

Are 11 Weeks Weak? A Conversation With Instructors

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ABSTRACT

Undergraduate programs in the United States range from locally funded, two-year community colleges, to state and federally funded universities, as well as private, tuition-based institutions. Assumingly most programs attempt to facilitate a relevant and balanced curriculum that prepares students for the general and perhaps specific obstacles that they will experience in a professional environment. Successful curricula may also attempt to prepare students for the social, cultural and economic challenges that they will experience in their personal life. The question of how various programs implement this fundamental yet daunting task has been in the past and assuredly will remain a part of academia, research studies and discussions. In general, these debates relate to the breadth of a program. However, within this arena, the pertinent factor is a program's length—the number of credit hours congruent to or with the duration of a quarter or a semester that are required to achieve a particular degree. This aspect may be of significance to prospective students, their parents, spouses and other individuals who potentially hold a role in the selection of the student's educational process and future. Undeniable factors in the decision-process include admission's work, the program itself, the degree offering, the reputation of the institution, cost of credit hours, the school's physical location and its supporting environment—including housing accommodation, libraries, activity centers, proximity to family and workplace. Regardless of the various options, some individuals make the decision to enroll in an 11-week quarter-based educational model. The Art Institutes utilize this educational model at their thirty-five locations across the United States and two facilities in Canada. This system leads us to the question: do eleven weeks provide sufficient time for a student to interpret, analyze and demonstrate the course objectives? With an effort to advocate open-minded and non-conformist responses questions relating to this topic were asked in an informal setting—to new and experienced instructors who currently teach full or part-time at The Art Institute of Dallas. All possess a Masters or terminal degree in their fields of instruction and have been teaching in higher education for five or more years. Data from these conversations was gathered and has become the essence of this paper. Readers may assume current faculty advocate this model in order to maintain active employment. However, those assumptions are erroneous. The relevance of this research is important to prospective students, parents and all the individuals involved in higher education across the continuum of five- to seventeen-week terms. Those individuals can 'hear' the pros and cons (if any) of such a model from instructors themselves. This inquiry contributes to the conversations and value as found and defined by instructors. Via their research, the authors hope to facilitate a dialogue that advocates/or does not advocate the institution of an 11-week educational model amongst all the interested individuals in higher education. A deeper level of understanding and respect for instructors who successfully teach in quarter-based educational models can be obtained. Administrators may find value in this research for economic and accounting reasons. Both the authors clearly understand that the 'instructor' is only one component of any successful educational model. Opinions from others such as the students and alumni are also of immense value. These individuals will be addressed in their further studies.

Keywords: Gagan Sarkaria, Toni M. Schuster, Sarkaria and Schuster, quarter-based, research, inquiry, quarter system, educational model, conversations, The Art Institutes, The Art Institute of Dallas, eleven weeks, non-traditional semester system, successful curricula, quarter-length systems, private creative arts school, arts college, creative arts programs, course objectives, course outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

A few weeks ago, the authors, Gagan Sarkaria and Toni M. Schuster were discussing their undergraduate and graduate education. Their shared learning experiences and communication sparked interest in having similar conversations with other instructors on different educational models. Both authors are successful outcomes of the graduate program at the University of North Texas in Denton, Texas, where they earned their Masters of Fine Arts in Communication Design with a major in Design Pedagogy.

The university follows a traditional 16-week semester system. Sarkaria and Schuster come from different undergraduate educational systems as compared to the 11-week quarter-based educational model utilized by The Art Institutes. They now work at The Art Institute of Dallas as administrators and faculty members.

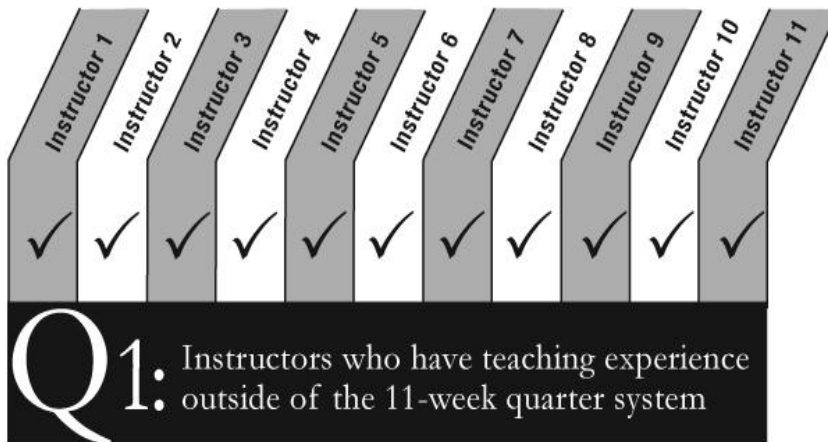
The Art Institute of Dallas offers degrees such as an Associate of Applied Science, an Associate of Applied Arts and a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Advertising Design, Culinary Arts, Digital Filmmaking & Video Production, Fashion Design, Fashion & Retail Management, Interactive Media Design, Interior Design, Graphic Design, and Media Arts & Animation.

Sarkaria and Schuster determined that talking with fellow instructors was a valid place to begin an inquiry. A list of questions to be asked was formulated. *“Are 11 weeks weak? — A conversation with instructors”* is the outcome of this shared communication.

The authors questioned 11 instructors from several departments within the school. All possess a Masters or terminal degree in their fields of instruction and have been teaching in higher education for a minimum of five years. Collectively these 11 instructors have 177 years of teaching experience in academia. Most are also active in their profession. All responses from these individuals shed light on the main question: does an 11-week quarter-based educational model provide sufficient time for students to interpret, analyze and clearly demonstrate the course objectives? The informal exchange of ideas, instructor views and information gathered via this ‘conversation’ is put forth below. Although all responses could be mentioned, instructor-responses that reflected varied experiences or points of view for each question are listed. In addition, several questions have a short and compendious conversational synopsis formulated by the authors.

QUESTION: 1

Sarkaria and Schuster: “Other than the 11-week quarter-based system at The Art Institute of Dallas, what educational models have you instructed in?”



Instructor 1: “Besides The Art Institute of Dallas, I have been teaching at a four-year public state university in Texas. The university offers a 17-week semester system.”

Instructor 5: “I taught six years at a community college in Texas which was based on a 16-week semester.”

Instructor 6: “I have been teaching sporadically for about 20 years. Currently I also teach at a private university that utilizes 15-week long semesters.”

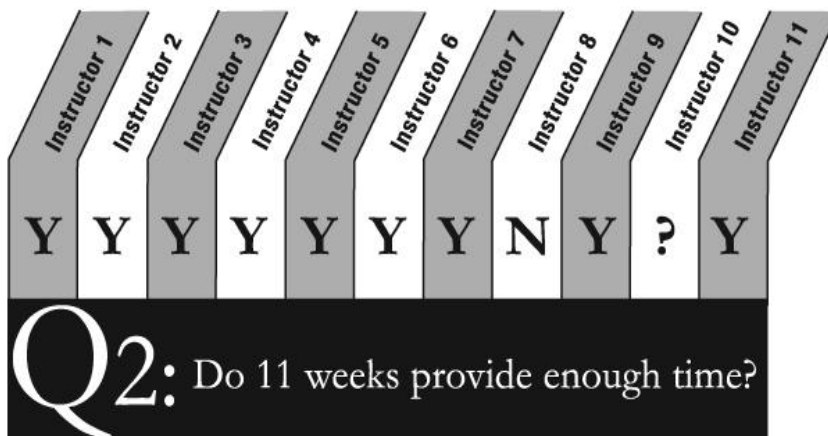
Instructor 7: “I have been teaching in higher education for twenty-four years. Before coming to The Art Institute of Dallas I taught for over eleven years in a 2-year private college in Texas. The college followed a semester system.”

Instructor 8: “More than half of my career in education has been spent teaching at traditional 4-year universities. Along with The Art Institute of Dallas, I’m currently instructing in the Junior College environment. At these institutions, I have taught in both the long semesters (16 weeks) and during summer terms. The summer terms were sometimes 10 weeks long and sometimes divided into 2 intense 5-week sessions.”

Instructor 11: “I have taught in various educational models used by public state universities, private schools and colleges. They engage from a 9-month to 16-week semester systems; from 5.5- to 11-week quarter systems.”

QUESTION: 2

Sarkaria and Schuster: “In your opinion, do 11 weeks provide sufficient time for a student to interpret, analyze and clearly demonstrate the course objectives?”



Instructor 1: “Meeting once-a-week for 4 hours is sufficient. I sometimes feel like I overload them with information, because of the time factor, however, thus far the majority of students seem to learn the course.”

Instructor 2: “Yes, but of course we could do more with more time. In a project-based learning environment we could. However, time-on-task is actually much the same as a 16-week semester. If you were to look at 16-week systems, week 1 is usually a waste. The syllabus is handed out and class is dismissed. Midterm is the same—a test is given and the class is adjourned. Final week once again is the same. You end up with 13 weeks. And of course, if the instructor isn’t prepared, a week or two can pass by. The 11-week process eliminates the instructor’s ability to coast. Classes are student-centered. With one class once a week, classes become intense mini workshops.”

Instructor 3: “Yes. To a student, 16-week semesters get tedious. Class and course work gets old because they are bored and ready to move forward. Student feedback is that they like mini-semester. There is so much information that they have to pay attention. There isn’t time for them to get bored or NOT to pay attention, because they will get behind and probably fail.”

Instructor 4: “Yes, if a student *is* focused. If he or she commits to attending school, working inside and outside of class, following instruction and being organized. This is a lot to ask, especially of new students. Being admitted and registered for classes does not guarantee nor entitle academic success. This misconception may be the reason students’ drop rate is higher their first couple of quarters. The lack of focus also comes into play if and when something happens in their life, which subsequently detracts their attention from schoolwork and participation. Then

there is the financial issue. If a student does not sign-up mind and body, they will (or their parents and family) eventually be hit where it really hurts.”

Instructor 6: “Yes, and I love it! The time passes so quickly that both the students and I don’t have a chance to get bored. Those students who will get it —will. Because of the short 11-week quarter, I believe students get to sample more because they are forced to. This system affords a bigger educational picture.”

Instructor 8: “In a word, no! Typical 16-week college courses meet twice a week for a slightly shorter time during each session. I think that this allows for greater retention of content information and a better opportunity to give small reinforcing outside assignments and check progress. The 11 weeks are sufficient only if the extra time is available and faculty have a reasonable course load.”

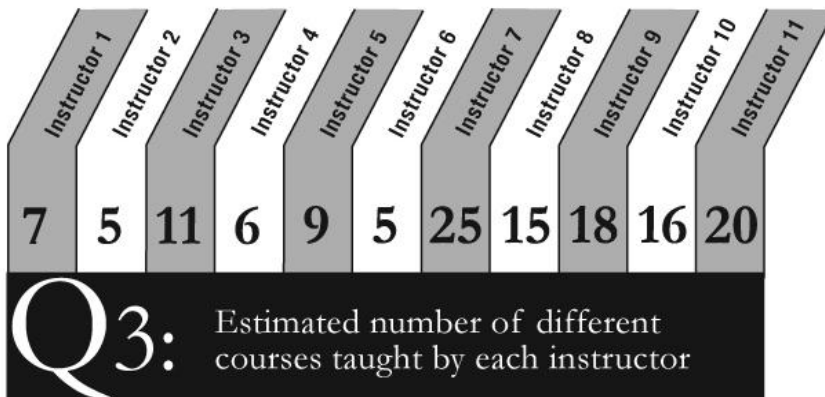
Instructor 10: “Lots of variables:

1. Student: How well the student is prepared?
2. Instructor: How thoroughly the instructor is prepared?
3. Development of the content: How well the content, lesson plans and curriculum are developed.”

Instructor 11: “Absolutely! 11 weeks in my opinion are sufficient. It is an extremely fast-paced learning environment though—not for everyone. We practice a learning-centered educational philosophy at The Art Institute of Dallas. I believe that education here is a partnership between the instructor and students. Of course the instructor has to be well prepared to get the ball rolling from week one. He or she has to be extremely prepared to teach a 3- to 4-hour studio or lecture class that meets once a week. On the other hand the student has to be prepared, focused and committed to learning. Then the educational experience of sharing knowledge and information becomes highly invigorating for the instructor and the student. Most instructors here are also very active in the profession. This propels and motivates the students in the classroom environment as the instructors share their real-life experiences and successful practices with them.”

QUESTION #3

Sarkaria and Schuster: “How many courses have you taught to date?”



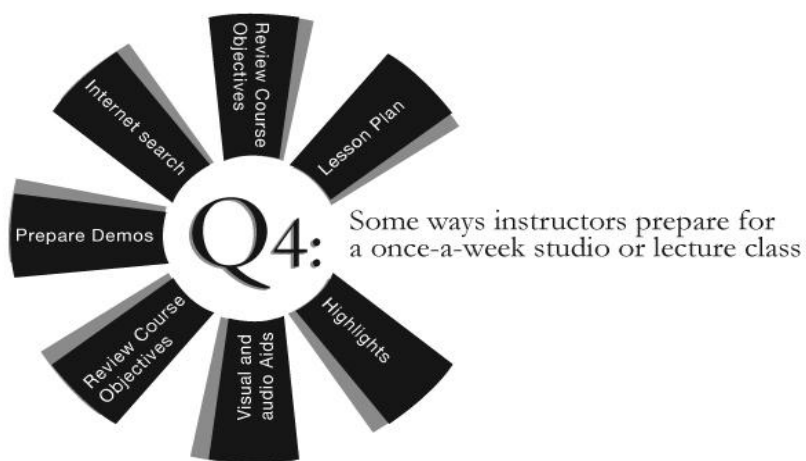
Conversational Synopsis:

All the instructors have been teaching hands-on applied arts and creative courses in their field of instruction. Most classes taught at The Art Institute of Dallas engage students in active learning. The vast knowledge, information and skills that these instructors bring to their students help them achieve outcomes and learning objectives of various courses required in the completion of their degrees. The authors are not suggesting that all professions should be learned with this educational system.

Some courses taught by these 11 instructors are: Adobe/Macromedia Director, Advanced Campaign Management, Advanced Case Studies, American Regional Cuisine, Apparel Structure, Business of Design, Career Development, Computer Applications, Design Fundamentals, Digital Filmmaking, Digital Imaging, Drawing Fundamentals, Economics, Financial Management, History of Graphic Design, Hospitality Cost Control, JavaScript, Life Drawing, Managing Brand Communications, Marketing & Media, Menu Management, Patternmaking, Principles of Digital Photography, Product Research & Positioning, Publications, Purchasing and Product ID, Sanitation & Safety, Senior Portfolio, Surface Design, Textiles, Traditional Typography, Typography Fundamentals, Video Production, Western Civilization, World Cuisines and Writing.

QUESTION #4

Sarkaria and Schuster: “How do you prepare yourself for a once-a-week studio or lecture class in an 11-week quarter?”



Instructor 4: “Before the quarter begins, I thoroughly review the course syllabus, objectives and the course binder with examples. I then establish an overall plan of how I am going to deliver the content. Most instructors realize that with each quarter the students and the group dynamics change. Therefore, my lectures and demos are revamped from week-to-week on a regular basis. This also means I spend at the very least one full day preparing for each four-hour class.”

Instructor 6: “It begins with a Lesson Plan which includes:

1. Key Concepts to Convey,
2. What to highlight/review from previous week,
3. Looking ahead,
4. Keep an open mind for change if necessary.”

Instructor 7: “I don’t want to listen to myself for 4 hours. I incorporate discussions, visuals and assignments into my lectures to reach out to all different kinds of learning styles —Visual, Audio, Read & write, and Kinesthetic/Tactile. You have to be very deliberate in your expectations from students. You also have to be repetitive in your reminders so that students understand what is expected of them.”

Instructor 8: “I usually get all of my handouts in order the day before so that they can be photocopied. I then refer to the course syllabus to be certain of the presentation content. I then spend about 1-2 hours (usually more if it is new material) prepping for the class. I go through the demonstrations and content that I plan to present so that the lecture or demonstration goes as smoothly as possible and I can successfully answer student questions.”

Instructor 9: “I use PowerPoint Presentations in all of my lecture classes and many lab classes also. This forms a structural guideline for the class period in addition to lesson plans. Formative assessment instruments are developed during the quarter and modified as needed. I typically spend time grading papers so that students get assignments/quizzes/journals back the next week of class.”

Instructor 10: “I tend to review my materials every week. I get tired of hearing myself so I try to bring something new and fresh to the class every week. Since I am active in the profession as well, I bring in real-world examples and experiences to help students compare and contrast, understand and have a dialogue with their peers and me. I am very cognizant of the fact that I do not want to be stale.”

Instructor 11: “A clear understanding of learning objectives and weekly lesson plans are the stepping-stones of being successful in an 11-week system. A detailed lesson plan that has weekly objectives to be covered, advance organizers, both informal and formal student assessment criteria, in-class activities and assignments, to be assigned homework and summary activity can actually relieve a lot of stress for the faculty in this fast-paced educational environment. I provide my students a weekly schedule, which is a concise version of my lesson plan. This helps us to be on the same page, avoids any surprises and help students remember what was covered in class and what is due the next week.”

QUESTION #5

Sarkaria and Schuster: “How do you engage students in active learning?”



Instructor 1: “The students are the number one priority. I get to know their names immediately. Several times over the course of the quarter I use interactive approaches —specifically, breaking the students up into pairs or groups for projects. I assign research projects where they are required to share information with the class. I also include critiques where every student must speak/share input. I try my best to keep it interactive! In the studio environment the students walk around to see what their peers are producing or creating —getting the blood flowing. Inevitably we learn from each other. Hanging students’ homework up on the wall and engaging them in the critique process has been productive as well. I hand out critique checklists and additional vocabulary so they have these reference materials in front of them and often times they actually use them! I try my best to be positive and enthusiastic! I take my vitamins regularly.”

Instructor 2: “Tell real-life stories that relate to the topic as much as possible. Hands-on work and group pressure forces the individual and the group to be present in body and mind. Also sub-manager concepts work effectively —delegation makes them stronger, more prepared for the professional environment.”

Instructor 3: “I mentally engage my students with lectures that have humor and stories.”

Instructor 4: “I use whatever method I believe will best communicate the concept to that particular class. My lectures include detailed handouts, videos, DVDs, PDF and PowerPoint presentations that I create. I do demos, hands-on in-class projects whenever possible. I bring in my own professional examples of work and actual printed samples to share with students. I coordinate with local businesses to plan field trips to provide students with real-life experiences. This can be especially good around week seven as a break from the classroom setting. I also engage my students via group activities. I’ll formulate groups to create various dynamics and at times even a sense of competition. I speak to them as a Creative Director providing feedback to each student equally and fairly. I encourage them to have a voice and to participate in discussions. I sometimes ask for their evaluation of an assignment and what or how they would do it differently. I allow them the chance to fail, and the opportunity to succeed.”

Instructor 5: “Get them involved. Interactive lectures are my goal. I expect my students to have a dialogue. What they think is of great importance to me.”

Instructor 6: “Usually I begin with a PowerPoint presentation based lecture with handouts. This takes us into a discussion as everyone is a consumer and has something to say.”

Instructor 7: “I am fairly successful in getting them back week after week because they are clear as to what is expected of them —what they need to bring to class to be successful. I try to connect and make sense of course information for real-life experience. I explain and then ask them to analyze: how can they use the information in the profession? What information do they need to display and why?”

Instructor 8: “I tend to do a lecture/demonstration and then give short in-class extemporaneous exercises. This allows students to synthesize and illustrate the learning objectives of that demo to me. I repeat this process a few times in class so that if there are any students who did not understand they get the opportunity to ask questions before the class is finished. I generally assign homework that reflects what was covered in class.”

Instructor 9: “Use of Jigsaw exercises, Socratic dialogue, Q&A. Students prepare journals and assignments that require a reflection on their learning experience. Many activities are engineered into the class that encourages higher order of thinking skills to complete.”

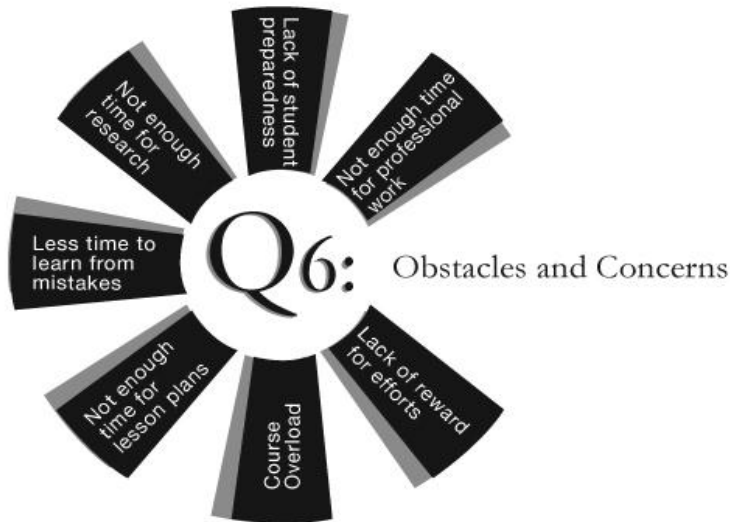
Instructor 10: “I let my students know that I love and care about them. I tell my students that it is OK to make mistakes. I praise them, push them, and do not let them settle as mediocre. I constantly challenge my students and remind them that criticism is *not* about them. I preach 4 rules:

1. Work hard,
2. Make money,
3. Help others and
4. Have fun.”

Instructor 11: “I’m ready to engage my students the minute they enter the classroom. I begin my class with advance organizers like answer the bonus questions, gallery walk, writing objectives of the day on the board. I tend to develop a very comfortable, trustworthy and socializing environment in the class for my students. The students not only focus on what I say, write or demonstrate they also pay attention to the feedback provided by their classmates. In-class assignments provide motivation and engagement for a lot of students where they are forced to work as a team or in small groups. The intelligent students receive invigoration and motivation by guiding their group-mates and helping the ones who struggle a little.”

QUESTION #6

Sarkaria and Schuster: “In your opinion, what are the obstacles or concerns with an 11-week quarter?”

**Conversational Synopsis:**

81.82 percent of instructors gave an affirmatory response to an 11-week quarter-based educational model. 18.18 percent shed light upon some obstacles. They emphasized on the course overload that resulted in serious distress. They highlighted the need to have more preparation time in-between quarters to effectively illustrate clear “blue prints” of the courses they teach.

Another concern stemmed from the lack of preparedness of the students accepted into the school. Students who are academically and/or emotionally unprepared are unequipped for this fast-paced educational environment. These students, although educationally deserving, can disrupt classes —taking precious time away from other worthy students. Interruptions present an earnest threat to the traction an instructor builds in a classroom.

CONCLUSION

Teaching excellence is the top priority at The Art Institute of Dallas. Faculty members are provided with resources and tools to develop and improve student learning and instructor effectiveness in an 11-week quarter via workshops, coaching and mentor programs. The school uses the I.D.E.A. survey for gathering data on course evaluations, progress on learning objectives, and instructor’s teaching style(s) and effectiveness in a classroom environment for a particular course. The Individual Development and Educational Assessment Center at Kansas State University tabulates the data and provides a diagnostic report on the above-mentioned areas. This report helps the instructors retain their strengths and work on the weaknesses. It becomes a great developmental tool to improve the course and instruction. The new and seasoned instructors are exposed to The Art of Teaching at Ai Training Module that helps them succeed in their classes by promoting and demonstrating a learning-centered educational environment in an 11-week quarter-based model.

The authors sincerely hope to have instigated a deeper level of understanding and respect for instructors who successfully teach in an 11-week quarter-based educational model. Administrators may discover value in this research for economic and accounting reasons. They believe the relevance of this research is important to prospective students, parents and all the individuals involved in higher education across the continuum of five- to seventeen-week terms. This inquiry contributes to the conversations and value as found and defined by instructors.

Via their research, the authors also hope to facilitate a dialogue that advocates/or does not advocate the institution of an 11-week educational model amongst all the interested individuals in higher education. Both authors understand that the ‘instructor’ is only one component of any successful educational model. Opinions from others such as the students and alumni are also of immense value. These individuals will be addressed in their further studies.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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Toni M. Schuster works as an Academic Advisor and graphic design instructor at The Art Institute of Dallas. She is also a practicing graphic designer for twenty-five years. She holds an M.F.A. in Communication Design with a major in Design Pedagogy from University of North Texas and a B.F.A. in Communication Design from Rochester Institute of Technology, New York.

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