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The Necessity For Students To Consider The Academic Term

When Choosing Universities

As the employment opportunities declined due to the financial crisis, the competition of finding jobs is getting more intense nowadays. In order to make oneself more competitive to win a position at a good working place, high academic qualification is helpful and probably necessary. An increasing number of students have the intention of going to college. An upcoming challenge they have is to make the decision of which university to enroll. Many elements of universities have impacts on students’ choices, but very few students care about whether the university is using a semester system or quarter system when they are choosing the universities. Actually, the length of each term is not the only difference of the two systems; they also have effects on the other sides of students’ life. Therefore, I argue that the academic term is an important element when students choosing universities for the depth of each class, the travel preference and the breaks students have each year, and the convenience of transfer to another college, getting internships and study abroad.

There are several academic terms used by the American universities nowadays – the semester system (including the traditional semester and early semester), the quarter system, the trimester system, and the 4-1-4 system, etc. Brenda Ashford mentions in his report *Academic Calendar – Encyclopedia of Education* that “traditional semester was the dominant calendar used by U.S. colleges and universities from the 1950s to the early 1970s. The early semester system replaced it in mid 1970s.” During the 1990s, the use of the semester system increased by 8% while the quarter system decreased by 9%. (Ashford 1) In another report *2000-2001 Academic Calendars Study – Analytical Profiles of Calendar Use and Conversions*, Brenda Ashford explains all systems and the use of them in detail. 77% of degree-granting institutions use the traditional system “making it the most heavily used calendar”. Both the traditional semester and the early semester system “divide the academic year into 15-17 weeks.” But they start and end at different times. The quarter system has a 15% rate(Ashford 2). There are four quarters in an academic year- autumn, winter, spring and summer. Students can choose to take summer quarter off and most students do so. Even quarter system is the second common type; it is still considered a “minority” type. The most well known universities under the quarter system are several campuses of University of California, Northwestern University, Dartmouth College and the Seattle campus of University of Washington.

The depth of each class under the two types of calendar is not alike. In a university under quarter system, most students take three classes per quarter and a total of 9 in one year. Students going to a semester-system university take 4-5 classes per semester and 8-10 per year altogether. Even the amount of classes students take in one year under the two types of calendar are about the same, the mode of studying and how deep each class goes are dissimilar. A course under the semester system lasts longer than one under the quarter system but the class meets less time in one week. Therefore, students are more focus on several classes in a specific period of time under quarter system. Those going to a semester-system university are allowed to make their own decision of the time allocation. In the news *Strength in Numbers* published on February 7, 2012, Mitch Smith said “semesters allow for a more flexible schedule without sacrificing rigor. If a student gets sick and has to miss a class in a quarter system, it’s very, very challenging for that student to catch up. In a semester system, it’s a little more forgiving.” During the quarter, the quarter-system students might understand one class more deeply. Because the semester lasts longer, when the quarter-system students start working on some new classes in the second quarter and forgetting about what they have learned from the previous quarter, the semester-students are still dealing with the familiar classes in their first term. As a result, the memory of the knowledge in one class lasts longer for the semester-students. Because of the different amount of terms, the quarter students have 3 midterm weeks and 3 final weeks per year while the semester students only have two. Some students like it because exams can force them to review what they have studied and have an idea that how comfortable they are with the courses they are taking. But most students don’t really like the exams because the final week means a week living in the library and studying from the morning to the evening to them. They want to get rid of it. One thing really good for the quarter-system students is that they only have to prepare for three classes during the final week, but the students under semester system have to work for five. All students have their own habits of studying and they should understand the merits and shortcomings of the two systems. They might benefit from one calendar and “suffer” from the other. It’s very important for them to find the one works for them.

Holidays and vacations are also not the same under the two systems. The semester calendar has a longer Thanks giving break, a longer Christmas break, a similar spring break, and a little shorter summer break compare to the quarter system. The winter break in a semester calendar is about one month long while the students under a quarter system only take 2-3 weeks off. Universities using both types of calendars have about 3 months summer vacation starting and ending at different times. The summer vacation in a quarter calendar is a little bit longer than the one in the semester calendar. This is one kind of typical winter break students have in a semester-system university. The vacations of a semester system are more reasonable than the ones under a quarter system for few reasons. First, students get enough breaks under a semester system so they can prepare them for the next term studying. Under a quarter system, there are two terms between the winter vacation and summer vacation. After the busy final week of winter quarter, they only get one week of spring break off. Then, the new quarter starts. They don’t have enough time to relax, so students are tired when the spring quarter is coming. As a result, learning efficiency will decline. The winter break is also not reasonable for non-local students, especially for the international students. The length of the winter break gives the international students a headache from planning what to do. If they choose to fly home, they can only stay for 2-3 weeks. The cost is so high and they’ve just left home for 3 months. It’s not so valuable to pay for it. If they choose to stay, they have to wait until summer to visit their families and friends. But international students under the semester system won’t be bothered. Both the price and the time are acceptable for them to go home twice a year. For those who decide to go home once a year at the very beginning, quarter system might be a good choice. They pay cheap price to get a long vacation at home though going home once a year is not a good idea for most international students.

The academic term also have impacts on students’ convenience to get an internship, transfer to another university and study abroad. In the news of *Strength in Numbers*, Mitch Smith talked about the reason that Otterbein University chooses to replace the quarter system by a semester calendar is “in hopes of encouraging transfers and increasing internship and study abroad opportunities.” Like Otterbein University, many other universities have changed their academic term or have thought about to change because it’s inconvenient for students to do few things under such system. The music professor at Otterbein University named Herbert Dregalla “worried that students lost out on internships or jobs because they were entering the workforce a month later than their peers at other colleges.” (Smith) Due to the major position the Semester system has, most companies coordinate the time of internship opportunities with the semester calendar. Therefore, the students studying at a quarter-system university are not as competitive as the ones under they semester system. This is a serious problem the quarter system face. It’s also very challenging for students under quarter system to transfer. The student will have to do lots of work if he or she is transferring to a semester-system university. The credit system is significantly different so the student has to find out how it works. He or she also has to adapt a new system. This can take a long time. If the student is a junior or senior with lots of pressure from the department, the adjustment can also have impact on the GPA and even graduation. Even though students can’t benefit from quarter system when they are looking for an internship opportunity or transferring to another university, students get some extra choice when studying abroad. Under the study abroad policy, the first semester overlaps with summer and autumn quarter, and the second semester overlaps with the winter and spring semester. If students want to take more credits at that year, they can choose to study abroad at the first semester and they get 3.5-quarter credits altogether. If they decide to have a relax year, they can apply for the second semester program and earn 2.5-quarter credits that year. If they just want to take same amount of classes as usual, they can study abroad for the whole year. It’s also very easy for students under the semester system, they can choose either half year or one year.

Many people hold the idea that students should not consider the academic term as an important element when choosing a university. Students should consider the tuition and probably the location. No matter what academic quarter is used by the university, the only thing for students to do is to get used to it. There’s no doubt that Tuition is something important needed to be considered or some students might not be able to enroll some universities. But there’s a common situation that student’s can decide which university to go because they can afford the tuition of two or more universities. At this point, academic term is something can be thinking about and then make the decision. I’m arguing that tuition is an important element, but I’m not arguing that tuition is the most important thing need to be considered.

Many students and parents don’t care about the academic term when deciding which university to attend. Some students even don’t know the academic term of the university until they enroll. This situation needs to be changed because of the great impacts the academic terms have on students’ life. Due to the length and the depth of each class, the travel preference and the appropriateness of the vacations and the convenience of finding an internship, transferring to another university and study abroad, academic term needs to be considered when choosing a university.

Work Citation

Ashford, Brenda. Ed. James W. Guthrie. *Academic Calendar – Encyclopedia of Education* Vol. 1.  2nd Ed. New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2003.

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Smith, Mitch. *Strength in Numbers*. Inside higher ED. Feb 7th, 2012.