

To members of the Cornell Community:

I am writing to you as the chair of a committee appointed in the fall of 2010 by the Dean of Faculty to consider the advisability of making changes to the Cornell Academic Calendar. Last year we circulated a document outlining the objectives and principles guiding the process of calendar revision. We have been meeting regularly since then to formulate specific recommendations guided by feedback concerning that document.

The committee has now produced a set of recommendations for revising the calendar. These are posted at the University Faculty website ([http://theuniversityfaculty.cornell.edu/calendarcommittee/calendar\\_main.html](http://theuniversityfaculty.cornell.edu/calendarcommittee/calendar_main.html)), along with a narrative providing a rationale for individual elements of the proposed calendar.

The committee hopes that these materials will be read by people throughout the Cornell and Ithaca communities, and we invite feedback, either through members of the various assemblies (preferably) or directly to this e-mail address: [calendarcommittee@cornell.edu](mailto:calendarcommittee@cornell.edu).

Sincerely,

Jeffrey J. Doyle, Chair

## Recommendations for revisions to the Cornell academic calendar

A committee composed of faculty, staff, and students was formed during the fall semester of 2010 to explore the possibility and desirability of revising the academic calendar. Among several reasons for forming the committee, one was to explore whether revisions to the calendar could help to alleviate student stress that had resulted in the cluster of suicides in the spring of 2010.

The committee has met regularly since fall, 2010. In the spring of 2011, the committee circulated a document, “**Objectives & Principles Guiding the Reexamination of the Academic Calendar**” and requested input from the community. Members of the committee met with various constituencies to answer questions concerning the document.

During the fall of 2011, the committee produced recommendations for the fall academic calendar, and in November presented these to the Senior Staff and also asked for input concerning the timing of Commencement, a key issue for formulating the spring academic calendar.

In early February, 2012, the committee presented recommendations for both spring and fall academic calendars to the Senior Staff, and, following their approval, presented the following summary calendar to members of the various assemblies gathered for their monthly breakfast meeting. The rationale for key changes is also provided in **narrative** form.

The committee is now requesting input from the entire Cornell and Ithaca community. Comments can be directed to representatives on the committee (e.g., undergraduate students to the SA representatives, etc.) or can be sent to the Calendar Committee website ([calendarcommittee@cornell.edu](mailto:calendarcommittee@cornell.edu)) by March 28, 2011. Any feedback is welcome, but those wishing to provide suggestions about individual features should consult the narrative and familiarize themselves with the constraints that led to particular choices in the proposed calendars; as both the Objectives & Principles document and the narrative note, all of the pieces of the calendar interact with one another, and the final result is often a compromise.

The committee will revise the recommendations using feedback from the community, and plans to submit a proposed calendar to the Faculty Senate by the end of the Spring, 2012, semester. If the calendar passes, it will go to the President and Provost for approval. Implementation is not part of the charge of the Calendar Committee; some recommendations could be implemented very soon, whereas others would likely take longer to phase in.

### Summary of proposed calendars 2013-2017

Event	Fall 2013	Fall 2014	Fall 2015	Fall 2016	Fall 2017
Classes begin (Tuesday)	August 27	August 26	August 25	August 23	August 29
Monday schedule on Friday*	August 30	August 29	August 28	August 26	September 1
Labor Day (no classes Monday)	September 2	September 1	September 7	September 5	September 4

Fall Break (no classes Monday and Tuesday)	October 14-15	October 13-14	October 12-13	October 10-11	October 9-10
Thanksgiving Break (no classes Wednesday through Friday)	November 27-29	November 26-28	November 25-27	November 23-25	November 22-24
Classes end (Friday)	December 6	December 5	December 4	December 2	December 8
Exams begin (Monday)	December 9	December 8	December 7	December 5	December 11
Study Day (Thursday)	December 12	December 11	December 10	December 8	December 14
Exams end (Tuesday)	December 17	December 16	December 15	December 13	December 19

- Classes start the Tuesday prior to August 30
- Schedule includes 68 days of instruction and 13 Mondays (including a Monday schedule on the first Friday of the semester)
- Exam schedule
  - First Monday – 3 exams
  - First Tuesday – 3 exams
  - Wednesday – 3 exams
  - Thursday – study day, no exams
  - Friday – 2 exams (morning and afternoon)
  - Saturday – 1 exam (afternoon)
  - Sunday – 1 exam (afternoon)
  - Second Monday – 3 exams
  - Second Tuesday – 3 exams

<b>Event</b>	<b>Spring 2014</b>	<b>Spring 2015</b>	<b>Spring 2016</b>	<b>Spring 2017</b>	<b>Spring 2018</b>
Martin Luther King Day	January 20	January 19	January 18	January 16	January 15
Classes begin (Wednesday)	January 22	January 21	January 27	January 25	January 24
February break (no classes Monday and Tuesday )	February 17-18	February 16-17	February 15-16	February 20-21	February 19-20
Spring break (no classes Thursday through following Friday)	March 27 – April 4	March 26 – April 3	March 31 – April 8	March 30 – April 7	March 29 – April 6
Classes end (Friday)	May 9	May 8	May 13	May 12	May 11
Exams begin	May 12	May 11	May 16	May 15	May 14

(Monday)					
Study Day (Thursday)	May 15	May 14	May 19	May 18	May 17
Exams end (Tuesday)	May 20	May 19	May 24	May 23	May 22
Senior Days (Wednesday through Friday)	May 21-23	May 20-22	May 25-27	May 24-26	May 23-25
Commencement (Sunday)	May 25	May 24	May 29	May 28	May 27

- Classes start the Wednesday prior to January 28
- Schedule includes 69 days of instruction and 13 Mondays
- Exam schedule
  - First Monday – 3 exams
  - First Tuesday – 3 exams
  - Wednesday – 3 exams
  - Thursday – study day, no exams
  - Friday – 2 exams (morning and afternoon)
  - Saturday – 1 exam (afternoon)
  - Sunday – 1 exam (afternoon)
  - Second Monday – 3 exams
  - Second Tuesday – 3 exams

## Rationale for Key Changes to Cornell's Academic Calendar

### 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. Because both the study period and exam period are long relative to those of other universities, 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 to avoid this constriction. After much deliberation, the committee recommends a revised exam/study period schedule: i) start exams on the Monday after the conclusion of classes; ii) insert a study day on the subsequent Thursday; iii) add an exam period on the subsequent Sunday afternoon; iv) revise the exam schedule to optimize the schedule for each semester of each academic year

The current final exam schedule is based on an algorithm that had been originally written in the 1980's; the committee believed there was some slack in the current schedule due to many exams being held during exception periods. With the assistance of ORIE 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 a full day. 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. The committee then explored the possibility of spreading out study days. With classes ending on a Friday, we recommend giving students the weekend to study and then inserting an additional study day in the middle of the exam period. Finally, the committee explored the possibility of scheduling exams over the subsequent weekend. We currently hold one exam period on Saturday for languages. The committee debated how to construct an exam schedule that would allow students to honor their religious practices. We recommend retaining the current two exam periods on Friday, broadening the single Saturday exam period to include more classes than just languages, and holding one exam period on Sunday. With the proposed changes, exams would begin on a Monday and end on the following Tuesday, eight days later. This would enable students to leave campus earlier than they would with our current final exam schedule.

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*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 holiday.

*Beginning of the semester.* Classes will begin on the last Tuesday in August, which in most years is later than the current start date. 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.

*Balancing days of the week.* Because classes begin on a Tuesday and both Labor Day and Fall break eliminate Monday classes, there are fewer Mondays of instruction than any other day of the week. To obtain a better balance, we recommend the first Friday of classes have a Monday class schedule.

### **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 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 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" 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 an internal study day should mirror that used for Fall semester, with exams beginning on a Monday and ending on a Tuesday, with Thursday as a study day, and with only a single exam period each on Saturday and Sunday. Ending on the Tuesday before a Memorial Day weekend Commencement leaves Wednesday through Friday as “Senior Days.” This is shorter than has been traditional; however, each Spring semester the Registrar will create an exam schedule that reduces the number of seniors having exams on the second Monday and Tuesday of the exam period, thus creating a de facto “Senior Week” for the majority of seniors.

*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. 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, approximately five 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 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 the New York public school system, which 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, minimally, the national holiday (the third Monday of February). Spring Break would then be centered in the remaining block of instruction between the new February break and the end of classes. Two primary options for using the remaining days were considered:

- 2-day break, Presidents’ Day Monday plus Tuesday of that week, with two additional days added to the beginning of Spring Break (i.e., the Thursday and Friday preceding Spring Break)
- 5-day break comprising the entire week that includes Presidents’ Day (Monday-Friday)

The first option was preferred 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, and because adding the preceding Thursday and Friday to Spring Break would make travel more affordable for many students. The second option was seen as advantageous for families with school-age students, and because, unlike the first option, it would not create scheduling problems for laboratory courses with sections that meet throughout the week.

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.

*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 committee recommends that the holidays at MLK Day and Presidents' Day become holidays for the entire university, including staff, but recognizes that this has important financial repercussions for the university that must be considered.