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WWU Faculty Survey Concerning Semester versus Quarter Schedules

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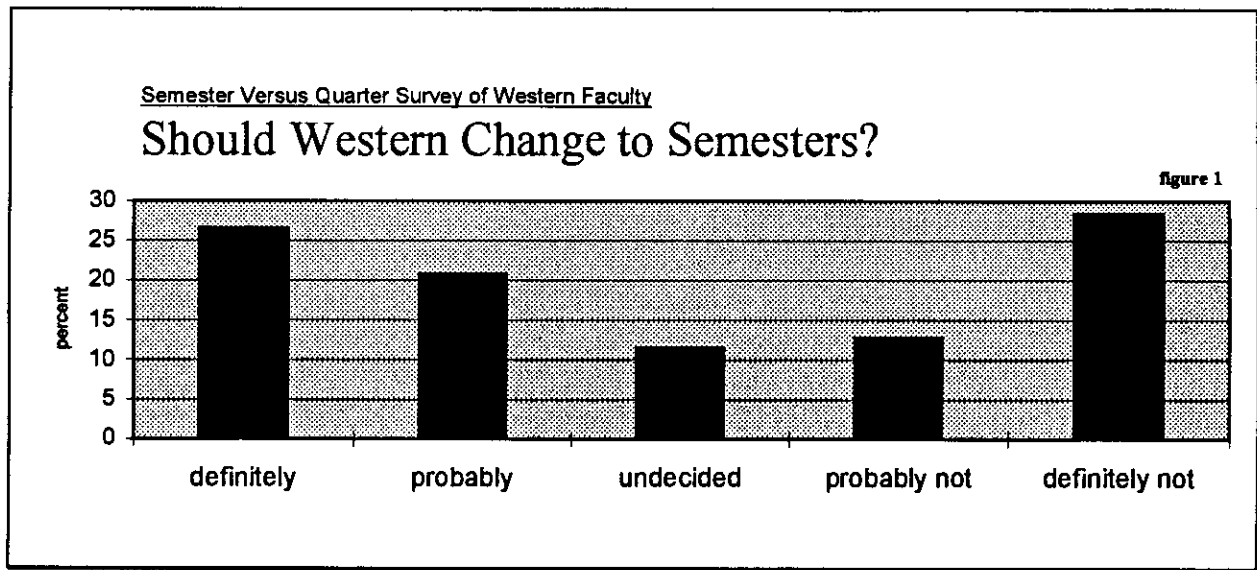
March, 1996

WWU Faculty Survey Concerning Semester versus Quarter Schedules *Fall 1995*

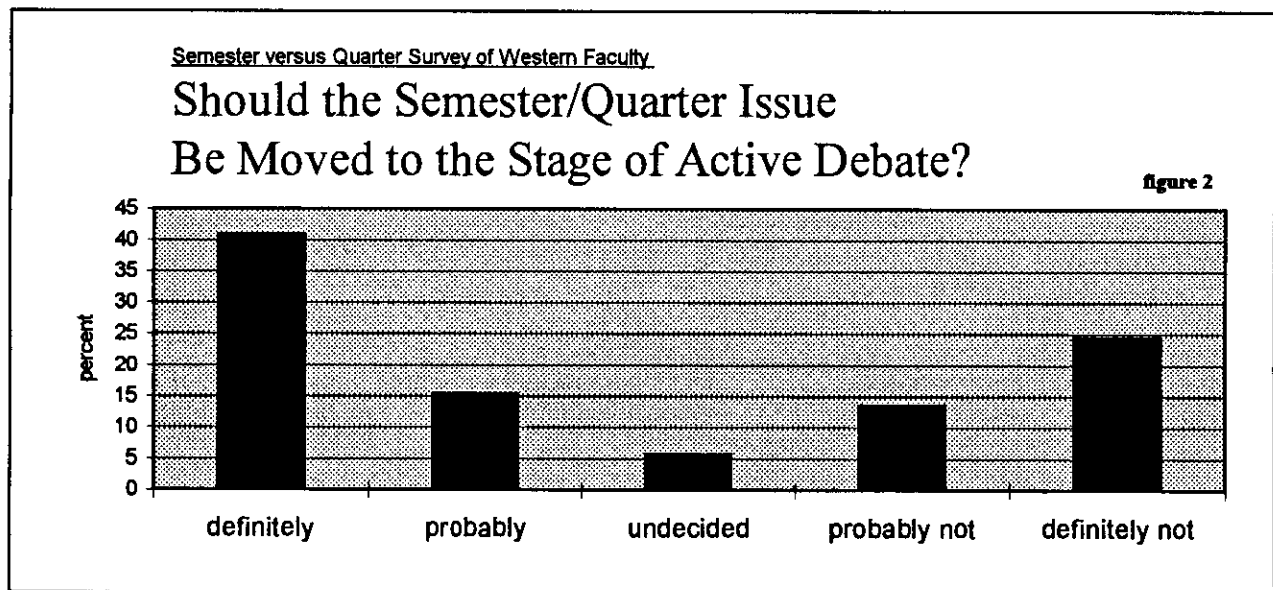
Prepared by Gary McKinney and Carl Simpson

Should Western change to some form of semester system? At the request of the Faculty Senate, this question, among many others, was asked of Western faculty in the *Faculty Survey Concerning Semester versus Quarter Schedules*, administered by the Office of Survey Research and analyzed in collaboration with the Office of Institutional Assessment and Testing. This Focus publication reports findings from that survey, conducted during the fall quarter of 1995.

Response to the above and related questions fit a textbook example of a bipolar outcome, with over half of the faculty respondents strongly favoring or strongly opposing the change, and the remainder divided among three intermediate positions. (See Figure 1 on page 2.) On a five-point scale (1 = definitely, 2 = probably, 3 = neutral, 4 = probably not, 5 = definitely not), the mean response was 2.96. Though there was a slightly higher percentage of faculty definitely or probably favoring a change to some form of semester system (47.4% favoring change versus 41.2% against change), more of those who opposed change opposed it strongly.

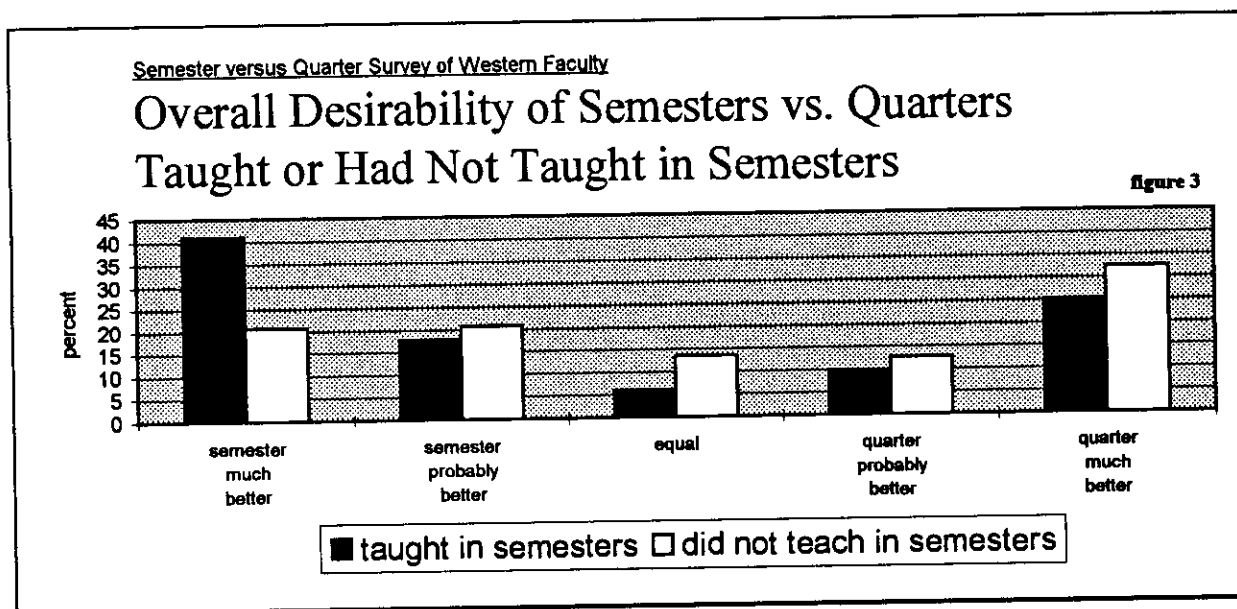


Faculty were less split when it came to the question of whether or not to move to the stage of actively debating a possible change to some form of semester system. A clear majority (56.3%) definitely or probably felt the issue *should* be moved to debate, though there was also a fair percentage who definitely or probably felt the issue *should not* be moved to debate (38.0%). Only a very small percentage of faculty were undecided whether or not the issue should be debated (5.7%). (See Figure 2.)



Two-thirds (65.5%) of Western faculty have at some point taught in a semester system. Whether or not faculty members had taught in a semester system influenced their comparative evaluation of semester versus quarter systems. (See Figure 3.) Among those who had never taught in a semester system, 40.8% evaluated semesters as better than quarters, while 45.4% evaluated quarters better. On the other hand, among those who had taught in both semester and quarter systems, 58.6% evaluated semesters as better than quarters, while 35.2% evaluated quarters as better.

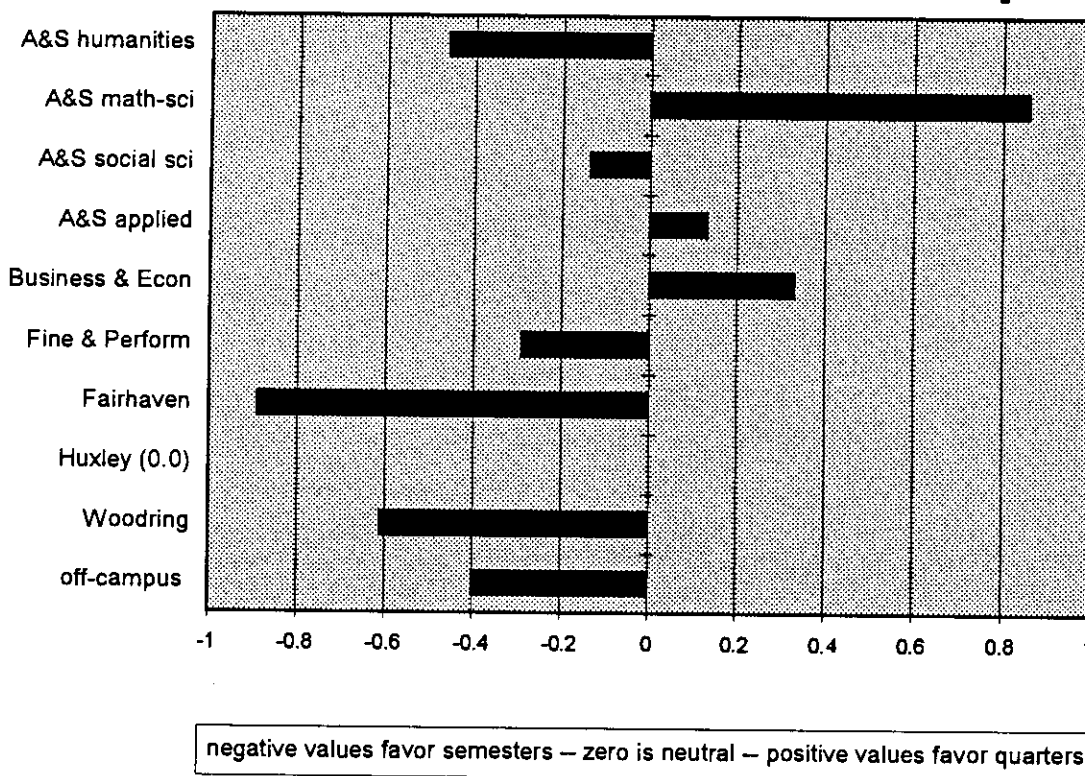
While significant numbers of each group favored each system, the odds of faculty members favoring semesters over quarters were 1.84 times as great among those who had taught in a semester system as among those who had not. Analysis suggests that this difference results partially from the experience with semesters systems and partially from the fact that the faculty who have been at Western longest and are therefore most committed to the quarter system have less often taught in a semester system.



The college/area taught in had a considerable influence over faculty opinion regarding semesters. To display this influence, respondents were grouped by college (and for Arts & Sciences into humanities, natural science/math, social science, and other applied studies). Average scores were then calculated for each resulting category on the question asking whether or not Western should change to semesters. In Figure 4, found on page 4, the neutral score--“undecided”--is displayed as zero. “Definitely” is scored as -2, “probably” as -1, “probably not” as 1, and “definitely not” as 2. Instructors at Fairhaven, Woodring College, and the Arts & Sciences area of humanities favored a change to semesters, while instructors in the Arts & Sciences area of natural science/math and, to a somewhat lesser degree, instructors in the College of Business & Economics favored remaining with quarters.

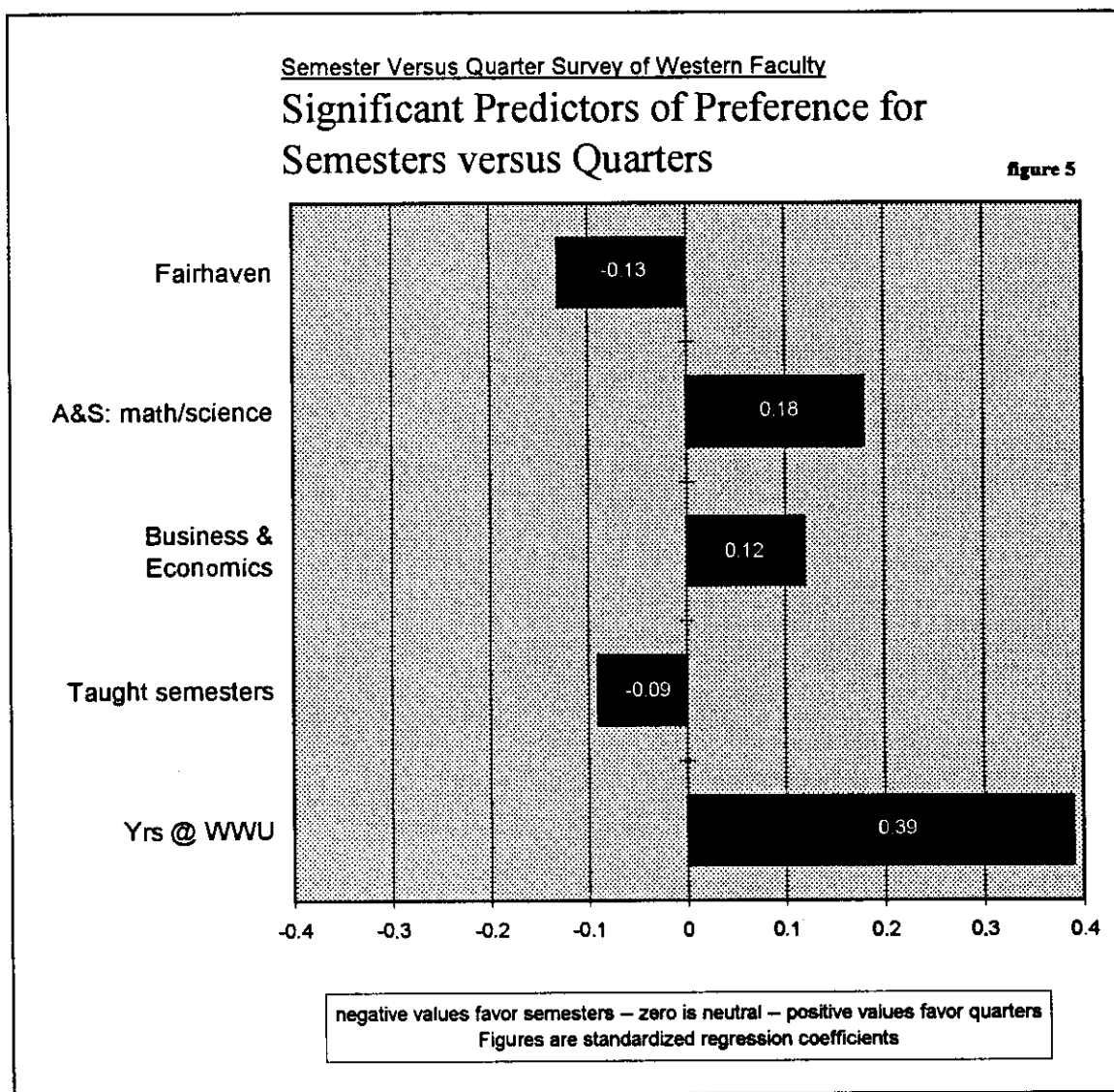
Semester versus Quarter Survey of Western Faculty
Should Western Change to Semesters?
Comparison by Collegiate Unit

figure 4



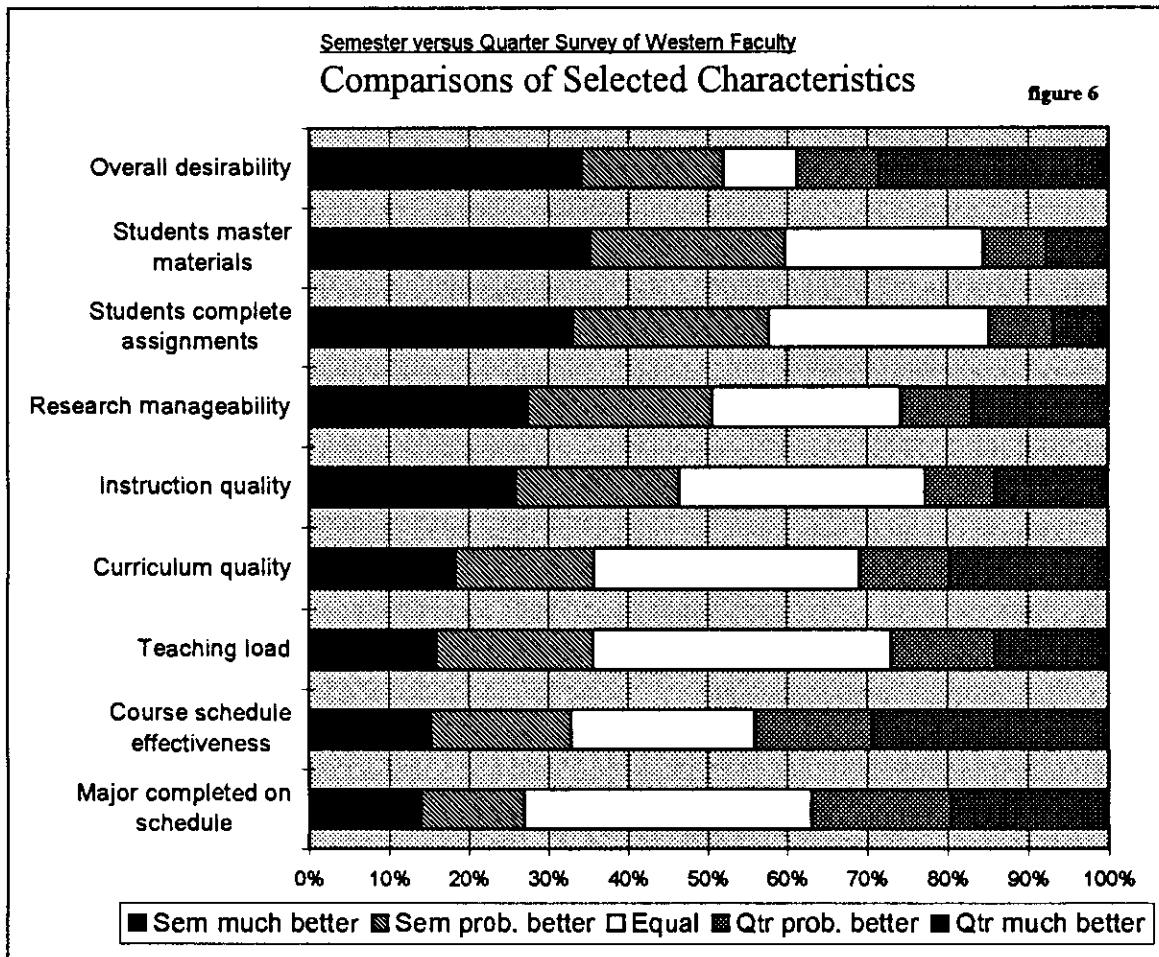
Just as the collegiate discipline and experience in semester systems, the number of years faculty taught at Western also exerted an influence over responses. Indeed, in Figure 5 below, various factors influencing survey responses were identified using standard multiple regression analysis, and none had a stronger influence than years at Western. The beta for years at Western was .39, with the positive direction indicating a preference for quarters. The strongest factor indicating a preference for semesters was teaching at Fairhaven; the beta in this instance was -.13, with the negative direction indicating a preference for semesters. The values shown in Figure 5 are standardized regression coefficients, which offer one way to look at which factors have relatively greater influence over the preference for semester versus quarters. They are also additive, so that, for example, a math/science professor who has also been at Western many years is doubly more favorable toward the quarter system.

Factors tested but not shown in Figure 5 had no reliably estimated impact on preference beyond that explained by the factors shown. Thus, teaching in other fields and tenure status had no further power to explain preference. Concretely, the most powerful explanatory variable--years at Western--translated to a movement of .32 on the 1-5 preference scale per each five years' experience, .64 per each ten years, etc. (The average number of years taught at Western by survey respondents was 9 years, with a range of 1 to 36 years.)



Seeking greater detail concerning faculty perceptions of semester versus quarter calendars, the survey also requested judgments about the relative merit of the two calendars in a series of areas, from student learning to course scheduling. Of these areas, student learning was seen *much more often* and faculty research and instructional quality *considerably more often* as best served under a semester system. Course schedule effectiveness and the ability of students to complete a major on schedule were seen as better served under the quarter calendar, while curriculum quality and teaching load were balanced between the two systems. (See Figure 6.)

One important finding here is that more than one-third of the faculty saw no advantage to either system when it came to teaching load, while about a third each favored either semesters or quarters. Thus it appears unlikely that judgments comparing the desirability of the two systems were overly influenced by hopes for improved teaching loads or fears of increased loads.



The finding that may provide the university community with its most productive discussion material was that found in regard to *student learning*. Despite the relatively even split on the issue of switching to a semester system, three-in-five of the faculty believe semesters would better enable students to learn course materials and to finish course assignments, while only one-in-six believe that quarters serve course learning better. This imbalance is even greater among those who have experienced teaching in both systems.

While other factors--scheduling flexibility, the timing of summer break, and the cost of changing systems, for instance--presumably influence many faculty to prefer remaining with quarters, many of those same faculty believe *students would learn better* under a 15-week rather than a 10-week schedule. Whether Western would ever change to semesters or not, it appears likely that the rapid pace and short period of weeks in the quarter system will remain an issue. If so, faculty most likely to report that the quarter system is limiting their students' learning may be in disciplines where students' work is difficult to segment or is not currently well sequenced. In particular, the natural sciences and math are much more likely than other areas to segment student work successfully and have already-developed sequences.

Although this is only one of many possible interpretations, analysis of the questions on student learning by collegiate unit is supportive. In no collegiate unit other than natural science/math did more than 20% of the faculty feel the quarter system was best for student learning. Even in the College of Business & Economics, where the majority of faculty favored remaining with the quarter schedule, nearly half (48.7%) agreed that the semester schedule would be superior for student learning, while another 35.9% were undecided, leaving only 15.4% reporting that the quarter system was preferable. In natural sciences/math, too, where opposition to semesters is marked, more faculty believe that semesters would be better for student learning than quarters (38.3% semesters versus 28.8% quarters), though this balance was far more favorable to quarters than in any other discipline. Outside of natural sciences/math and CBE, the proportion of faculty who believed quarters were better for student learning varied from zero, at Fairhaven, to 18.8% at F&PA.

This evidence is consistent with the idea that faculty whose course materials and assignments are difficult to segment and/or where materials are not sequenced across courses face particular difficulties organizing materials so as to maximize student learning. Alternatively, other differences between semester and quarter schedules may explain the finding. In any event, the finding of faculty concerns about student learning under the current schedule, which emerges serendipitously from this study, may be one to which the University's curricular bodies might wish to devote attention.

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