

Flexible Calendar

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A flexible calendar has been chosen for the Ottawa University campus effective in the Fall of 1979. Advantages and attractions of the intensive calendar in use since 1970 have been retained insofar as possible, but some of its weaknesses needed attention and modification.

The flexible calendar retains the intensive course system in about half of all course options in which a college course can be begun and completed in approximately two months. Other courses are available that extend over a normal semester length of approximately four months. Students can therefore choose courses in the intensive style as in the past, or may elect courses over a longer period. Normally, students are expected to choose some of each, based upon their own interests, availability of subjects, and by criteria that includes considerations of which subjects may best be learned in an intensive format or

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over a longer time for absorption and retention. To maximize flexibility the new form of the academic calendar also absorbs the January winterterm and provides options for variable credit.

Thus, part of the time formerly assigned in January is now counted in the Fall by starting a little earlier than before and adding class days to the Fall. The remainder of the former January term is absorbed in the Spring. An additional week of time is available at the Christmas holiday season since Spring session resumes on January 7, 1980 instead of January 1st. Variable credit means that some classes can be designed for their optimal learning needs instead of all classes forced into equal size of four semester hours value as before.

Reasons leading to the shift emerged gradually during the 70's. The intensive calendar was chosen after much careful study and consideration of alternatives. There is no single ideal calendar for academic purposes. Some forms have advantages that others do not have, but each tends to be a compromise. The weaknesses of O.U.'s intensive calendar were also its simplicity and its uniformity. Every learning experience had equal value to other experiences theoretically - but not in practice. To make it work, only four class periods were available. Further, the pattern of enrollment created hardships for most students. Two demanding classes at the same time created too much pressure for good learning, while two classes that were easy for a student tended to defeat intellectual stimulation and be boring. Students needing to learn at a slower pace could not take a reduced load without serious penalty, and the normal enrollment load crept up from about 30 or 32 semester hours per year to a demanding 36 hours per year. For the few students who could handle it well, it was an ideal calendar. For most others, it extracted a penalty of one kind or another. Additional problems developed for the students who had part-time employment and found their work schedules constantly interfered with; those who became temporarily ill lost too much ground too quickly in a short session; and those who wanted to participate in drama, debate, music, and athletics had problems as well.

Faculty hopes for learning advantages in the short session were only partially achieved. Many subject areas worked very well in intensive sessions. Others, particularly accounting and the hard sciences, suffered in compressed times due to the lack of time for absorption and self-confidence to occur. Other subjects found little time for reflection and growth available within the design of the classes themselves, so had trouble evaluating learning.

Thus, as the 70's proceeded, a growing level of dissatisfaction with O.U.'s 2-2-1-2-2 calendar emerged. In recent years ad hoc study committees were formed at several times to examine the effectiveness of the intensive system and the satisfaction level of students and faculty with the system. Alternative calendars were proposed informally and discussed several times. Finally, during the year 1977-78, an ad hoc committee identified a readiness for change and the faculty, after involving a large number of students in the study and discussion, developed the basic format of the new flexible calendar. The new calendar was then adopted, dates were set to maximize opportunities for interaction with other institutions and a new daily class schedule designed to assist the flexibility. The publication of the new schedule and times of offerings will occur in March.

The best aspects of the intensive calendar are preserved and half of all courses offered are available in that format. For some learning experiences that timing is valuable. In other cases more time is needed and now will be available to enable mastery of information, concepts, and techniques to develop and be practiced.

The loss of Winterterm is accompanied with regret. The educational hopes for the January period in which only a single course could be taken, were never fully realized. Faculty hoped initially to use the time for trying out new ideas in learning and in teaching. We hoped for new experimental offerings to be generated both by faculty and also by students. We even forbid the offering of departmental courses that were listed in the catalog in order to encourage new offerings and variety. Some of these things happened. Others did not. Students increasingly chose not to enroll at that time, and many who did enroll designed independent studies or internships that kept them away from the campus. The economic effect on the campus and the gap in the learning environment were both crippling. Tragically, that is the experience of most other colleges who have a January session and as a result the tendency everywhere is to abandon the January session as a calendar device. The vast majority of colleges and universities are moving now to dates similar to the ones now in effect at Ottawa, although without Ottawa's flexibility.

Ottawa University's flexible calendar is a sign of our institutional maturity. We've not been afraid to try something new and different, nor are we afraid to change if it doesn't work as well as we'd like. Yet, when we make a change we preserve the elements that are valuable and we make no apologies for having tried to make it work. Our new flexible calendar thus preserves our uniqueness but does so at the maximum benefit to students.