

April 11, 2008

MEMORANDUM

To: Kim Wilcox, Provost
E. James Potchen, ECAC Chair

Cc: Douglas Estry, APUE

From: R. Sekhar Chivukula, UCAP Chair

RE: UCAP Response to Proposal to Change Academic Year Start Date

On April 1, 2008, ECAC requested that UCAP consider the academic issues arising from the proposal to change the academic year start date, eliminating two instructional days and beginning classes on the Wednesday of the first week. In the limited intervening time, UCAP members have solicited feedback from their constituencies, studied data on the celebratory drinking of students, and examined the calendar implications of various scenarios based on information provided by the Registrar's office. This report summarizes the information and responses that the committee has received, and suggests several possible revisions to the proposed policy that the committee believes should be considered. The committee also respectfully suggests that many people in the MSU community have not yet been fully engaged in the review of this proposal, and that more time may be needed for the community as a whole to respond.

The data that UCAP reviewed in regard to students' celebratory drinking during Fall Welcome indicate clearly that this period poses a significant health and safety danger for MSU students. UCAP concurs with the administration that revisions of Fall Welcome must be considered, to try to minimize the potential danger to students.

Input to UCAP also confirms that, in many cases, Fall Welcome is currently not fully utilized to orient and acclimate incoming students to the rigors and stimulation of college academic life, the adjustments necessary for on-campus housing, and the realities of living away from home. Many UCAP members suggested, however, that this should be taken as an indication to strengthen the orientation period, and to include more of an academic focus to the activities. Students on the committee, in particular, noted that Fall Welcome activities (with some notable exceptions, especially in the Residential Colleges) are typically unconnected to Departments or Colleges, and that very few faculty participate. UCAP respectfully suggests that the alternative of strengthening the existing Fall Welcome period be studied. UCAP notes, however, that this is only feasible if all Departments and Colleges become involved with Fall Welcome activities, and if faculty participate more often and more meaningfully in these activities.

Turning to the current proposal, the committee notes the following academic concerns:

1. The proposal reduces the number of instructional days in the fall semester from 72 to 70, increasing the disparity with the spring semester that has 74 instructional days. Since curricular demands typically specify that a fixed amount of material be covered in a course, the loss of two

additional instructional days to the already short fall semester poses a problem. This problem is particularly acute in courses which are offered both semesters: since courses are required to have identical content both semesters, the shortened fall will require them to be planned on a fourteen-week basis. UCAP believes the shortening of fall semester constitutes a major academic problem with the proposal as currently constructed.

2. The proposal reduces the number of complete instructional weeks in the fall semester from 13 to 12, again increasing the disparity with the spring semester that has 14 such weeks. This problem is particularly acute in laboratory classes configured such that each student attends once per week, but which have multiple sections scheduled all days of the week. In these courses, the effect of the current proposal is to reduce the number of "lab-weeks" to twelve. This is of particular concern in that enrollment in the STEM colleges with many such lab courses continues to increase. UCAP believes the loss of an additional instructional week in the fall semester is a major academic problem with the proposal as currently constructed.

3. With Labor Day falling during the week immediately after the first week of classes, classes that meet only on Mondays would go two full weeks into the term before the first class meeting. Data we have received indicate that this situation affects 120 sections in 63 undergraduate courses, and 95 sections in 56 graduate courses.

4. Some colleges, James Madison College for example, use Fall Welcome effectively for academic programs. These colleges will need to make alternative arrangements, if this content is to be provided.

5. As noted above, it is important to provide freshman and other entering students with a strong orientation period including, in the view of UCAP, events with an academic focus, particularly those including interaction with faculty. Necessary enhancements to Fall Welcome will be more difficult to arrange if it is shortened.

In addition, UCAP has received feedback questioning whether a shortened first week of classes prior to Labor Day Weekend will effectively curtail celebration. Some have suggested that student celebratory activities will simply move into the first week of classes, thereby undermining the hoped-for effects of the proposed policy. UCAP is not in a position to evaluate these concerns, and notes them here so that they may be addressed in future discussion.

The committee feels that the academic issues (1-5) raised above are significant, and respectfully requests that changes to the current proposal be considered which would mitigate some of these concerns. Specifically, the committee suggests that the following alternative proposals be explored:

A. Leave Start of Fall Term As Currently Scheduled: Reschedule freshman "move-in" to the *Saturday* prior to the beginning of classes, and hold all orientation events on Saturday evening and Sunday. The proposal here is that the first weekend of the term (Saturday night, and Sunday) would be used for University-sponsored, chaperoned, orientation activities for freshman and transfer students - including faculty and perhaps also parents who were on campus to help their student move in. This proposal would compresses the orientation period further, but would allow for upper-class move-in to be on the *Sunday* prior to the start of the term, and for classes to begin on *Monday*. UCAP

notes that its student members felt this option was rushed, at best, for freshman orientation, and may not provide sufficient time for upperclassmen to settle in before classes resumed.

B. Modify the Proposal to Move the Start-Date: Begin the academic year on the *Wednesday* prior to Labor Day, as currently proposed, but implement two more changes to the Fall Calendar: (1) use the first *Friday* of the semester (just prior to the Labor Day weekend) for a "*Monday*" schedule of classes and (2) move finals week by two days, having finals begin on the *Wednesday* of the currently scheduled finals week and end on the *Tuesday* of the following week. The intent of first modification is to "recapture" the Labor Day week as a "complete instructional week"; the intent of the second is to maintain the total number of instructional days. The viability of this proposal will depend on the practicality of running a "*Monday*" schedule on a *Friday*, and the willingness of the campus community to lose two days from the break between fall and spring semesters. (Note that the two parts of this option are separable, and one could implement the first change without the second and vice versa.)

C. Add Three Instructional Days to Fall Semester: Begin classes on the *Wednesday* prior to the current first week of class. In this proposal Fall Welcome would proceed as under the current proposal, but one week earlier. This proposal would actually increase the number of fall semester instructional days to 75, and make fall and spring semesters more comparable. The viability of this proposal depends on the willingness of the campus community to lose a week of summer, inconveniencing instructors and students with school-age children and affecting summer term. In addition, there is the concern that this proposal would result in celebratory activities being moved to the first weekend of the term (which, in this proposal, would be the weekend prior to Labor Day weekend).

D. Leave Fall Welcome and Fall Semester as Currently Scheduled: Establish a Faculty/Student/Staff Task Force to reform Fall Welcome to make it more academic and more engaging, and to study how best to avoid the problematic drinking which motivates the current proposal. UCAP notes that enhancements to Fall Welcome could include community service (helping students learn more about the communities of which they are becoming a part), small group discussions of the summer reading books, and one-lecture freshmen seminars across campus on a wide variety of engaging topics. These enhancements would naturally involve Departments and Colleges, and would facilitate interaction between students and faculty.

Given the limited time available, UCAP was unable to perform a detailed analysis of any of these scenarios. However the committee notes that, while proposals A-C would address items 1 - 3 listed above, proposal D could address items 4 or 5 as well.