Thinking about Semester Conversion: Ten Conversational Points

This handout is meant to be a brief introduction to some of the topics that could be discussed with semester conversion. I know this list is not comprehensive or exhaustive. For example, there are many curriculum issues specific to departments as well as student issues not addressed in this handout.

1. **COGNITIVE LOAD**

   Under the quarter system, many courses have a traditional midterm and final exam. Keep in mind that retaining information for five weeks is difficult for many students and expecting students to have a traditional midterm and final exam during semesters can be problematic. Faculty who have taught on semesters also note that students often struggle with coming back after Thanksgiving and Spring break. Be sure to plan for this. In speaking with faculty who have taught on semesters, most recommend not giving an assignment for students to complete during the break. Rethink assessment and evaluation opportunities in your class. EARLY AND OFTEN ARE RECOMMENDED.

2. **STUDENT ENGAGEMENT OUTSIDE OF CLASSROOM**

   Although many courses may have lost classroom time by combining courses in a sequence, semesters do offer an opportunity to make better use of outside classroom experiences. Service learning becomes a more powerful pedagogy to use on semesters. Students have the chance to participate for 13 or 14 weeks instead of 7 to 8 weeks. This is often better for students and better for the agencies they serve. Other opportunities to consider are offering your course for honors, making better use of group projects, and field trips outside of class.

3. **COMMUNITY BUILDING IN THE CLASSROOM/RAPPORT**

   Semesters increase the opportunity to create "community" in your classroom. Learning names and helping students get to know each other is important in a semester course. Classroom closure is also important.

4. **CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT/TIME MANAGEMENT**

   It has been found that the longer time period could also increase the opportunity for more conflict in the classroom, and classroom management becomes even more important. For example, sitting in a class where a student dominates discussion for ten weeks is very different from sitting in class where this happens for 16 weeks. Be sure to have guidelines in your course syllabus related to course management and time management. Many think that with semesters this means that students will have more time to write research papers or do final projects. Unfortunately, we know that this means more time to procrastinate for many students. It becomes important under semesters to scaffold larger projects and have milestones throughout a course to assist students with time management.

5. **ATTENDANCE**

   Attendance policy should be revisited!! Classes will meet more often and your current attendance policy may not fit a semester model. Be sure to have departmental discussions about this topic. Statistically, there are more classes for a student to miss in a semester session. This could mean illness,

work schedule changes, or child care changes may happen. Also, this means more opportunity for faculty to be ill as well. Be sure to discuss a departmental plan to handle this change.

6. **SPECIFIC TEACHING SYLLABUS/PLAN**

   Syllabus needs to be planned and scheduled especially the first year!! Although we will have access to a new teaching syllabus template, this template may not be specific enough in assisting faculty in teaching for semesters. Most of us are used to teaching on quarters and it becomes very important to make sure you have a well planned schedule for your semester. You will be working on adjusting your rhythms of teaching, and a well thought out syllabus will help!! Think through each class period including films, activities, homework, etc. Feedback from institutions that have already converted indicates that many faculty struggled with semesters beginning in the 8th or 9th week, for the first year of transition. Many faculty and students who have studied or taught on semesters talk about the mid-semester doldrums. Think about ways to introduce new learning and teaching methods or approaches throughout the course to decrease the doldrums.

7. **GROUP PROJECTS/DIVERSITY/TEAM BUILDING**

   Consider increasing opportunities for group projects and also changing groups at the mid-semester. Working in the same group on a semester schedule is very different than on the quarter system.

8. **EARLY SEMESTER STUDENT FEEDBACK**

   One important lesson coming out of all institutions on semesters is the importance of offering students an early feedback mechanism. The Center for Teaching and Learning has developed five questions (being used across country) that can be used to gather some basic feedback from students early in the course (typically before the first test or after). Student evaluations at the end of the semester are too late to understand what problems students might be facing in your course. Here is an example of what is being used at a few institutions (there are several variations):

   - **What is the best feature of this course?**
   - **What is helping you learn in this course?**
   - **What is making learning difficult?**
   - **What do you want continued in this course?**
   - **What, if anything, would you change about this course?**
   - **What suggestions do you have for improving the course?**

9. **ENGAGED PEDAGOGIES**

   Although lecturing can be effective for teaching various types of content, using the lecture method for every day of class during a semester term is not a best practice in teaching and learning.

10. **FLEXIBILITY AND COLLEAGUES**

    Lessons from other institutions indicate that the first year of conversion can be stressful for some faculty, staff, and students. Some department chairs reported having to deal with more student complaints and faculty concerns during the Fall semester of conversion. The good news is that Spring semester seems to be less stressful, and after a year of conversion, faculty, staff, and students report that things are back to normal for most people. It is important to remember this process may be stressful for some people and to take time to support colleagues and students through the transition.