Proposed Academic Calendar

What are the goals of the calendar committee, who is on it and how long have we been meeting?

Our goal is to recommend changes to Cornell’s academic calendar that help address concerns about student stress, as well as improve faculty work-life balance. We also have to ensure that we propose a calendar that is in compliance with New York State education guidelines. Our committee is composed of faculty, graduate and undergraduate students, staff, and administrators and we have been meeting since October 2010.

What are the highlights of suggested changes to the Fall calendar?

Suggested changes to the Fall calendar are not extensive. To meet state education requirements for the number of days of instruction, we suggest that classes begin the Tuesday before Labor Day in most semesters. Breaks in the semester would occur on Labor Day, for a two-day (M & T) Fall break on Columbus weekend and for Thanksgiving break. We are proposing that the Wednesday before Thanksgiving be a full day off instead of a half day, so the holiday would be W-F. These changes would bring the number of instructional days from 67.5 to 68.

When would classes end in the Fall?

After Thanksgiving break, we would have one full week of classes. The last day of classes would be on a Friday.

What are the highlights of suggested changes to the Spring calendar?

Suggested changes to the Spring calendar were designed to address university concerns about student stress. We propose adding a winter break on the Monday and Tuesday of Presidents week (during the third week in February). Although this is only about a third into the semester, it allows the five-day Spring break to be scheduled two-thirds into the semester, in late March. Students would return from break for the remaining third of the semester. (The semester is thus broken into thirds, rather than in half – by Spring break – as in the current calendar.) We are also proposing that classes begin on the Wednesday after Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, in most semesters. In addition, Martin Luther King, Jr. Day would be a university holiday. The proposed calendar is very similar to the proposed Fall calendar.

When would classes end in the Spring?

Classes would end on a Wednesday in early May. This would be three instructional days later than when we currently end classes. With adding an additional two-day break in February, these changes would still reduce the number of instructional days from 70 to 69.

How would study days and exams work?

In both semesters, we propose that students have two study days, in addition to the weekend, to prepare for exams. In the Fall semester, the study days would be on M & T. In the Spring semester, this would be on Th & F. This is a reduction of two-thirds of a day relative to the current exam schedule.
To minimize stress (as much as possible), our exam schedule was remodeled using students’ schedules (vs. class meeting times in the old model) to space-out exams and provide natural breaks that minimize the number of students who have back-to-back exams or three exams in 24 hours. We found that the optimal number of exam periods to meet these goals was 19 (versus our current 21 scheduled periods). In other words, we could reduce the number of exam periods and obtain a better outcome for students.

In the current calendar, exams begin on a Wednesday evening, with three exams on Thursday, two on Friday, one on Saturday, and then three exams daily on Monday through Friday. In the Fall, our proposed schedule would have exams beginning on a Wednesday and ending on the following Wednesday. In the Spring, exams would begin on a Monday and finish the following Monday. We would have three exams daily except for Friday (when we would have two, with no evening exam) and one each in the afternoon on Saturday and Sunday. So the number of exams days would be reduced from 9 1/3 to 8, which is still long relative to our peer institutions. (Next year, Harvard will be at 6 exams days and Yale will be at 5.)

What about Senior Week?

The student representatives on the committee were strong advocates for the benefits of Senior Week. Although not denying its importance, the majority of the committee considered it a lower priority than breaks that would reduce stress during the semester. The proposed calendar would accommodate formal programming on T-Th, or even F. In addition, the final exam schedule can be created so that the vast majority of seniors would end their exams before that last Monday, leaving the week for celebration.

Why not start the Spring semester earlier - and perhaps make the break in February a full week?

Our Spring semester anchor was a Memorial Day weekend commencement, which was the stated preference of the President and his Senior Staff. Thus, we essentially worked backwards from that date. If we began the semester earlier, we could offer a week-long break during Presidents week. However, we were told that many students might not be able to afford to leave campus for two separate breaks and that a full week of break on campus, in the winter, was too long. While some faculty expressed concern at the difficulty of the M-T winter break, in that they would lose a full week of M-F instruction, we would run into the same difficulty of abbreviated weeks if we had a five-day winter break and began the semester three days earlier, before the Martin Luther King, Jr. Day holiday. In addition, beginning earlier would bump us into our Winter Session, and take research time away from many faculty who are working to meet January grant proposal deadlines. There are also staffing costs to having the campus open for a full additional week. Lastly, due to other constraints, we could not readily use those days for increasing either the study/exam period or Senior Week, as some students suggested.

When would these changes take effect?

Not immediately, although we anticipate some changes could occur in the next year or two. If approved, we believe that most changes would likely be in place by Fall 2016.

What are the next steps?

We plan to submit the proposed calendar to the Faculty Senate for a vote at its May, 2012 meeting. If approved by the Faculty Senate, the calendar would still need to be approved by Provost Fuchs and President Skorton. If not approved, the Dean of Faculty would determine the next steps.