



Report on the 2015-2016 Academic Calendar

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I. Context

Every year, the date on which Yale College classes begin is determined by the date on which Labor Day falls. Classes begin the Wednesday before, and the dates of breaks, reading period, and exam period are arranged accordingly.

In 2015, Labor Day falls on the latest day possible, September 7. As a result, classes are not scheduled to begin until September 2, pushing back the entire calendar so that final exams are not scheduled to end until December 23. As a result, residences would not close until December 24, Christmas Eve.

II. Problem

This schedule presents problems for cultural, logistical, and financial reasons affecting all Yale College students. For the many students celebrating Christmas, the calendar would prevent them from enjoying this special season with their loved ones. On its own this fact creates a compelling reason for change, but the implications of this potentiality could also undermine Yale's commitment to creating a positive learning environment. In the YCC survey, students expressed concerns about their ability to focus on exams so close to the Christmas holiday. One student even went so far as to say s/he would "consider making [his/her] class choices based on exam schedules so [s/he] could get home on time."

For some students, the provisional calendar would not only take away time spent with family during the Christmas season, but also Christmas itself. Due to flight durations and different time zones, some individuals literally would not be able to make it home for Christmas. This problem requires particular attention because of the large number of international students enrolled in Yale College. Critics of our proposal have noted that in the past, fall exams frequently ended on December 22. However, those calendars existed at a time when Yale's demographics were very different. In 1990, for example, only four percent of the student body was international.¹ The YCC believes that Yale's different demographics today must be taken into consideration.

Lastly, all Yale undergraduates, regardless of whether they celebrate Christmas or not, will be impacted by the financial burdens associated with the later fall term end date. Christmas Eve is one of the most expensive days of the year to travel. Although exact price discrepancies vary depending on airlines and routes, some students will pay more than double what they usually pay for transportation. The financial impacts of the stipulations of the provisional calendar are noteworthy and further necessitate a change.

III. Proposed Solution

Begin the Fall Semester One Week Earlier

To identify possible solutions, the YCC Board members have held discussions with multiple administrators, including Dean Gentry, Dean Levesque, Dean Holloway, and Secretary Goff-Crews. At

¹ Edited by Waters, Beverly. "1976-2000, Yale Book of Numbers." *Office of Institutional Research*. Yale Office of Institutional Research, n.d. Web. 04 Dec. 2014.

a YCC meeting open to the student body and including members of the student body at large, we debated alternatives such as shortening Thanksgiving, reading period, or Fall Break, and discussed the pros and cons of different options as well as the status quo.

Based on the landslide vote following that discussion, we are recommending that the 2015-2016 Academic Calendar be moved up one week.

Explanation

The current structure of beginning classes the Wednesday before Labor Day has its merits. The long weekend so early in the academic term allows for a number of valuable events, such as the extracurricular bazaar, and gives students a chance to focus their class options for the remainder of shopping period. However, we believe that these considerations pale in comparison to the imperative of ensuring exams end before December 23.

Further, this revision would create a calendar very similar in structure to the one used this year. Classes would begin only one day earlier than they did this past year (see table 1). Lastly, a quick glance at the calendars of other Ivy League universities reveals a wide range of start times for the fall semester. This indicates that there is no compelling rationale for the academic calendar to revolve around Labor Day.

table 1

	Provisional 2015-2016	Proposed 2015-2016	2014-2015 Calendar
Residences Open	August 26	August 19	August 20
Classes Begin	September 2	August 26	August 27
Finals End	December 23	December 16	December 17

IV. Student Reaction

Due to the issues described in Section II of this report, student opinion on the issue of next year’s calendar is extremely passionate. When the provisional dates were identified on the popular Facebook page “Overheard at Yale,” they provoked a flurry of commentary and expressions of concern. Although YCC assurances of proactivity placated student social media angst in the short-term, on Monday, December 1, we followed up to gauge support for our proposed solution through a YCC survey.

The results we received were overwhelming. In fact, the YCC has never in its recorded history received the same level of support on any policy initiative. Out of 2,721 respondents, 2,512, or 92%, expressed their approval for moving up the calendar one week.

V. Possible Concerns

To weigh possible concerns, the YCC engaged with varsity athletics, Yale’s summer programs, Yale facilities, and Yale faculty.

Athletics

To discuss impacts on varsity athletics, the YCC contacted Yale Athletic Director Thomas Beckett. Through representatives, we have heard that our revision to the provisional calendar does not present any significant obstacles to them.

However, the provisional calendar would be detrimental to winter athletes in a particular way. Because of practice schedules, if the status quo is left unchanged some winter athletes will only have three days of break. For many, this situation would mean they would not be able to go home at all.

Summer Programs and Facilities

To get a better idea of the impacts on Yale’s facilities and summer programs, the YCC contacted Yale’s Dean of Summer Sessions and Special Programs William Whobrey, Yale’s Director of Conferences and Events Suzanne Shaw, and Facilities Operations Director of Residential Colleges and Property Services Carmine Amento.

From them, we learned that Yale’s 2015 Summer Session will end on August 7, and that it cannot be moved. Beyond summer session, Ms. Shaw informed us that she did not believe moving up the start of classes to August 26 would have “any significant impact” on the events within her purview.

Because of the date on which summer session ends, our proposal would lead to a problematic outcome for Yale Facilities by replicating the time crunch they experienced this year. The rapid transition from summer session to preorientation programs would also be duplicated (see Table 2). Based on feedback from residential college masters and deans, the twelve day turnaround does not provide facilities sufficient time to perform painting, repairs, and a thorough cleaning of occupied spaces for the new academic year. Facilities has requested a two week window between the end of summer activities and the official opening of residences.

Our facilities staff are hard-working individuals, and it is unfair to consistently place this burden on them. However, because of the severity of the situation, we need a one-time, short-term solution. If the proposed changes are implemented next year, students, faculty, and the administration would then have six years to find a solution before this challenge reoccurred. The YCC has brainstormed a few options. Possibilities include starting and ending the summer sessions earlier, or, because summer programs do not use all of the residential colleges, cleaning some colleges prior to the period between summer session and fall semester.

table 2

	Provisional 2015-2016	Proposed 2015-2016	2014-2015 Calendar
End of Summer Session	August 7	August 7	August 8
Opening of Residences	August 26	August 19	August 20
Days Between	19	12	12

Faculty

In previous discussions, some individuals expressed concern about the possible faculty reaction to our proposal to move the academic calendar up one week. To better gauge their response, the YCC contacted the directors of undergraduate studies of thirty randomly selected academic departments. Based on the responses, we do not believe faculty opposition will be a significant obstacle to the proposal.

Of the thirty DUSes contacted, we received responses from fifteen, only two of whom expressed opposition to the proposed changes. Five expressed explicit support, three expressed personal support but wanted to discuss the matter with other faculty before taking a position, and the remaining five were indifferent. Just like students, many faculty are eager to spend the holidays at home with family.

As Professor Daniel Spielman wrote to the YCC: “In addition to making it difficult for students to get home, [the provisional calendar] will make it difficult for the faculty to grade the exams. This is especially true for those of us who rely on the help of grad students, who will also be trying to get home... Please count me in support!”

Conclusion

With these considerations in mind, the YCC submits this report to the Yale administration for further consideration. Due to the tremendous student support for this initiative as well as its very direct implications to undergraduates, we are eager to contribute to the conversation going forward. 