive final exam that requires all the time available.
- Retaining the separate finals-week template provides a break of at least a weekend for students to review and prepare for the final.

Reasons to Integrate Finals into Regular Class Schedule

Instead of a separate finals schedule, the semester could follow the same schedule throughout, and final exams (or other terminal activities) could be included in the last one or two meetings, much as it is already handled for summer, late start and short courses.

- Instructors would have more flexibility about how to offer finals. Instructors could divide a final exam into two parts, spread student presentations over two sessions, or offer exams during lab time.
- Faculty preferring one-day finals could use the first day of finals week to review material, using the overall time allowed for finals more efficiently
- Classes would meet during the same times and days of the week through the end of the semester, maximizing schedule predictability for students. The current finals schedule can create difficulties for students who plan classes around work and parenting.

Overall Opinions

Final questions on the survey give you a chance to express yourself. You may draw on the information in this Voter's Guide or share opinions of your own. Thank you for taking the time to give us important feedback.