Context for recommended changes to the academic calendar

The academic calendar is approved by the Faculty Senate, and its format is constrained by state law, UW System policy, UW-Madison faculty legislation, and patterns of practice. Seventeen specific constraints on the academic calendar have been identified, some of which operate in incompatible ways. Part of the reason for this is that the basic design of the calendar has not been revised in several decades.

During AY 2014-2015, two separate working groups developed recommendations relating to the academic calendar. The first of these, the Summer Term Committee based in the Division of Continuing Studies, recommended the creation of a 4-week summer session to precede the customary 8-week session. This recommendation was endorsed by the majority of respondents to a summer 2015 student survey. The second group, convened by the provost and comprising primarily administrators, identified several problems related to the academic calendar (#1-#4 below). This working group issued a White Paper with recommendations to address some of these issues.

In October 2015, the Faculty Senate officially created the 4-week summer session (to begin in summer 2017) and adopted two additional parameters to the academic calendar recommended by the working group (Faculty Document 2570). These new parameters primarily address problem #1 (by making the fall start date always the Tuesday before or after Labor Day) and problem #3 (by setting commencement always on the second Saturday in May and counting the spring semester backwards from there). Although this solved some of the most pressing problems, it did leave others unaddressed and created or highlighted some additional problems (#1a, #2b, and #5-#7 below).

The October 2015 Faculty Senate action (Faculty Document 2570) also called on the University Committee to appoint a broader ad hoc committee on the academic calendar to make recommendations on the remaining (unaddressed and new) issues. This committee met over the course of AY 2015-2016 and identified two additional concerns (problems #8 and #9). The Ad Hoc Committee on the Academic Calendar developed the recommendations discussed by the Faculty Senate on May 17, 2016, (Faculty Document 2632) and presented for approval at the September 2016 Faculty Senate meeting (Faculty Document 2636). The above problems are interconnected and modifications to one aspect often affects other aspects. The six recommendations made by the ad hoc committee are intended to, on the whole, address all of the problems with one set of changes.

Problems with the academic calendar

All of the problems with the calendar relate in one way or another to predictability and planning by students and instructors, administrative actions and processing, and compliance. These problems have significant impacts on planning of academic and co-curricular activities and all negatively impact the student experience. (Specific details explaining the issues referred to below is available in the Working Group White Paper and the report of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Academic Calendar, Fac doc 2632.)

1. Fall semester sometimes starts on a Friday. This creates a number of logistical and planning challenges and pedagogical issues, and raises concerns regarding student safety during a long weekend that follows the first day of class.
   a. This issue has been addressed by Faculty Document 2570, however, convocation is still isolated from rest of the semester.
   b. Recommendation #2 (instructional days) allows convocation to occur during the first week of classes; creates predictability of the start and end of terms; makes the number of instruction days each semester equal; and balances the spread of class days over the week.

1 https://summer.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/SummerTermCommitteeReport_Updated7.17.15.pdf
2 https://kb.wisc.edu/sof/page.php?id=67084

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c. Creating a fixed, predictable academic schedule with slightly fewer instructional days has the following advantages:
   - fall semester always starts on Wednesday and spring on Tuesday;
   - puts us more in line with peer institutions, allowing for easier cross-institutional cooperative education opportunities;
   - fall semester ends sooner, allowing more time between last exam and winter holiday, and eliminating workload for instructional staff and TAs over holiday break;
   - restores almost all of previous winter break;
   - provides more flexibility for housing contracts;
   - timetable will be easier to build;
   - creates the possibility of eventually adding additional study days.

2. Final exams conflict with commencement.
   a. Exams on the day of commencement resolved through administrative action that has effectively already eliminated one day from the summary period. Recommendation #3 (summary period) makes this official.
   b. Spring summary period immediately prior to commencement makes departmental commencement events difficult. Students have particularly asked that this and the processing time between semesters be addressed.
   c. Recommendation #2 (instructional days) addresses this concern.

3. Spring semester sometimes starts in late January and the semester ends in late May, creating limitations on student summer internships and employment, as well as the “Maymester.” Commencement moves unpredictably and can be as late as the third Saturday in May.
   a. Faculty Document 2570 sets commencement as always the second Saturday in May.
   b. Recommendations #2 (instructional days) and #3 (summary period) address this issue.
   c. Additional time created for departmental commencement events.

4. Irregular semester lengths and unpredictable term start and end dates create difficulties for instructors and students. Fall and spring semester do not have the same number of instructional days. The unpredictable calendar does not consistently allow enough time for the “Maymester.”
   a. Faculty Document 2570 regularized the start and end dates of the semesters.
   b. Remaining irregularities addressed by recommendation #2 (instructional days).

5. Faculty Document 2570 significantly shortened winter break in some years, creating problems for “J term” offerings and significant administrative constraints on processing of grades, financial aid, etc.
   a. Recommendation #2 (instructional days) addresses this issue.
   b. This also enables quicker processing of withdrawals for the required Return of Title IV funds (financial aid) and Satisfactory Academic Progress calculations, which provides a longer window for students to submit appeals and the appeals to be reviewed by financial aid prior to the subsequent terms disbursements.

6. Current UW-Madison policy (Faculty Legislation II-105.6) is that grades must be submitted within 144 hours of the assigned final exam block. Current practice has interpreted this as 144 hours from the last final exam. This lengthy grade submission period makes processing of grades, financial aid, and academic actions extremely difficult and does not allow students adequate time to make informed decisions about enrollment, course requirements, and degree clearance. Administrative actions (grading, reporting, Dean’s list, academic standing, probation and appeals, federal financial reporting, and so on) have a very tight turnaround time at the end of semester. The processing time between semesters is a significant student concern.
   a. Recommendation #4 (grade submission) directly addresses this issue. When combined with the effects of recommendations #2 (instructional days) and #3 (summary period), there will be substantially more time for the required administrative processes and, thus, for student planning.
   b. Creates the possibility for additional study days.
   c. Recommendation #3 (summary period) also suggests an assessment of current final exam block usage to determine whether needs from changing pedagogical trends (e.g., fewer traditional final exams) are being met.

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7. An overlap of approximately two weeks between the faculty contract and the new 4-week summer session could prohibit 9-month-contract employees from being able to do both.
   a. Recommendation #1 (contract year) solves this problem. This recommendation also makes more time available for Welcome Week activities, creates more lead time to find last minute staff replacements, and provides more time and flexibility for employee training and orientation before fall semester.
8. The state law mandating that classes not start prior to September 2 exempts only two professional programs. This creates significant problems for other professional programs, especially Pharmacy, which would be out of alignment with its peers if bound by the calendar.
   a. Recommendation #5 (state statute) solves this problem.
9. The UW System policy which creates many of the existing constraints on the academic calendar is seriously outdated. Much of it has been superseded by newer HR and other policies, and much of what remains still assumes paper-based registration and grade submission.
   a. Recommendation #6 (System document) addresses this issue directly, but all of the recommendations are in one way or another linked to this outdated System document. Updating would take into account online registration and electronic processing of grades.
   b. All recommendations are in compliance with federal, state, university and system policies for semester length, accreditation, etc.
   c. Existing “hardship rules” for clustered exams (for students) or grading (for instructors) are still applicable.
   d. Allows more efficient processing of grades and other end-of-term processing, such as determination of deans’ lists and degree clearance (audits of graduation status).