

Purple Paper

Fall Reading Break

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Introduction

In her article of May 16, 2012, *Toronto Star* Education Reporter, Louise Brown, alleged that in order to address mental health concerns in postsecondary education, university administrators must "[e]valuate the impact of administrative changes to reduce student stress, such as fall reading weeks or more flexible exam schedules."¹ When considered within the larger context of increasing mental health-related problems in universities, Brown's recommendation holds weight. Efforts to reduce student stress, among other considerations, make the adoption of a 'fall reading break' an attractive option. While student advocacy groups have traditionally sought the implementation of a 'full-week' reading break, this paper contends that a break of one to two days is more appropriate. As both a selling point for the university and as a means of stemming mental health-related issues, the adoption of a fall reading break offers key advantages to Ontario universities, and particularly to Western University.

Terminology

For the purposes of this study, the term 'fall reading break' will refer to a cessation of classes for one to two days.

The universities evaluated in this document will include seventeen Ontario universities, McGill University, and the University of British Columbia (UBC).

Rationale

Institutional

Any study which seeks to implement new policy must first establish that the recommended change fits within the existing institutional framework. The conception of a fall reading break advanced by this paper satisfies both Western's existing Senate policies and provincial academic policies. According to the existing Senate policy on hours of instruction, a half year course requires a minimum of

¹ Louise Brown, "Ontario Students Face Long Waits For Mental Health Help, Warns New Report," *thestar.com*, <http://www.parentcentral.ca/parent/education/article/1179587--ontario-students-face-long-waits-for-mental-health-help-warns-new-report> (accessed June 6, 2012).

twenty-six contact hours.² While Western operates on a thirteen week term schedule, administrators include up to three additional days in the academic year. These additional days allow for the accommodation of classes cancelled due to inclement weather, or ‘snow days’. The number of classes cancelled due to inclement weather each year, however, seldom parallels the number set aside to accommodate cancelled classes. Further, Western operates on a sixty-five day academic term (See Appendix A). With the exception of McGill University, Western students attend classes for three to five days longer than students at other research-intensive universities. The addition of a one to two day ‘break’ in the academic schedule, therefore, would not hinder students’ academic progression requirements or Western’s reputation for delivering high quality education.

Competitive Advantage

The addition of a fall reading break to Western’s academic year may provide incentive for prospective students to attend Western. Although fifty-three percent of the universities studied do not offer a fall reading break, many of the schools which compete more vigorously with Western for top students do offer this inducement (See Appendix C). Both the University of Toronto and the University of Ottawa, for example, provide their students with a fall break. As a marketing tool then, the fall reading break presents Western with an opportunity to showcase its adaptability and its concern for students’ well-being.

Mental Health

As previously described, the implementation of a fall reading break would bolster Western’s commitment to mental health. Providing a small reprieve from classes at a critical time in the academic year will supply students with a chance to ‘catch-up’ on their studies and to improve their work. Students forced to miss classes by pressing assignments and midterms will instead be able to finish those assignments while still attending all or almost all of their classes. The importance of this factor should not be underestimated as a measure for reducing students’ stress. A fall

² Western University Senate, Hours of Instruction for Undergraduate Courses, *University Secretariat’s Handbook*, <http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/handbook/reg/coursenumbering.pdf> (accessed June 7, 2012).

reading break would offer an extended time period to visit family members or, especially in the case of first year students, to adapt to a demanding university environment. A short break, moreover, should promote student learning without sacrificing courses' academic rigour.

Principle

The implementation of a one to two day fall reading break within the first semester would not only provide Western with a competitive advantage, but would also reduce student stress at a critical juncture in the academic year.

Recommendation

Based upon the data above, this paper proposes that Western should include a fall reading break in its academic schedule. According to Vice-Provost (Academic Programs and Students) and Registrar, John Doerksen, the most promising time for the implementation of this break is last weekend of October or the first weekend of November. Alternatively, a date closer to the final exam period would be acceptable. The concept of increased final exam 'study days' is currently under review.

Conclusion

Taken together, the factors supporting the implementation of a fall reading break at Western far outweigh arguments that this policy would detract from the academic rigour and reputation of Western's courses. Rather, the inclusion of a fall reading break would promote mental health among students and offer Western a competitive advantage. For many students, Western's adoption of this policy would demonstrate its administrators' concern for the success and well-being of Western students.

Appendices

Appendix A: Term-Length Across Ontario Universities, McGill University, and the University of British Columbia

60/61 Day Term or Lower	62/63 Day Term	64/65 Day Term
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brock University • University of Guelph • Lakehead University • Queens University • University of Toronto • University of Waterloo • Wilfrid Laurier University • Ryerson University • University of British Columbia (UBC) • Laurentian University • Nipissing University • Ottawa University 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • McMaster University • Carleton University • York University • Algoma University 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Western University • McGill University
13 Universities	4 Universities	2 Universities

Appendix B: Breakdown of Reading Week/Reading Breaks in Studied Universities

University	Reading Week?	Reading Break?
Algoma University	No	Yes, Founders Day Oct. 9
Brock University	No	No
Carleton University	No	Currently lobbying for break
University of Guelph	No	No
Lakehead University	No	No

Laurentian University	Yes, Oct. 22-26	-
McMaster University	No	No
Nipissing University	Yes, Oct. 8-12	-
University of Ottawa	Yes, Oct. 22-26	-
Queens University	No	No
Ryerson University	Yes, Oct. 8-12	-
University of Toronto	No	Yes, Nov. 12-13
University of Waterloo	No	No
Western University	No	No
Wilfrid Laurier University	No	No
University of Windsor	No	No
York University	Yes, Oct. 8-12	-
McGill University	No	No
University of British Columbia (UBC)	No	No

Appendix C: Reading Week/Reading Break Policies Among Studied Universities, 2012-2013

