

## **Alternate Academic Calendars and the Trimester System: Profiles and Compliance**

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In this report, The Hanover Research Council examines the trends and practices behind the trimester and other academic calendar units. We examine first the prevalence of the trimester system among American colleges and universities, as well as more general calendaring trends encountered in our examination of the issue. A second section details the academic calendars of institutions currently operating on a trimester system, while the third section details the advantages and disadvantages of alternate academic calendars. The final section looks at compliance issues for federal financial aid, state law, and accreditation requirements.

## Academic Calendars and the Trimester System: An Overview

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The most commonly used academic calendar by postsecondary institutions in the United States is the semester system; however, the use of alternate academic calendars is growing among institutions hoping to better suit the needs of their students and maximize campus resources. In this report we primarily focus on the trimester academic calendar, with mention of the integration of the 14-week semester in an alternate academic calendar.

Historically, the trimester system has not seen very wide use. The vast majority of institutions use the two-semester system with an optional summer session. In 2004, the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers conducted a survey of its member institutions, the results of which showed the rarity of the trimester system at the time.<sup>1</sup>

Academic Calendar Type	% of Institutions Using Calendar
Trimester	3.8%
Other	6.7%
4-1-4	8.4%
Semester	81.1%

Though this survey was conducted in 2004, a look at *U.S. News & World Report's* 2010 college listings found 28 institutions claiming to use trimester-based academic calendars, further supporting the survey's claims regarding the trimester system's rarity.<sup>2</sup> Further examination by Hanover extended this count by only four.

Only slightly more popular is the 4-1-4 academic calendar system, which “usually consists of 4 courses taken for 4 months, 1 course taken for 1 month, and 4 courses taken for 4 months.” A summer session may be included in this type of system.<sup>3</sup>

Academic calendars with 14-week semesters often follow a structure closely related to the 4-1-4 calendar. The semesters are often divided into seven-week halves, with mid-terms scheduled after the first half and finals after the second. Typically, the fall semester begins during the last week of August or the first week of September and ends during the beginning or middle of December. The fall and spring terms typically are divided by a winter vacation lasting three weeks to one month or a brief

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<sup>1</sup> American Association of College Registrars and Admissions Officers, Grades and Grading Practices Report. Available at: [http://www.aacrao.org/pro\\_development/surveys/Grades\\_and\\_Grading\\_Practices\\_Report\\_2004.pdf](http://www.aacrao.org/pro_development/surveys/Grades_and_Grading_Practices_Report_2004.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Institutions identified through: “Best Colleges 2010.” *U.S. News & World Report*. <http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/>

<sup>3</sup> “Glossary.” Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System. <http://nces.ed.gov/Iped/glossary/index.asp?id=247>

intersession, sometimes called a “J-term.” It is this brief intersession that allows most institutions with 14-week semesters to meet federal 30-week requirements. A rarer way to meet this requirement is simply to extend the length of each course meeting during the 28-week period.

At institutions with 14-week semesters, the spring semester starts in mid-to-late January and ends during the last week of April or the beginning of May. As with institutions using regular 15/16-week semester calendars, institutions with 14-week semesters have summer terms of varying lengths. One of the main benefits of shortened semesters is that it makes room for intersessions in January and May, similar to the 4-1-4 system used by some liberal arts colleges, and allows for longer summer sessions, though as we shall see, not necessarily 14 weeks long.

To inform a transition to a proposed 14-week trimester calendar, this report provides brief profiles of institutions identified either by *U.S. News & World Report* or The Hanover Research Council in order to more closely examine the variations in trimester system academic calendars. These profiles, found in the table of the following page, detail the start, finish, exam, and vacation dates for each of the institutions. Following the profiles, the report turns to the advantages and disadvantages of the trimester and/or 14-week semester system as reported by institutional administrative bodies that have either implemented the system or closely examined the implementation of such a system. A final section details federal law, state law, and relevant accreditation agency compliance regarding alternative academic calendars and institutional eligibility for federal financial aid or accreditation.

It should be noted that some confusion apparently exists even amongst university administrators as to the exact term appropriate to describe the trimester system. For instance, a number of institutions are billed as having trimester systems when, in fact, they use what is essentially a quarter-based semester system with a significantly shorter summer session. For the purposes of this report, we will exclude these types of “trimester systems,” and instead focus our research on systems wherein the academic year is divided into three roughly equal parts (plus a fourth summer period of lesser length). While it is tempting to say that all institutions with a trimester system require students to take courses in three consecutive terms, as with quarter systems, there are exceptions. At the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, for example, students are only required to take courses during two of the three terms offered.

## **Key Findings**

The review of institutions with trimester-based or other alternate academic calendar systems found some variance with regard to the implementation of this type of calendar system. These findings are discussed below, however, it should be noted that given that the movement toward shortened/trimester terms is fairly recent in

many cases, the trends and consequences of these types of academic calendars are not yet fully apparent.<sup>4</sup>

- ❖ **Trimester length:** Trimester lengths were found to range from nine weeks at the low end to fifteen weeks at the high end. Trimester calendars generally include a summer session with a course period that is shorter than it would be in a quarter system and takes place between the spring and fall trimesters. The use of a summer session is not, however, uniform across all institutions. Carleton College's lack of a summer term, for example, partially explains how the institution can be said to have a trimester system despite the fact that its trimesters run the same length as a typical quarter.
- ❖ **Breaks:** Some institutions, despite the shorter length of the trimester, retained the typical structure of a semester with regard to standard student vacations, i.e., Fall Break and Spring Break.
- ❖ **Applicability:** It is sometimes the case that the alternate calendar system is only implemented for a particular college or school within a larger university. Such is the case with the School of Education at the University of Alaska—Anchorage and the Goldfarb School of Nursing at Barnes Jewish College.
- ❖ **Divisions:** It is not uncommon to see institutions dividing their trimesters into halves: say, Spring I, Spring II, Fall I, and so on. In these cases, divisions tend to coincide with midterm examinations. In some cases, though, institutions such as Wilmington University offer seven-week courses, two of which can fit into any given trimester.
- ❖ **Impacts:** There are both positive and negative impacts to the implementation of this type of alternate academic calendar in terms of efficiency, academic quality, and student/faculty reactions.
- ❖ **Compliance with Federal Law, State Law, and Accreditation:** As long as the proper notification procedures are followed and the institution continues to meet credit hour/contact hour requirements, then the trimester system does not appear to be a barrier to compliance.

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<sup>4</sup> "UCAP Meeting of 1/10/2002," *Michigan State University*, <http://ucap.msu.edu/domsite/msu/committees/ucap/ucap.nsf/52cab3faf5990642852567e90076dd1f/98d849e2d614778485256b3600661d5d?OpenDocument>; and Arthur Iruilli, "College to Shorten Semester Length," *The College Voice*, March 31, 2006.

## Alternate Calendar System Profiles

**Figure 1: Institutions Operating on a Trimester Basis<sup>5</sup>**

University	First Trimester				Second Trimester				Third Trimester			
	Classes Begin	Break	Classes End	Exams	Classes Begin	Break	Classes End	Exams	Classes Begin	Break	Classes End	Exams
Brigham Young University–Idaho <sup>6</sup>	9/10	11/26-11/27	12/16	12/17-12/19	1/5	1/18, 2/15	4/7	4/8-4/10	4/20	5/31, 7/4	7/21	7/22-7/24
Lawrence University <sup>7</sup>	9/24	11/26-11/30	12/5	12/9-12/12	1/5	1/19	3/13	3/17-3/20	3/30	5/7-5/10	6/5	6/8-6/11
Carleton College <sup>8</sup>	9/14	10/17-10/19	11/18	11/21-11/23	1/4	2/8	3/10	3/13-3/15	3/29	5/3	6/2	6/5-6/7
Northwestern Polytechnic University <sup>9</sup>	9/7	11/26	12/14	12/15-12/20	1/11	--	4/19	4/20-4/24	5/10	7/4	8/16	8/17-8/21
College of the Atlantic <sup>10</sup>	9/10	10/29-10/30	11/20	--	1/4	1/18	3/12	--	3/29	--	6/4	--
University of Alaska–Anchorage School of Education <sup>11</sup>	9/7	--	12/19	--	1/11	--	4/24	--	5/10	--	8/20	--
Knox College <sup>12</sup>	9/10	--	11/18	11/19-11/21	1/4	--	3/10	3/11-3/13	3/24	--	5/29	5/30-6/1
Union College <sup>13</sup>	9/9	--	11/17	11/19-11/24	1/4	--	3/12	3/15-3/18	3/29	--	6/4	6/7-6/10
Mercyhurst College <sup>14</sup>	9/1	10/14-10/17	11/11	11/15-11/17	11/29	12/20-1/2	2/18	2/21-2/23	3/5	4/22	5/13	5/16-5/18

<sup>5</sup> Categories marked -- indicate that the pertinent information was unavailable on the institution's website.

<sup>6</sup> "Brigham Young University – Idaho: Calendar 2009-2010." Brigham Young University – Idaho. <http://www.byui.edu/Catalog/2009-2010/calendar.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> "Lawrence University Academic Calendar." Lawrence University. <http://www.lawrence.edu/dept/registrar/cal0809.shtml>

<sup>8</sup> "2008-2014 Academic Calendar." Carleton College. [http://apps.carleton.edu/calendar/academic/assets/Academic\\_Calendar\\_08\\_14.pdf](http://apps.carleton.edu/calendar/academic/assets/Academic_Calendar_08_14.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> "Academic Calendar." Northwestern Polytechnic University. [http://www.npu.edu/academics/academic\\_calendar.shtml](http://www.npu.edu/academics/academic_calendar.shtml)

<sup>10</sup> "Academic Calendar." College of the Atlantic. <http://www.coa.edu/academiccalendars.htm>

<sup>11</sup> "Academic Calendar." University of Alaska Anchorage School of Education. <http://www.uaa.alaska.edu/academicaffairs/upload/Academic-Calendar-Summary6.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> "Academic Calendar." Knox College. <http://www.knox.edu/Academics/Academic-Calendar.html>

<sup>13</sup> "Academic Calendar 2009-2010." Union College. <http://www.union.edu/Academics/Calendar/>

<sup>14</sup> "2010-2011 Academic Calendar." Mercyhurst College. <http://www.mercyhurst.edu/files/academics/calendar/10-11-final-calendar.pdf>

University	First Trimester				Second Trimester				Third Trimester			
	Classes Begin	Break	Classes End	Exams	Classes Begin	Break	Classes End	Exams	Classes Begin	Break	Classes End	Exams
Granite State College <sup>15</sup> ( <i>uses a trimester plus an optional 8 week summer term</i> ) <sup>16</sup>	9/12	11/23-11/29	12/11	--	1/9	--	4/2	--	4/10	5/31	6/30	--
Hodges University <sup>17</sup>	1/14	4/2-4/4	4/28	--	5/13	7/2-7/5	8/25	--	9/9	10/25	12/22	--
Wilmington University <sup>18</sup>	9/8	--	12/22	--	1/11	--	5/2	--	5/10	--	8/23	--
University of Michigan--Ann Arbor <sup>19</sup>	9/8	11/25	12/14	12/16-12/18 and 12/21-12/23	1/6	2/27-3/7	4/20	4/22-4/23 and 4/26-4/29	5/4	--	8/17	8/19-8/20
Nova Southeastern University <sup>20</sup>	8/24	--	12/5	12/7-12/12	1/11	3/8-3/14	5/1	5/3-5/8	5/10	--	6/26	8/2-8/7
Briar Cliff University <sup>21</sup>	9/2	--	11/13	11/16-11/18	11/30	12/23-1/3	2/16	2/17-2/19	3/1	4/2-4/5	5/11	5/12-5/14
University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma <sup>22</sup>	5/26	7/3	7/28	7/29-7/31	8/24	10/15-10/16	12/1	12/2-12/4	1/8	3/15-3/19	4/19	4/21-4/23

<sup>15</sup> "Academic Calendar 2009-10." Granite State College. <http://www.granite.edu/academics/academiccalendar.aspx>

<sup>16</sup> "Self-Study 2006." Granite State College. P.2. <http://www.granite.edu/library/pdf/About/Mission%20and%20Accreditation/selfstudy/institutionalcharacteristics.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> "Academic Calendar." Hodges University. <http://www.hodges.edu/academics/calendar.aspx>

<sup>18</sup> "Academic Calendar." Wilmington University. <http://www.wilmu.edu/registrar/calendar.aspx>

<sup>19</sup> "Calendar 2009-2011." University of Michigan. P 1-2. <http://ro.umich.edu/calendar/pdfs/Cal%202009-2011.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> "Academic Calendars." Nova Southeastern University. <http://www.fcas.nova.edu/calendars/Fall2009.cfm>

<sup>21</sup> "Graduation Requirements - 2009-2010 Academic Calendar." Briar Cliff University. [http://www.briarcliff.edu/academics/academic\\_calendar.aspx](http://www.briarcliff.edu/academics/academic_calendar.aspx)

<sup>22</sup> "USAO Academic Calendar 2009-2010." University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma. [http://www.usao.edu/acad-calendar/calendar09\\_10.htm](http://www.usao.edu/acad-calendar/calendar09_10.htm)

## Potential Impacts of a Trimester System and Other Types of Academic Calendars

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Of course, alterations to institutional academic calendars don't happen in a vacuum. These alterations have the potential to positively and negatively impact virtually all aspects of a university, from operations to housing to enrollment to revenues and quality of education. Below, we examine some of the impacts of trimester and other alternate calendar systems through a review of the experiences of institutions using such a system. In particular, our review focuses on George Washington University, an excellent example of institutional planning in regards to a proposed 14-week trimester system.

### Efficiency

In the winter of 2003, George Washington University administrators examined the possibility of moving to a trimester system. Chief among the reasons put forth by administrators for the switch was a **more efficient utilization of the campus**. "We are maintaining and paying for our buildings and grounds 12 months a year, but we are actually using them fully a little more than half the year," claimed the university's former president, who proposed a 14-week trimester system in which students would be on campus two of three trimesters and faculty would teach two of three trimesters. According to the then-president, adoption of the system would allow the university to slightly **increase enrollment** while only having to accommodate 6,000 students during any trimester. This would decrease pressure to build more residence halls, increase revenues, and possibly bring about a decline in class sizes.<sup>23</sup>

Another gain in efficiency can be found through the **accommodation of additional terms**, such as intersessions and longer summer terms. For instance, rather than shutting down the campus early and offering longer vacations, some institutions like Michigan Technological University, Brigham Young University, and Weber State University transitioned to shorter semesters or to 14-week trimesters in part to make room in their academic calendars for intersessions and longer summer terms.<sup>24</sup> Several administrators mentioned that offering additional sessions would increase institutional revenues. Brigham Young University, for example, anticipated enrolling the same number of students for its 14-week summer term as its fall and spring terms.<sup>25</sup> As Stephen Joel Trachtenberg, George Washington University's former

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<sup>23</sup> "Trachtenberg Proposes Trimester System for GW,"

<http://www.gwu.edu/~bygeorge/nov19ByG1/trimesters.html>

<sup>24</sup> See: "Board Approves 14-Week Semester"; "The University Will Implement a New Semester Schedule Beginning in January"; and "Faculty Senate Agenda for September 20, 2007," *Weber State University*.

<http://faculty.weber.edu/senate/Minutes07-08/FS20Sep07.htm>

<sup>25</sup> Kendra Evensen, "The University Will Implement a New Semester Schedule Beginning in January," *Idaho Falls Post Register*, December 21, 2006

president, noted, “I have a campus and I have a lot of sunken resources ... you have to ask yourself if you are using your resources to their full potential.”<sup>26</sup>

### Faculty Perceptions

The George Washington University example also provides a look at potential pitfalls to this sort of calendar realignment. The former president of the university encountered **stiff resistance from faculty** almost immediately following his proposal of a trimester system. In short, the faculty calendar review committee took the president to task for the proposal of such a system, dismissing the proposal outright and decrying the system as requiring an inordinate increase in classroom time while compressing the actual time in which instructors can teach. They also raised questions over the effect of such a change on institutional eligibility for federal student aid; though there does exist a mechanism by which institutions with alternative calendar arrangements may qualify for federal aid, which is discussed later in this report.<sup>27</sup>

Yet at the same time, faculty may also find that the 14-week trimester system, which has the potential to give faculty – and students – **more time for research**, beneficial to their personal academic and personal pursuits. It may also allow for **more personal time** around major holidays – some universities, like Michigan Technological University, schedule a full week off for Thanksgiving vacation.<sup>28</sup>

### Accelerated Student Progress

Albertus Magnus College, in the 1990s, implemented a trimester system to **aid students in graduating earlier**. The idea was that students could take courses year round and graduate in three years. Very quickly, though, the program was **discontinued due to lack of student interest**. Still, the trimester system, if implemented among a student population with an interest in early completion and the drive to endure year-long education, could prove to be an attractive cost-cutter for students.<sup>29</sup>

Because the 14-week trimester system is often easier to **align to other systems’ academic calendars**, the implementation of this alternative system may also help higher education institutions better cater to non-traditional students. Several

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<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Mosheh Oinounou, “SJT proposes new trimester system: Group to look into new calendar system, proposal due early in May,” *The GW Hatchet* (George Washington University newspaper), November 25, 2002, <http://media.www.gwhatchet.com/media/storage/paper332/news/2002/11/25/News/Sjt-Proposes.Trimester.System-332422.shtml>.

<sup>27</sup> “The Report of the Educational Policy Committee on an Alternative Academic Calendar at The George Washington University,” [http://www.gwu.edu/~facsen/faculty\\_senate/pdf/EdPolCalendarRpt.pdf](http://www.gwu.edu/~facsen/faculty_senate/pdf/EdPolCalendarRpt.pdf)

<sup>28</sup> See: “Board Approves 14-Week Semester,” Michigan Tech. [http://www.admin.mtu.edu/urel/news/media\\_relations/112/](http://www.admin.mtu.edu/urel/news/media_relations/112/); and “The University Will Implement a New Semester Schedule Beginning in January”

<sup>29</sup> Jaschik, Scott. “The Buzz and Spin on 3-Year Degrees,” *Inside Higher Ed*, February 17, 2009. <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2009/02/17/three>

university administrators commented that 14-week semesters would better align the undergraduate calendar with the calendars of their graduate programs, of neighboring universities, and of their counties' K-12 school systems. They anticipated that such calendar synchronization would facilitate easier program administration and cross-registration, in addition to being “more respectful of families with children”<sup>30</sup> – that is, families of faculty and students with children in local school systems. An administrator at Weber State University pointed out that “nontraditional students are a large part of this university, so the more WSU supports them, the more likely they’ll succeed.”<sup>31</sup>

### Difficulty in Implementation

In the winter of 2009, Wright State University and the University of Cincinnati indicated an interest in adopting a 14-week semester academic calendar. Upon examination, they initially found that such a policy would conflict with Ohio state regulations requiring 75 class days per semester. The two institutions signaled an intention to make up for the difference between a 14 week semester and the 75 class day requirement by **extending each class meeting throughout the academic year by five minutes**. Administrators found that an additional five minutes added to each class would be the equivalent of an additional week each semester.

While this solution would prove suitable for institutions with regular schedule blocks for each class, an examination of the policy by administrators at Ohio University found that institutions with variability in the number of minutes classes meet each week – dependent on whether they meet four times a week or two – would mean that five additional minutes wouldn’t add much in terms of satisfying state regulations. This example shows the logistical difficulties that can arise from a switch to a trimester system, as one size most definitely does not fit all.<sup>32</sup>

This point is further illuminated through an examination of Brigham Young University – Hawaii. While Brigham Young University – Idaho has successfully implemented a trimester system with equal enrollment each semester, the president of the Hawaii campus noted that the university’s international student population would make this type of academic calendar change more difficult. The president noted that while the trimester system had the **potential to maximize campus resources**, it was **important to the institution to consider the needs and characteristics of its student population** prior to implementation. As noted by the president: “We’re

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<sup>30</sup> Quoted in “BYUH Outlines New 2009 Academic Calendar,” Brigham Young University in Hawaii, September 26, 2008, <http://newsroom.byuh.edu/node/1910>

<sup>31</sup> Jestina Clayton, “Shorter semesters for WSU.” *The Signpost* (Weber State University Newspaper), September 26, 2007, <http://media.www.wsusignpost.com/media/storage/paper985/news/2007/09/26/News/Shorter.Semesters.For.Wsu-2991706.shtml>

<sup>32</sup> “Quarters to Semesters Transition Term.” Ohio University. February 18, 2009. <http://www.ohio.edu/provost/upload/NOTES-Q2S-2-18-09.pdf>

going to make sure we do it in a way that works for us. We don't know exactly what form that's going to take, but we're going to make sure we have the right form. We don't have a timeline."<sup>33</sup> A year later, the university decided to use a year-round, 14-week academic calendar that started in January and features shorter winter and fall semesters with longer class hours, three terms in the spring and summer, and shorter breaks in between each term. The purpose of this change was noted to be to "serve more students at a reduced cost."<sup>34</sup>

### Student Reaction

The trimester system can cut both ways with regard to student perception of its advantages and disadvantages. The Mercyhurst Student Government in 2004 conducted a survey to gauge student opinions of a potential switch to a 4x4 college curriculum and of the trimester system. A number of respondents felt quite positively about the system, indicating that it was a **major selling point** for them in deciding to come to Mercyhurst. Respondents also indicated that they **liked the degree to which classes were shortened**, which meant less time spent in classes in which they weren't interested. If the students at Mercyhurst are at all indicative of a larger college student populace, the trimester system is an innovative enough design that it can have a real drawing power.

There is, of course, the other side, in which students complained about the trimester system **holding them back from fully exploring the academic offerings** the college provided. Additionally, students **didn't like the timing of university breaks**, which saw them on Spring Break and other vacations at different times than were most of their peers. Other students expressed a desire to move to a more standard calendar in order to allow professors more time to fully present the material they are required to teach.<sup>35</sup>

### Academic Quality

Before deciding overwhelmingly on a quarter system in the early 1990s, the Calendar Review Committee at the Rochester Institute of Technology examined the possible impacts of semester, trimester, and quarter academic calendars. The committee, consulting with outside institutions, found that the introduction of a trimester system might bring about some increases in effective curricular delivery for some subjects, but it was decided that this would only come at a cost of **no longer being able to expose those same students to a wide selection of courses**. This wide selection

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<sup>33</sup> "President Wheelwright's Q&A sessions continue." Brigham Young University Hawaii. <http://newsroom.byuh.edu/node/1451>

<sup>34</sup> "BYUH outlines new 2009 academic calendar." Op.cit.

<sup>35</sup> Mercyhurst Student Government, "4x4 Calendar Constituency Report," April 2004.

[http://lakernet.mercyhurst.edu/departments/college\\_council/documents/4x4%20Calendar%20constituency.pdf](http://lakernet.mercyhurst.edu/departments/college_council/documents/4x4%20Calendar%20constituency.pdf)

was found to be a major draw for students.<sup>36</sup> RIT has since decided to move from the quarter system to a regular semester system, which will take effect in Fall 2013.

### Conversion of Courses

In the fall of 2001, a Calendar Task Force at California State University, Los Angeles examined the possibility of switching to a trimester academic calendar. Specifically, the task force looked at the **conversions that would be necessary in university courses to implement a trimester calendar**, being that the university operated on a quarter system at the time. The task force found that semester units and trimester units would be **virtually interchangeable**, and both units would amount to about 1.5 quarter units. The task force also developed sample course structures indicating the time requirements for three and four credit courses under a trimester system, as seen below.<sup>37</sup>

Sample 14-Week Trimester Course Structure			
Credits	Meetings per Week	Minutes per Meeting	Total Time
3 (2,250 minutes total)	1	161	2 hours, 41 minutes
	2	180	1 hour, 20 minutes
	3	54	54 minutes
4 (3,000 minutes total)	1	214	3 hours, 34 minutes
	2	107	1 hour, 47 minutes
	3	71	1 hour 11 minutes

However, some university faculty and administrators expressed concerns that **shortening the semester would either force professors to drop subject matter or to go through the same amount of material at a faster pace**. As the associate dean of faculty at Buena Vista University said, “Sometimes it’s a struggle in itself to fit everything into 15 weeks.”<sup>38</sup> Students often share similar concerns. An undergraduate at Michigan State University sent an e-mail to faculty objecting to the shorter semester in part because “the loss of instructional time ... will create a burden for class schedules and syllabi that are already compressed and thereby compromise academic quality.”<sup>39</sup> However, as previously noted, some institutions like Brigham

<sup>36</sup> Rochester Institute of Technology Calendar Review Committee Recommendation, February 1995. <http://www.rit.edu/academicaffairs/media/1995CalendarReport.pdf>

<sup>37</sup> Report of the Task Force on Academic Calendar. <https://nss-nemo.calstatela.edu/semester/docs/tfcal9-10-01.pdf>

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in “Administration forbids holiday graduation.”

<sup>39</sup> The text of the e-mail can be found at <http://www.thefire.org/pdfs/f41e4f45d70a14800b4c3e30a58c319a.pdf>

Young University, Wright State University and the University of Cincinnati,<sup>40</sup> compensate for lost time by **lengthening the contact hour from 50 to 55 or 60 minutes**. Lengthening contact hours may present a viable way for an institution to ensure that it is still meeting state, federal, and accreditation credit hour requirements.

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<sup>40</sup> “Quarters to Semesters Transition Term.” Op.cit.

## Federal, State, and Accreditation Compliance

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Academic calendar operations also have the potential to impact an institution's eligibility for Federal Financial Assistance. Too short an academic year can disqualify an institution. After reviewing the relevant statutes from the Code of Federal Regulations, it is Hanover's opinion that a 14-week trimester calendar can still leave an institution **eligible for Federal Financial Assistance**, so long as a request for approval is submitted in writing to the Secretary of Education; there is **no overlap at all among the trimesters** – it is essential to note here that overlaps among academic terms disqualify a program and a student from receiving financial assistance<sup>41</sup> – and new calendaring practices are in keeping with the federal guidelines as laid out in the following paragraphs.

More specifically, in an institution with a 14-week trimester calendar, if students are required to attend all three trimesters, and these trimesters add up to one academic year, then such a calendar should have no trouble conforming to federal standards. If, however, students are required, advised, or allowed to take one of the three trimesters off, or to take shorter courses during one, such that the total time of instruction falls below 30 weeks, in such a case, an institution would be required to **petition the Department of Education** to procure permission to proceed with such a calendar without incurring penalties in federal aid.

In short, institutions with non-standard academic calendars **retain their eligibility for Federal Financial Assistance by conforming to federal guidelines governing non-standard academic calendars**. Institutional eligibility for Federal Financial Assistance is governed by the Code of Federal Regulations, Title 34, Part 668. This section examines that particular regulation, explaining the steps necessary for the implementation of a federally compliant, non-30-week academic year.

According to this code, in order to be acceptable according to federal guidelines, an academic year for a program must include:<sup>42</sup>

- ❖ 30 weeks of instructional time for programs offered in credit hours; or
- ❖ 26 weeks of instructional time for programs offered in clock hours.

For undergraduate educational programs, the regulations stipulate that students must be expected to complete at least:

- ❖ 24 semester or trimester credit hours or 36 quarter credit hours for programs measured in credit hours; or

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<sup>41</sup> "Chapter 4: Federal Pell Grant Program." U.S. Department of Education. <http://www2.ed.gov/PDFDocs/FinAidHB/ch4.pdf>

<sup>42</sup> "Electronic Code of Federal Regulations: Title 34: Education: CFR 34.668.3." National Achieves and Records Administration. <http://ecfr.gpoaccess.gov/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=ecfr&sid=b4d104145efbb5cda5a72d3a7089586b&rgn=div8&view=text&node=34:3.1.3.1.34.1.40.3&idno=34>

- ❖ 900 clock hours for programs measured in clock hours.

**Institutions may request exemption from these minimum requirements to adopt alternative academic calendar structures.** These exemptions are granted by the Secretary of Education and must be requested by the institution in writing. Exemptions cover academic years between 26 and 29 weeks of instructional time for a two-year program leading to an associate degree or a four-year program leading to a baccalaureate degree.

Written requests must identify the educational programs for which the institution is requesting an exemption, as well as specify the number of weeks of instructional time for that program. For institutions looking to make an institution-wide transition to an academic year of less than 30 weeks, it would then be advisable to list all programs offered at the institution, since presumably these would all transition to the alternate calendar. Written requests must also show good cause for the requested reductions.

Granting of the regulatory exemptions is contingent upon the institution's demonstration of good cause in shortening its academic year and that the reduction has already met the approval of the institution's accrediting agency and state licensing agency.

### **State Compliance**

The Board of Higher Education in Massachusetts does not accredit programs or institutions. Instead, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, discussed below, is responsible for accreditation.<sup>43</sup>

### **Accrediting Institutions' Standards for Postsecondary Programs**

Below is a discussion of provisions that might relate to the length of the semester.

*New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (CIHE)* – The NEASC CIHE accredits degree-granting educational institutions on the basis of Missions and Purposes, Planning and Evaluation, Organization and Governance, Academic Program, Faculty, Students, Library and Other Information Resources, Physical and Technological Resources, Financial Resources, Public Disclosure, and Integrity.<sup>44</sup> These general standards do not appear to provide much guidance on the length of the semester.

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<sup>43</sup> "Academic Program Review and Approval – Accreditation." Massachusetts Department of Higher Education. <http://www.mass.edu/forinstitutions/academic/programapprovalfaq.asp>

<sup>44</sup> "Standards." New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Institutions of Higher Education. [http://cihe.neasc.org/standards\\_policies/standards/standards\\_html\\_version](http://cihe.neasc.org/standards_policies/standards/standards_html_version)

*The Technology Accreditation Commission of ABET* – ABET’s engineering criteria are categorized under Students, Program Educational Objectives, Program Outcomes, Continuous Improvement, Curriculum, Faculty, Facilities, Support, and Program Criteria.<sup>45</sup> The Curriculum criterion stipulates that baccalaureate programs “must consist of a minimum of 124 semester hours or 186 quarter hours of credit,” while Associate degree programs “must consist of a minimum of 64 semester hours or 96 quarter hours of credit.”<sup>46</sup> Assuming that an institution operating on a 14-week trimester schedule ensures that its courses cover subject matter in sufficient depth, there is little indication that this type of schedule, in itself, would be a barrier to accreditation.

*The Engineering Accreditation Commission of ABET* – ABET’s engineering criteria are categorized under Students, Program Educational Objectives, Program Outcomes, Continuous Improvement, Curriculum, Faculty, Facilities, Support, and Program Criteria.<sup>47</sup> The Curriculum criterion stipulates one year of a combination of college level mathematics and basic sciences and one and one-half years of engineering courses for undergraduate engineering majors.<sup>48</sup> Assuming that an institution operating on a 14-week trimester schedule ensures that its courses cover subject matter in sufficient depth, there is little indication that the schedule, in itself, would be a barrier to accreditation.

*The National Architectural Accrediting Board* – While the Board requires that bachelor’s architecture degree programs must require a “minimum of 150 semester credit hours or the quarter-hour equivalent” in academic coursework, including a minimum of 45 credit hours in general studies, there isn’t an indication that the switch to a 14-week trimester system would be a barrier to accreditation. However, the institution must describe how its curriculum is evaluated and how modifications to the curriculum (e.g. a switch to a trimester system), are “identified, developed, approved, and implemented.”<sup>49</sup>

*The American Council for Construction Education* – The American Council for Construction Education notes that it “recognizes the autonomy of educational institutions in the matter of curriculum development,” suggesting that as long as the curriculum includes at least 120 semester or 180 quarter credit hours in the required curriculum categories (General Education, Mathematics and Science, Business and

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<sup>45</sup> “Criteria for Accrediting Engineering Technology Programs: Effective for Evaluations During the 2010-2011 Accreditation Cycle.” Technology Accreditation Commission of ABET. P i.  
<http://www.abet.org/Linked%20Documents-UPDATE/Criteria%20and%20PP/T001%2010-11%20TAC%20Criteria%2011-3-09.pdf>

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 2.

<sup>47</sup> “Criteria for Accrediting Engineering Programs,” *ABET Engineering Accreditation Commission*, December 1, 2008,  
<http://www.abet.org/Linked%20Documents-UPDATE/Criteria%20and%20PP/E001%2009-10%20EAC%20Criteria%2012-01-08.pdf>

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 2.

<sup>49</sup> “2009 Conditions for Accreditation.” National Architectural Accrediting Board, Inc. Pg. 28-29.  
[http://www.naab.org/accreditation/2009\\_Conditions.aspx](http://www.naab.org/accreditation/2009_Conditions.aspx)

Management, Construction Science, Construction, and other), then a trimester system would not impede accreditation.<sup>50</sup>

*The Council for Interior Design Accreditation* – The accreditation standards for this agency do not provide any indication that a move to a 14-week trimester system would impede accreditation. As long as “the curriculum follows a logical sequence and achieves the program mission and goals,” it appears that institutions are free to arrange curriculum and coursework as they see fit.<sup>51</sup>

*The International Facility Management Association* – Accreditation standards from this Association do not suggest that the 14-week trimester system would pose a barrier to accreditation, as long as the learning methodologies are identified and course sequencing is appropriate and reasonable.<sup>52</sup>

*National Association of Schools of Art and Design* – Finally, the National Association of Schools of Art and Design poses similar credit hour requirements, but does not suggest that the trimester system would be a barrier to accreditation. The bachelor’s program requires at least 120 semesters or 180 quarter credit hours taken over the equivalent of four academic years.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> “Document 103 – Standards and Criteria for Accreditation of Postsecondary Construction Education Degree Programs.” American Council for Construction Education. Pg. 7-8. [http://www.acce-hq.org/documents/DOCUMENT103080906\\_002.pdf](http://www.acce-hq.org/documents/DOCUMENT103080906_002.pdf)

<sup>51</sup> “Professional Standards 2009.” Council for Interior Design Accreditation – Accreditation Manual. Pg. 9. <http://www.accredit-id.org/accredmanual.php>

<sup>52</sup> “Standard for Accredited Degree Programs.” IFMA Foundation. Pg. 11-12. <http://www.ifmafoundation.org/scholarships/standards.pdf>

<sup>53</sup> “Handbook 2009-10: October 2009 Edition.” National Association of Schools of Art and Design. Pg. 62. [http://nasad.arts-accredit.org/site/docs/Handbook/NASAD\\_HANDBOOK\\_2009-10\\_Oct2009Edition.pdf](http://nasad.arts-accredit.org/site/docs/Handbook/NASAD_HANDBOOK_2009-10_Oct2009Edition.pdf)

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