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Improving the GSU Academic Calendar

Submitted by Lorne Wolfe
12/15/2006

Motion:

I move that we modify the GSU fall semester calendar to make the end of the semester more effective for teaching.

Rationale:

As the schedule stands now, the end of the fall semester is not effective for student-teacher interactions. Thanksgiving week has only two days and as we know, many students take that week off (and some faculty cancel classes). The week after Thanksgiving is the last of the semester and is also not a full week. Thus, the last real full week of the semester is the 2nd week of November. I suggest: 1) we start the semester in the 3rd week of August (not the 2nd) which would provide a longer summer break; 2) have a true fall break by taking the entire Thanksgiving week off; 3) then return for two full weeks followed by a week of finals. Students and faculty would return from Thanksgiving refreshed and we would then have a significant time period to complete the semester effectively. This suggested model fits what several other Georgia system schools (2 and 4 year) are currently doing. This also fits in with BOR regulations: we would simply interpret their mandated latest ending date as the last day of classes with final exams to be held after. In addition, joint enrolled GTREP students (whose Georgia Tech semester typically starts one week after ours) would have better access to their financial aid money (among other benefits). I believe there is wide support among faculty for this motion. In fact, I have found near unanimous support in discussions with faculty from across the campus over the past several weeks. Of course there are some problems but I believe there are solutions. The most common concern I have encountered is that the December-January break would be one week shorter.
Solution – start the spring semester one week later (and also start Summer session later).

SEC Response:

The SEC has amended the motion for clarity to the following:

"I move that we modify the GSU academic calendar to make the end of the fall semester more effective by giving two full weeks of class after Thanksgiving and moving spring semester back one week. This effectively moves the entire calendar back one week from what is currently proposed."

Senate Response:

Minutes: 2/15/2007: A motion requested improving or changing the academic calendar to make the last weeks of the Fall Semester more academically viable. Motion, Improving the GSU Academic Calendar, Maggie LaMontagne (COE) for Lorne Wolfe (COST):

LaMontagne read the following motion, which the SEC had amended for clarity: “I move that we modify the GSU academic calendar to make the end of the fall semester more effective by giving two full weeks of class after Thanksgiving and moving spring semester back one week. This effectively moves the entire calendar back one week from what is currently proposed.” The motion was seconded.

Tim Giles (CLASS) did not see this motion as addressing the problem with Fall Semester. He thinks that the problem is not having a break about halfway through. He stated that, at Thanksgiving, GSU has one more day off compared to other states where he has lived and taught. He asked about the possibility of a Monday or Tuesday off about halfway through semester.

Patricia Humphrey (COST), Senate Moderator, answered that, last year, members of the Calendar Committee had discussed that option; however, they were told that it was not possible.

Mary Hadley (CLASS) spoke in favor of a longer Thanksgiving Break. She stated that she has no difficulty preparing for final exams, etc., when we come back from Thanksgiving. Every year, some students tell her that she is the only teacher “holding classes on those days” (the Monday and Tuesday of Thanksgiving Week). Those who
travel during Thanksgiving Week could avoid expensive airfares. She did not understand why people would advocate pushing back [the end of Fall Semester] a whole week.

Patricia Humphrey (COST), Senate Moderator, mentioned the concern that Thanksgiving Week has two days of class, and then, the way the calendar has been shaped lately, the next week we have four days of class, not a full week, because we have Friday off as a study day. So, in some cases, it effectively means that a faculty member needs to be through teaching material before Thanksgiving. There is also a question about how many of our students actually use that Friday as a study day before final exams.

Norman Schmidt (COST and SPC) recalled when GSU cancelled classes because of Hurricane Floyd and then, two or three weeks later, had a fall break over Thursday and Friday. And then later in the semester we had cancelled Thursday and Friday classes again for Thanksgiving break. Any classes that were like laboratories that met only on Thursday and Friday were totally disrupted. He could see some value to taking a full week off at Thanksgiving. However, he believes that we need two full weeks of classes after Thanksgiving so that students don’t forget everything they have learned and then return for final exams.

Mary Hadley (CLASS) responded that, if GSU had a full week off at Thanksgiving, she would have no problem coming back for two weeks in December and then coming back maybe a week later in January. Clara Krug (CLASS) advocated that, if GSU does have a full week off at Thanksgiving, then, in order to help with another issue, the 48-hour reporting period after final exams, we somehow change final exam week. She reminded senators that, before we converted to semesters in 1998, we had a five-day exam week, and faculty taught a maximum of three classes. So faculty had five days in which to give three exams. Now that some faculty, at least, have four classes, we have 33 1/3% more students, but we have only four days of exams. So we have more exams in fewer days. That makes it more difficult to complete grading of the exams and the entire course for all students within a 48-hour period.

Ellen Hendrix (CLASS) spoke in support of a one-week Thanksgiving break. She remembered that, the year we had the fall break scheduled in October, it accomplished absolutely nothing. Students who lived far away couldn’t plan a trip home. That is also one of the problems that they face now with Thanksgiving. A longer break at Thanksgiving might also give faculty some time to start averaging grades before coming back for two weeks.

Bruce Grube (President) asked if taking the full week of Thanksgiving off was part of the motion.
Patricia Humphrey (COST), Senate Moderator, answered that this option was in the rationale; however, it wasn’t in the motion per se.

Bruce Grube (President) asked if the calendar is currently mapped out so that we could all see what we are talking about.

Patricia Humphrey (COST), Senate Moderator, presented a timeline for Fall Semester 2007: The academic year begins August 6th, classes begin August 13th, August 13th through 16 is drop/add, September 3rd is Labor Day, November 21st-23rd is Thanksgiving break, November 29th is the last day of classes, November 30th is reading day, and December 3rd through 6th is final exams. December 7th is commencement. The proposal stated would be to move the whole schedule back a week. She stated that someone might amend the motion to include the full week of Thanksgiving as a break.

Norman Schmidt (COST) reminded senators that the rationale discusses a full week off during Thanksgiving, but that the amendment by the SEC does not reflect it.

Patricia Humphrey (COST), Senate Moderator, responded that the full week off was not reflected in the original motion.

Ellen Hendrix (CLASS) had a question. If we do have the whole week of Thanksgiving off, is a reading day necessary, or might we move to a five-day exam period to help us out when it does come to averaging grades and submitting those grades within the 48 hours?

Patricia Humphrey (COST), Senate Moderator, reminded everybody that the Registrar’s Office says they are lenient until it comes to 48 hours after the last final exam.

Clara Krug (CLASS) offered that, if you have four final exams at the very end of the week, you are still grading the first two when you give the last two on the last day.

Chris Geyerman (CLASS and NCAA) said that he was not making a statement about this motion in particular, but he does think it applies to a lot of motions: He would like to see evidence that a problem actually exists before we try to solve it. He had not seen anything other than anecdotal evidence, someone saying that it makes it hard at the end of the semester from a faculty point of view. What do students think about it? He had not seen any evidence that a problem exists.

Mary Hadley (CLASS) agreed with Geyerman. She added that she would like to change the motion to put forward that we have the whole week of Thanksgiving off and, “if the powers that be” feel that for whatever reason the students do need a bit more time, that instead of finishing around December 7th, we would finish a week later.
Patricia Humphrey (COST), Senate Moderator, asked if Hadley offered that as an amendment.

Mary Hadley (CLASS) responded that she did. Patricia Humphrey (COST), Senate Moderator, requested a second to the amendment. There was a second. She asked Hadley to state her amendment clearly. Hadley asked Humphrey to repeat the original motion. Humphrey did: “I move that we modify the GSU academic calendar to make the end of the fall semester more effective by giving two full weeks of class after Thanksgiving and moving spring semester back one week. This effectively moves the entire calendar back one week from what is currently proposed.”

Mary Hadley (CLASS) amended the motion to include “two full weeks of class after Thanksgiving, but that we would have the entire week of Thanksgiving.” Humphrey asked “a full week of Thanksgiving break?” Hadley concurred.

Maggie LaMontagne (COE), who had offered the original motion read the amended motion: “That we modify the GSU academic calendar to make the end of the fall semester more effective by giving two full weeks of class after a full week of Thanksgiving break and moving spring semester back one week.” The amended motion was seconded.

Chris Geyerman (CLASS and NCAA) mentioned a sentence that he had heard at a recent NCAA Convention in relation to some legislation proposed without thinking it through: “Oh, those were the unintended consequences.” He referred to the current amended motion. If we change Fall Semester, it is going to affect how Spring Semester is changed in 2008. Then that is going to affect summer of 2008, which is going to affect fall of 2008, which is going to affect spring 2009. He would prefer actually seeing what such a calendar would look like.

Bruce Grube (President) had two comments: 1. How would moving the Spring Semester back one week make for a more effective Fall Semester? 2. For those of you who were out in Paulson Stadium later in May, the first time we had commencement, you may want to think about the fact that commencement being in early May is a good thing. And if Spring Semester gets pushed back, “a lot of you are going to look like hot dogs before we are through.”

Clara Krug (CLASS) had assumed that, if any change took place, it would take place in 2008, academic year, not 2007 because we already advertised on our web site our dates are for fall. She thought that it was too late to change the 2007 calendar.

Patricia Humphrey (COST), Senate Moderator asked if the Senate should refer the proposed revision to the Calendar Committee. Norman Schmidt (COST) made a motion to table the amended motion.
Clara Krug (CLASS) spoke against referring the proposed revision to the Calendar Committee. As a former member of that committee, she stated that then-Provost Vandergrift had approved a template for the calendar that was to last for a number of years, with only adjustments for dates. She expressed concern that, if the proposal was referred to the committee, there would not be true shared governance as stated in the Faculty Handbook in deciding whether or not to approve and implement it: “Shared governance involves faculty and administration participating mutually in the development of policies at the departmental, college, and University levels” (p. 19). She emphasized the word “mutually.” She thought that faculty would be invited to discuss, but the deal would already be done, a fait accompli. Faculty might then wait another ten years to hear about calendar revisions again. She suggested that, at some point, we get the proposal back to the faculty.

Linda Bleicken (Provost) stated that this hurt her feelings because, just as faculty have some concerns about the lives of students and what happens with students at the end of the semester, she does, too. And so when this proposal came from Lorne Wolfe, she talked with him about it, and she thought that it wasn’t a bad idea. She asked that no one assume that she would dismiss the idea because it had come from a faculty member.

Clara Krug (CLASS) interjected that she had not said that it would be dismissed because it came from a faculty member.

Linda Bleicken (Provost) stated, “You came close.”

Clara Krug (CLASS) repeated that she had not.

Linda Bleicken (Provost) continued: “Anyway, but the point is I think that we really do try to consider the needs, not only of the faculty, when we look at the calendar, but the students as well. And this is one that really does, if I recall the spirit in which Lorne proposed this, ... really had primarily to do with the students and their learning process and what happens to them at the end of the semester. So, in that spirit ... I would think that the Calendar Committee would consider this very seriously. Thank you.”

Bruce Grube (President) reminded Krug that, in 1999-2000, one of the things that she had said to him was that the Calendar Committee consisted of about 19 people, 16 of whom were administrators. He told her that, as a result, administrators had restructured that committee so that there would be good faculty representation on it.

Clara Krug (CLASS): “Great. I am glad to hear that.”

Bruce Grube (President) asked Krug if she could explain how moving back the spring semester for one week helps us to have a more effective fall semester.
Clara Krug (CLASS) responded that she had not proposed that. She did not know if she would vote in favor of a calendar that would start later and go longer into the spring. What she had proposed was that, regardless of what we might decide, we have a longer time to decide it, meaning that we would think in terms of 2008, instead of 2007, and that faculty would be involved. Alluding to reconfiguration of the Calendar Committee, she stated that she was really glad that there is greater representation of faculty. In regard to this proposal, faculty ought to be really “mutually” involved in a decision (as on page 19 of the Faculty Handbook).

Patricia Humphrey (COST), Senate Moderator, reminded senators that there was a motion on the floor to table this motion. She asked if there were additional discussion. One senator asked when the Faculty Senate might reconsider the motion if it were tabled.

Bob Cook (CIT), Senate Parliamentarian, that it would be tabled until someone moved to take it off the table.

Patricia Humphrey (COST), Senate Moderator, asked if there were further discussion. There was none. The motion passed with one objection. The amended motion was tabled.