



University Students' Council Standing Policy

Fall Reading Break	SP 12.2(ii)
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Introduction and Overview

Between 2011 and 2014, use of fall reading breaks to provide a strategically placed break from the rigors of academics was widely embraced by post-secondary institutions across Ontario and other parts of Canada.¹ By the time the University of Waterloo issued a report on the matter in mid-2014, the majority of Ontario universities had implemented a fall reading break. Of those schools, and of schools studied for the purpose of writing this paper, the number of schools scheduling a week-long, as opposed to two-day long break accounts for a majority (see Appendix 1).

Western University's Senate gave its approval for the inception of the school's first fall reading break in November of 2012, with the break appearing on the academic calendar beginning in October 2013.² The University Students' Council, and in particular the student senators of the day, played an integral role in the break's inception, after almost ten years of advocacy on its behalf.

Now, with a fall reading break in place for the last two week days of October, students have expressed a desire for a break that is longer, more flexible, and timelier. The University Students' Council is committed to furthering student interests in this area, and in that spirit, has recommendations for the institution on improving the structure and outcomes of its fall reading break.

Recommendations

The University Students' Council proposes the following recommendations in an effort to improve the existing fall reading break.

1. The University should incorporate existing holidays into its fall reading break in order to maximize the amount of down-time available for students.
2. The University should institute a process whereby it measures the outcomes of its fall reading break, methodically evaluating whether or not students derive value from its existence in categories including academic success, mental health, and physical wellbeing.

¹ http://www.thestar.com/life/health_wellness/2013/10/14/ontario_universities_embrace_midterm_fall_break_to_ease_students_minds.html

² <http://westernusc.ca/blog/2012/11/16/university-senate-passes-fall-reading-break-starting-in-the-20122013-academic-year/>

Recommendation 1: The University should incorporate ~~existing holidays~~ **Thanksgiving** into its fall reading break in order to maximize the amount of down-time available for students

Principle: students should receive an adequate break during the fall term that would afford them a reprieve from the rigors of academic responsibility.

Concern: as it stands, the fall reading break takes place following many midterm projects and examinations for half-credit courses and is too short to allow students requiring long-distance travel to return home.

Currently, Western's reading break takes place during the last two week days of October. Consolidating those dates in the Thanksgiving weekend, as is done at many other Ontario universities, will give students a longer, more flexible period of time with which to undertake their endeavours.

Recommendation

Of institutions surveyed, two-thirds maintain a week-long fall reading break (see Appendix 1). Of those, half offer a week-long break that incorporates an existing statutory holiday – Thanksgiving – which comes with the benefit of sparing those institutions the loss of an additional academic day. After its decision to implement a fall reading break, Western dropped from 64 instructional days to 62.³ As such, the implementation of a week-long break within the current academic context would be impossible without reducing the number of instructional days – an unlikely scenario, particularly because the university reduced the number of instructional days as recently as 2013.

However, mirroring the efforts of peer institutions such as Brock University, McMaster University, the University of Toronto (Scarborough), and Wilfrid Laurier University, which offer a full week-long break immediately following Thanksgiving, might offer a reasonable work around to the length of the academic term. Shifting existing dates to the week immediately following Thanksgiving creates a five-day, as opposed to three-day, holiday that offers more flexibility for travelling and working students.

³ https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/general/structure.pdf

Recommendation 2: The University should institute a process whereby it measures the outcomes of its fall reading break, periodically evaluating whether or not students derive value from its existence in categories including academic success, mental health, and physical wellbeing

Principle: university initiatives should constantly be assessed to determine whether or not they are appropriately responding to student needs.

Concern: very little research has been done on the impact of the fall reading break on its target indicators, including better time management capacity and improved wellness for students.

While the USC and the University have independent mechanisms to measure whether or not students like the fall reading break, no system is currently in place to monitor the effectiveness of the break on an ongoing basis. Very little research has been done on the impact the break has had on key indicators; for instance, we do not have a clear idea of whether or not the existence of the break translates into reduced academic stress post-break.

Recommendation

In order to ensure that the fall reading break is fulfilling the original spirit in which it was created, we propose that the University articulate desired university-wide outcomes for the break. A process whereby we determine whether or not the break results in those institutional outcomes for our students can then be put in place. Other institutional initiatives with a stress reduction component, including many existing student services, are monitored constantly for effectiveness. The fall reading break should be no exception.

Appendix 1: Fall Reading Week lengths and dates at large Canadian universities

Institution	Full Week Reading Break (Yes/No)	Dates
Brock University	Yes*	October 13 th to 16 th , 2015
Carleton University	Yes	October 26 th to 30 th , 2015
McMaster University	Yes*	October 12 th to 17 th , 2015
Trent University	Yes	October 26 th to 30 th , 2015
University of Alberta	Yes	November 9 th to 13 th , 2015
University of Calgary	No	November 11 th to 13 th , 2015
University of Guelph	No	October 13 th , 2015
University of Toronto, Mississauga	No (instituted for 2016)	October 10 th to 14 th , 2016
University of Toronto, Scarborough	Yes*	October 13 th to 17 th , 2015
University of Waterloo	No	October 11 th and 12 th , 2016
Wilfrid Laurier University	Yes*	October 13 th to 16 th , 2015
York University	No	October 29 th to November 1 st , 2015

* – indicates that a full reading week is partially composed of an existing holiday