

**RESPONSE TO SENATE RESOLUTION ON AN INCREASED EMPHASIS ON
BI-TERM TEACHING AT WKU**

University Senate, February 21, 2013

A. Gordon Emslie, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs

Colleagues:

I have appreciated the opportunity to discuss with many of you, over a series of college forums, the possibility of WKU moving to an increased emphasis on bi-term instruction. It is clear from these discussions, and from other input I have received, that an overwhelming majority of faculty and students do not support a deliberate, systemic move toward an increased emphasis on bi-term instruction at WKU. Many points arguing against such a systemic move have been made. Among these are:

- the lack of adequate precedent at other higher education institutions, and so the corresponding high level of risk involved in making such a change;
- the need, in many courses, for an extended period of time for students to reflect and prepare meaningful written assignments;
- similar considerations for courses that involve clinical experiences;
- the increased impact of missed days/weeks due to sickness, etc.;
- the suitability of the current, predominantly semester-based, course calendar for students who are employed;
- the complicated scheduling logistics that would be associated with a substantially increased number of bi-term courses offered in parallel with semester-length courses;
- the increased stress, both on individuals (students, faculty, and staff) and on the institution, of more frequent final examinations and term starts/ends;

- the loss of the important fifth-week assessment instrument; and
- the possible negative impact on student enrollment and retention, at a time when these issues are paramount.

Some months ago, the Student Government Association passed a resolution against any systemic change to the academic calendar reflecting a bi-term structure. At its last meeting, the Senate passed a resolution arguing against any “change to the academic calendar to privilege delivery” of classes in a bi-term mode.

It is clear from all the above that a deliberate campus-wide move toward increased bi-term instruction at WKU is not in the overall best interests of our students and faculty. Therefore, **WKU will continue to offer courses predominantly in the semester-based format.**

This outcome notwithstanding, the opportunity for reflection, discussion, and debate on this issue has, I believe, generated an increased awareness of how academic course content is packaged and how best to use precious class time. Several aspects of this merit mention at this juncture.

In cases where it is believed that significant advantages in pedagogical effectiveness would result, I still encourage faculty and units to explore teaching courses in bi-term mode during Fall and Spring semesters. Indeed, several units have indicated that they do plan to explore the enhanced use of this already available accelerated learning mode. Care must be taken to ensure that the overall integrity of class schedules for students who do participate in bi-term classes is maintained.

Second, the growing level of participation in our summer and winter course offerings indicates that enhancing these additional opportunities for learning may be beneficial. Many students take advantage of winter and

summer term courses not only to accelerate their progress toward a degree, but also to engage in enriching experiences such as Study Abroad.

Third, as the various means through which information is transferred, through which knowledge is acquired, and through which learning is accomplished, continue to evolve, there are other important changes within the higher education landscape that merit our attention. Some of these changes are gradual, some not so gradual. In the latter category, the rapidly increasing availability of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), which offer higher education content to a wide audience, usually at no charge, clearly pose both an opportunity and a threat to learning in the traditional university context. As an institution, we need to be formulating how to respond to such rapidly evolving elements of higher education, and I therefore encourage you all to be thinking about such issues.

Fourth, there is considerable evidence that for online courses, in which students working at their own pace can (and often do) comfortably complete material within a duration significantly shorter than a semester, there may be distinct advantages to offering courses more frequently, or even on an “on demand” basis. Such a model may be a distinct attraction to the population of adult learners who desire to return to complete degrees in order to advance their careers. It is likely that such adult learners will form an increasingly important element of our enrollment profile, and we must be willing to be increasingly flexible in our course delivery modes in response to this changing demography.

In closing, I would like to recall my request in early Fall that the campus give the idea of increased bi-term course offerings a “fair shake,” and I am appreciative that this is indeed what has occurred. I would like to thank you all for giving the bi-term concept such fair and thoughtful consideration, and I look forward to a similar level of campus engagement in future initiatives.