

UCAP RESPONSE TO TRIAL CHANGES IN ACADEMIC YEAR START DATE AND FALL WELCOME

Background: At the Faculty Council planning meeting held on Tuesday, August 26, 2008, Senior Associate Provost June Youatt stated that the administration plans to proceed with implementation (on a trial basis) of a shortened two-day Fall Welcome and to shorten the fall 2009 semester by two days. This change would allow fall move-in to take place on Sunday, August 30, 2009, Fall Welcome to occur the next two days, and classes to begin on Wednesday, September 2, 2009. Dr. Youatt also stated that, due to the short time frame for finalizing the 2009-10 academic year calendar, any response(s) from Academic Governance would be needed by the end of September, 2008. Here we summarize the response of the University Committee on Academic Policy (UCAP).

Summary of Response: Based on the analysis of the proposed changes to the academic year start date and Fall Welcome that UCAP undertook last year (see UCAP memo to Jim Potchen and Kim Wilcox, dated April 11, 2008), UCAP concurs with the administration that changes to Fall Welcome should be considered. UCAP also concurs that, done correctly, a “trial-run” of a two-day welcome during the 2009-10 academic year could be a useful exercise.

However, UCAP opposes the linked (but logically distinct) proposal to shorten the fall 2009 semester by two days. This part of the proposal would reduce the number of fall instructional days to 70, exacerbating the difference between the fall and spring (which would retain 74 instructional days) semesters. Since curricular demands typically specify that a fixed amount of material be covered in a course, the loss of two additional instructional days to the already short fall semester poses a problem – especially for those courses which are offered both semesters and must cover the same material both terms.

UCAP believes that the following changes should be made to the current proposal:

1. UCAP supports shortening Fall 2009 welcome to a two-day period on a trial basis, so long as accommodation is made for Colleges or programs that require additional days to accomplish well-defined academic or community-building purposes.

A. We suggest that a comprehensive study be undertaken during fall 2009 to assess the effectiveness of a shortened two-day welcome period in facilitating the transition of students to undergraduate MSU campus (academic and non-academic) life, including a careful study of whether the abbreviated Fall Welcome time period has any deleterious effects.

B. As noted in the April 2008 memo, UCAP remains concerned whether Fall Welcome has sufficient academic content and that few faculty participate in freshman welcome programs. As Fall Welcome is being reconfigured, is there a plan to address these concerns?

C. We suggest that data on celebratory behavior, participation of off-campus individuals, and student arrests and hospitalizations, be carefully tracked to demonstrate whether the shortened Fall Welcome has a salutary effect.

D. We suggest that colleges or programs requesting additional Fall Welcome days collect evidence to demonstrate the efficacy of their programs.

2. UCAP believes that the academic year start date for 2009 should not be changed, that the fall 2009 semester should not be shortened, and that it is inappropriate to change the academic year calendar on a trial basis. The academic year calendar should be changed only rarely, and only after a comprehensive review with input from the campus community, including an analysis of the academic consequences of any proposed change.

Provost Wilcox's statements at the Academic Council meeting of April 15, 2009, indicated that an academic year calendar review was to be undertaken by Academic Governance during the current (2008-9) school year. UCAP concurs that Academic Governance should be an integral part of this review, and recommends that such a review should also definitively consider the issue of a fall break, which was raised by ASMSU in Academic Assembly Bill #14-32 (passed January, 2006), discussed by UCAP in 2005-6 and 2006-7, but has been in abeyance ever since pending calendar review.

A. UCAP is concerned that the current proposal to change the Academic Year Start Date appears to be driven solely by the issue of shortening Fall Welcome, despite the fact that the majority of the campus community is not directly involved with this event. It is also not clear that due consideration has been given to all relevant issues – for example, by shortening the fall semester, the proposal pre-empts any possibility of considering a fall break.

B. UCAP believes that, since the academic calendar is to be reviewed in its entirety this year, it would be unnecessarily disruptive to make a change for fall 2009 followed by other possible changes to the calendar shortly thereafter.

A two-day Fall Welcome in 2009 could, in principle, be accommodated without changing the academic calendar. For example, on a trial basis move-in could begin on Friday, August 28, 2009; Fall Welcome activities could take place over the following two (weekend) days; and classes could begin as currently scheduled on Monday, August 31, 2009. UCAP notes that such a plan would require careful scheduling of activities to accommodate students' religious practices.

Adopted by UCAP, 8/28/2008