


SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

Memorandum

To: Senate

From: Graham Percival
Chair, Calendar Committee 

Date: May 13, 2003

Subject: Guidelines for Determination of the Academic Calendar of Events (CC References, 03-1)

Action undertaken by the Calendar Committee gives rise to the following motions:

Motion #1

“the Calendar Committee approves and recommends to Senate for approval the following guidelines for the determination of semester schedules:

1. there will be 63 instructional days;
2. classes will begin on a Monday or Tuesday.

Motion #2

“the Calendar Committee may recommend to Senate the creation of a reading break of up two days in the Spring Semester, dependent upon public holidays.”

Rationale

The Calendar Committee was requested by Senate to “evaluate the success of reading break”. The committee solicited feedback from members of the university community on this question. A variety of responses were received, as reflected in the attached summary of feedback. In general, there was no overwhelming opposition to the Reading Break, and many respondents pointed out the beneficial aspects to faculty and students of providing a mid-semester break in a semester that would not otherwise include any statutory holidays. However, the impact of scheduling Reading Break in a given Spring semester differed dependent upon when New Years Day and Easter weekend occurred.

It was clear from feedback that in the Spring semester it was less disruptive to the community to begin classes on a Monday or Tuesday. It was also clear that, given the variability of when the Easter weekend occurs, there are Spring semesters that include two days of statutory holidays. As such, the Calendar committee agreed the following are corollaries of Motion #2 as stated above:

- in semesters in which Easter occurs on instructional days, no reading break would be scheduled;
- should Easter not occur on instructional days, a two-day reading break would be scheduled; and,
- should the Spring semester end on Good Friday, a one-day reading break would be scheduled.

Some respondents were concerned about the negative effects of shortening the Spring semester, and other respondents thought that the Spring semester should be no longer than the other semesters. These guidelines would ensure that all semesters have an equal number of days.

The Calendar Committee believed that by applying the guidelines created by the above motions, Reading Breaks of one or two days could be scheduled in many Spring semesters with a minimum of negative impact on classes and on the start and end dates of the semesters.

Summary of Feedback Regarding Reading Break
(Responses to Email Questions)

The Calendar Committee requested feedback from the SFU community via various email lists. This resulted in 153 comments (of which approximately one third was from faculty and two thirds were from students).

Almost half of the faculty comments suggested that we abandon the reading break. A quarter of the comments supported having a two-day break, while 10% suggested that we move to a full-week break. A further 10% thought that we should have either a full-week break or no break at all.

Half of the student comments were supportive of the current two-day reading break (either by moving the extra days to the end of the semester or simply not having any extra days at all). 30% wanted to have a full-week break, and 10% wanted no break at all. A further 10% thought that we should have either a full-week break or no break at all.

There was one notable subgroup amongst the student replies: SFU at Surrey students were quite opposed to the reading break, saying that the break added stress and caused havoc with their current modular system. A motion from the SFU Surrey Student Society recommended against having a Reading Break for SFU Surrey Students taking courses in the modular system.

A few (less than a dozen) students commented that they didn't mind beginning the semester so early (before the schools and other BC Universities), but an overwhelming majority of students (and faculty) were highly critical of this experiment.

There were two main comments from students about attendance during the first two days of semester. Some students said that they (and their friends) didn't realize that SFU started on a Thursday, and thus missed classes without realizing it. Most students said that the first few days were a waste, as instructors covered administrative material "that we can read for ourselves off the Internet". Almost all students said that they could decide whether or not to attend class themselves, and that instructors should not change their lecture schedule if some people skip the first few days.

Many students complain about stress and high work-load. Perhaps SFU student advisors should make sure that students realize that SFU is very flexible with regards to credit-hours, and that there's nothing wrong with taking 12 credits instead of 15.

Graham Percival
Chair of the Calendar Committee