

PRESS RELEASE

DATE: March 14, 2007
FROM: Faculty Senate Office, University of Massachusetts Amherst
SUBJECT: Survey reveals faculty opposition to proposed change in the UMass academic calendar
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MOST UMASS INSTRUCTORS OPPOSE CHANGING ACADEMIC CALENDAR *Faculty concerned about effects on cooperation among the Five Colleges, teaching and research*

The majority of UMass Amherst faculty oppose a proposal to have the campus's spring semester begin and end two weeks earlier than it currently does, according to a Faculty Senate survey released today. The change is suggested for the 2009-2010 academic year.

The poll showed 59 percent of the respondents were against the change, 24 percent in favor and 17 percent neutral. All faculty and some administrators received the survey to which 241 responded.

The senate's Academic Matters Council, deliberating the Calendar Changes as proposed by the administration, requested that the Faculty Senate Office conduct the survey.

Those who oppose the alteration cite the disruption of Five Colleges cooperative efforts, the inability to conduct academic discipline between semesters, and a substantial decrease in international study opportunities for students as issues. Many also felt that it would have a negative impact on faculty preparation time for spring semester courses and research opportunities for both graduate students and faculty.

Because the spring semester at the University would begin before it does at the other institutions in the Five Colleges, students who wish to take courses and collaborate in artistic projects, such as music, theater and dance, at those schools might not be able to, respondents said.

For some students, taking classes at the other schools is a necessity, not a luxury, according to Ron Snell, who heads both the University's astronomy department and the Five College Astronomy Department (FCAD).

"We have a truly shared curriculum," he said of FCAD. "It would be a tremendous problem for us if the calendars weren't the same."

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Members of the executive committee of the Five College Dance Department have similar concerns, said Peggy Schwartz, professor of Music and Dance at the University. The requirements for completing a dance degree are not offered at all of the colleges, necessitating travel between campuses to complete the major, she said.

Committee members note that the January term is a time of “intensive and focused rehearsal periods” when students train with “nationally and internationally renowned artists,” she said. “We count on this time.”

Other intercollegiate work is at stake, as well, survey respondents said.

“We run a lot of short-term programs abroad in January,” said Frank Hugus, director of International Programs at the University. “If [the calendar change] happened, we would have to curtail these.

“But the bigger issue is what to do with exchange programs in Western Europe, where the fall semester actually runs though the end of January. Our students can go in the fall now because they are done with their classes [in time] to get back for the spring semester. If the calendar were changed, they would have to sit out the spring.” For the same reason, Western European students wanting to study at UMass in the spring would have to either wait until the fall or choose a different school, he said.

Shortening the January break would make academic discipline procedures “difficult, if not impossible” between semesters, according to the survey.

Gordon Wyse, associate dean of Natural Sciences and Mathematics, explained: “What looks like this pristine, free month in January is actually tight for the academic discipline that has to take place before the spring semester. If you cut the time between the fall and spring semester in half, it is impossible to get through that process.

“If academic discipline is something that happens only after the spring semester, then there’s no opportunity to do intervention mid-year for students with illness, family issues, personal issues, and special needs.” The Arts and Sciences Advising Center, which works with students from three of the University’s colleges, “deals with hundreds of students in these categories,” he said.

Many of the faculty responding to the survey said a shorter January break would curtail teaching preparation for the second semester, as well as research, grant-proposal writing at an important time of year, and other professional development.

Some of those who favor of the proposed calendar change said they preferred a longer stretch of time in the summer for research and teaching preparation. Others said it would be advantageous for students with respect to summer activities and that any inconveniences should be dealt with in order to provide this benefit to the students. Respondents also noted that summer construction and maintenance work on campus might benefit from an extra two weeks.