Rationale for Key Changes to Cornell’s Academic Calendar

The following narrative updates the document from February, 2012, which accompanied the proposed recommendations prior to feedback received by the committee from February through April, 2012. The recommendations were revised based on that feedback, and were described to the Faculty Senate on April 11, 2012.

The most notable revisions to the original set of recommendations are: 1) Addition of two study days either after the weekend following the end of classes (Fall semester) or before the weekend following the end of classes (Spring semester), and the removal of the study day in the middle of the exam period (both semesters); 2) Removal of the two additional days of Spring Break (Thursday and Friday), which had created another partial week of instruction.

Fall Calendar

Fall Calendar Overview: Considerations, Constraints, and Process. The Fall semester calendar has two anchor points: Labor Day and Thanksgiving; the committee did not revisit the issue of Labor Day, which was debated in recent years. The current Fall semester has 67.5 days of instruction, which is out of balance with the current 70 days of instruction in the Spring calendar, so increasing (or at least not reducing) the number of days of instruction was an important consideration. Because Labor Day and Thanksgiving are university holidays, and Fall Break coincides with the Columbus Day holiday, there is less concern in the Fall semester about alignment with local school systems. The timing of Thanksgiving creates irremediable problems because of its proximity to the end of the semester.

Thanksgiving break. The half-day of instruction on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving was considered to be of little value, as students often skip morning classes. It is proposed to include all day Wednesday in the Thanksgiving break; this reduced the number of days of instruction in the Fall semester to 67, further exacerbating the imbalance with Spring semester. This deficiency was addressed by gaining days elsewhere (see below) so that the final calendar was 68 days.

End of the semester: End of classes, study period, and exam period. The timing of Thanksgiving means that there is little time for instruction after the break. However, because both the study period and exam period are long relative to those of other universities, and the end of the exam period is sometimes very close to the winter break, causing hardship for students, staff and faculty, the committee explored the possibility of shortening the study period and the exam period. After much deliberation, the committee recommends a shortened exam/study period schedule (as noted above, this has been revised from the original recommendations): i) end classes on a Friday; ii) study days will be the weekend following the end of classes, plus the following Monday and Tuesday; iii) begin exams on the Wednesday after the conclusion of classes; iv) add
an exam period on Sunday afternoon; v) revise the exam schedule to optimize the schedule for each semester of each academic year. Thus, there will now be four study days, and there will be exams Wednesday (3 periods), Thursday (3 periods), Friday (2 periods, with no evening period), Saturday (1 period in the afternoon), Sunday (1 period in the afternoon), Monday (3 periods), Tuesday (3 periods), and Wednesday (3 periods).

The current final exam schedule is based on an algorithm that had been originally written in the 1980’s; the committee believed there was scope to improve upon the current schedule in part due to many exams being held during exception periods. With the assistance of ORIE and SHA faculty, Registrar Cassie Dembosky and her staff worked to develop a model to reduce the number of students who had back-to-back exams or three exams scheduled in one day. Based on the registrar’s calculations, the exam schedule can be optimized to reduce the number of exam periods needed by 2 (3 if the single period dedicated to language exams in the existing calendar is considered). Exam schedules would be determined by students’ actual class schedules versus when a particular class meets. As a consequence of this change, the university would post final exam schedules 3-4 weeks into the semester, once most student add-drops are completed.

An initial proposal that reduced the number of study days before the beginning of exams was received with concern by some faculty (particularly in Engineering, due to the need for projects to be completed during the last days of classes) and students (the Student Assembly expressed its desire for a minimum of 4 study days in a resolution). In response to these concerns, the final proposal includes four study days.

We recommend holding general course exams on the weekend. We currently hold one exam period on Saturday for languages. We recommend broadening this single Saturday exam period to include other classes. We recommend holding one exam period on Sunday and retaining the current two exam periods on Friday. With the proposed changes, exams would begin on a Monday and end on the following Tuesday, eight days later.

*Timing of Fall break.* Fall break is centered between Labor Day and Thanksgiving break, as is currently the case, coinciding with the Columbus Day federal and local school system holiday.

*Beginning of the semester.* Classes would begin on the last Tuesday in August. Classes currently begin on a Wednesday, and it is recognized that beginning on Tuesday will put further stress on Orientation activities; however, consultation with Orientation staff suggested that this could be managed. Retaining move-in day on a Friday seems advisable, as it imposes less hardship on families accompanying freshmen to campus. Beginning classes earlier did not seem advisable given the time needed to prepare campus between summer session and Fall semester. Starting a week later, as desired by
many parents with school-age children, pushes the end of exams too close to Christmas to be feasible.

**Spring Calendar**

**Spring Calendar Overview: Considerations, Constraints, and Process.** Options for the Spring semester calendar are constrained by several issues. The timing of Commencement is a key factor in shaping the end of the semester; Cornell’s current Commencement date, on Memorial Day Weekend, is late compared with many peer institutions. In setting the start of the semester, the length of Winter break is a factor; Cornell’s current start date is late relative to many other universities. A second consideration at the beginning of the semester is the Martin Luther King, Jr. Day holiday; the committee felt that this national holiday should be respected by the university. A third constraint is the number of days of instruction, which must meet the NYS standard and should also be balanced with the Fall semester (68 days in the proposed Fall calendar). It also seems beneficial to have a Study/Exam period schedule that mirrors the Fall calendar. One of the primary goals of the committee was to break up long blocks of instruction during the worst of the Ithaca winter. An additional consideration was the scheduling of breaks, where possible, to coincide with local school system holidays. Ultimately, the committee’s deliberations proceeded by first setting the date for Commencement and then setting the beginning of the semester. With these endpoints established, the remainder of the calendar was then developed.

**Commencement date.** Early in its deliberations the committee determined that Commencement should be no later than its current Memorial Day weekend date, and explored options for moving Commencement forward, to either one or two weeks earlier. However, earlier dates would produce many complications. Concerns about possible conflicts with Ithaca College were addressed with the IC registrar on several occasions (IC is also in the process of revising its calendar). The biggest difficulties, however, are caused by Ithaca’s climate, which poses two major problems. First, we were told by the Vice President for Facilities Services, Kyu-Jung Whang, that it is already a major challenge for Buildings and Grounds to prepare the campus for Memorial Day weekend Commencement and this would be much more difficult with an earlier Commencement date. Second, Cornell lacks a suitable venue to accommodate an indoor Commencement, which we were told would be much more likely to be needed with an earlier date. After considerable deliberation, and meetings with individuals representing several different constituencies, a subset of the committee met with the Senior Staff in November, 2011, to ask whether Commencement should continue to be held during Memorial Day weekend. The answer was “yes” primarily because concerns about the impact of weather on preparing for and holding Commencement outweighed the potential advantage to Cornell graduates and faculty of an earlier start to the summer.

**Study/Exam period and Senior “Days.”** The combined Study/Exam period with 4 study days prior to exams should mirror that used for Fall semester, given the concerns
discussed above. In the Spring semester, exams would also be 8 days in length, beginning on a Monday and ending the following Monday, and with only a single exam period each on Saturday and Sunday. Ending exams on the Monday before a Memorial Day weekend Commencement shortens the period for Senior Week programming relative to the current calendar, but is one day longer than in our original proposal, in response to the Student Assembly’s resolution requesting that Senior Week not be reduced unduly. In addition, each Spring semester the Registrar will create an exam schedule that minimizes the number of seniors having exams on the final Monday of the exam period. The committee also responded to a request by the Employee Assembly not to decrease the number of days between the end of exams and Commencement, which are needed for preparing dormitories for families of graduating students.

**Martin Luther King, Jr. Day and the start of Spring Semester.** The committee determined that, with a late Commencement and with the days gained by using the same study/exam schedule as in the Fall semester (see above), there was no reason to ever hold classes on Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK) Day, thus resolving the controversy that has occurred in years when Spring semester has begun before the third Monday in January. A start date in late January was considered beneficial for faculty facing grant submission deadlines earlier in the month, and for preserving Winter session course options; these issues had been discussed extensively when an earlier Commencement date was being considered. However, Cornell’s Spring semester start date is late relative to many other universities, so starting even later was not considered a good option. One further consideration to honor the holiday was that the semester should start on Wednesday, rather than Tuesday, since many staff must work on the day before classes begin. In most years this would be the same week as MLK Day, but in some years the following week (due to a later Memorial Day).

**Adding a break during the Spring semester.** With a late January start and a Memorial Day weekend Commencement, additional days were available for creating or augmenting breaks. One of these days was deployed to start the semester on the Wednesday following MLK Day, rather than Tuesday, in order to honor the holiday more fully. An obvious candidate for using at least some of the remaining days was Presidents’ Day in mid-February, both as a mental health break for students and because the week that includes Presidents’ Day is a holiday for some New York school districts (e.g., ICSD, Lansing), though not always for others (e.g., Cortland). If Cornell holds classes during public school holidays, this creates difficulties for Cornell parents of school-age children who must work during that week. Thus, it was considered desirable to create a break that included the national holiday (the third Monday of February) and the next day. Spring Break would then be centered in the remaining block of instruction between the new February break and the end of classes.

There was considerable exploration of other options for this break, notably a full week Presidents’ break. The 2-day break was recommended in the original recommendations (as in these) because the full Presidents’ week break would be a very long break for
students who could not afford to travel home more than once during the semester, raising practical issues for the university as well. While the short week does pose problems for laboratory classes with sections that meet throughout the week, if we were to schedule a 5 day break, we would have a similar short-week problem at the start of the semester. Thus, we opted to stay with a recommended two-day break. An additional idea that was discussed was to insert a third break of one day later in the semester, midway between the end of Spring Break and the end of classes. This day might also serve as a snow make-up day. This idea was rejected because it created yet another week without a full five days of instruction and also would occur during Cornell days, a time when we would like classes to be in session. The initial proposal for a 2-day President’s break also added two days to Spring Break; the addition to Spring Break, however, also created an additional short week and was discarded.

Staff holidays. Although not directly part of the committee’s charge, the issue of staff holidays was discussed. Staff have no holidays between New Year’s Day and Memorial Day, and many staff volunteer to work at Commencement on Memorial Day weekend, in which case they have no holiday until July 4. The recognition of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day and the creation of the two day Presidents Day break provide the university with an opportunity to address this issue, which is of great concern to the staff, as noted in the Employee Assembly resolution supporting the recommendations of this committee.

Summer and Winter Sessions

Neither Summer Session nor Winter Session is affected in any significant way by the proposed changes to the academic calendar. Beginning the Spring semester a week earlier, an option that was explored by the committee, would have had an impact on Winter Session. The committee received recommendations from respondents to its request for feedback both for and against the idea of shortening Winter break. One of many reasons the committee considered moving Commencement to an earlier date was the possibility of increasing the length of the summer for research, jobs, internships, etc. This could have created time for additional summer programming. An earlier start to the Fall semester could have impacted on Summer Session, but there was more interest in exploring a later start to the Fall semester, so this never became a problem.