



Report of the Undergraduate Student Government

Academic Calendar Focus Groups Report

January 11, 2013

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Introduction

One of the core missions of the Undergraduate Student Government (USG) is to “exercise leadership in all activities affecting the life of Princeton University undergraduates.” Under this charge, USG seeks to add a student perspective to the conversations about potential changes to the academic calendar. To do so, the USG ran a series of focus groups to complement those held in the residential colleges through the Office of the Dean of the College. Through this process, we sought to obtain a diverse and representative sample of student feedback on Thanksgiving break in particular and to gauge overall student opinion about the current academic calendar.

Methodology

On November 8th, USG President Bruce Easop emailed the student body asking for participants to serve in these focus groups (see Appendix I). Of the 56 students who expressed interest in participating, we were able to fill four focus groups with a total of 25 students. These groups were held between November 30th and December 6th. All four class years were represented and students from a variety of disciplines across A.B. and BSE degrees attended to share their perspectives. Each group had a moderator and scribe to record the content of these conversations. These roles were rotated among USG President Bruce Easop, USG Academics Chair Steven Rosen, and ALTA committee members John McNamara and Elan Kugelmass to mitigate any potential bias from questioning style. The focus groups created an opportunity for informal conversations and supplemented the data collected in the ALTA report published in May 2012 by the USG. What follows is a description of a focus group and a summary of the key takeaways.

Outline of the Focus Group Conversations:

The following is the standardized set of questions followed by focus group moderators. Key takeaways will be organized into three sections based on the train of questions asked by moderators in each focus group.



Thanksgiving Break Focus Groups—Moderator Questions

I. Fall Break Function:

- What do you do over fall break? What is your perception of what people do over fall break?
- Does the timing of fall break provide any logistical challenges for you?
- Why is that time valuable?

II. Fall Break/Thanksgiving Comparison

- If you have been *on campus* over fall break or Thanksgiving break, what have you done? Was it a positive experience?
- Would you be more likely to go home for a full week Thanksgiving break or full week fall break?
- Who has had classes that were canceled on Wednesday before Thanksgiving? Did you cover less material? Were any rescheduled?

III. Proposals: Please record student feedback and reactions to these options--

- **Option 1:** Full Week of Thanksgiving Off in Exchange for Fall Break; First Week of Classes starts on a Monday
 - Moderator Notes:
 - *This means classes would continue uninterrupted until Thanksgiving week*
 - **Ask:** How would starting class on a Monday instead of Thursday impact your 'shopping' period?
- **Option 2:** Thanksgiving Break Starts on Wednesday; Classes would correspondingly start on Wednesday instead of Thursday
- **Option 3:** Full Week Thanksgiving and a Columbus Day Weekend Break (or other long weekend), in lieu of a full week Fall Break; Winter Break would start on a Tuesday to accommodate the long weekend
- **Option 4:** Midterms Shifted to the current Fall Break week, resulting in No Classes During Midterm Week; The result is a Full Week Thanksgiving Break, but no official Fall Break
- **Follow Up:** For options *without* a full week fall break, what if these options incorporated a one week earlier start to Winter Break so Break Out and class trips could occur in December?
- **Option 5:** We welcome other options that have not been proposed.
 - Moderator Notes: Please keep track of any that arise!

I. Fall Break Function

Key takeaway: Rather than visiting friends and family, going on vacation, etc., students find fall break valuable to engage in student activities. Whether participating in breakout trips, halftime programs, or other service projects, many focus group participants indicated that fall break allowed them to take part in activities they would not otherwise have been able to take advantage of. In general, students also appreciated fall break as a much-needed time for relaxation after midterms, which is widely recognized as the most stressful part of the semester, particularly for freshman.

Function of Fall Break

The students in the focus group presented a wide range of perspectives on the function of fall break. For those students who had input to share but did not participate in the focus groups, in November the USG collected 93 online responses to the question, “What did you do over fall break?” Some of the most prevalent activities that came up through these sources are below:

- Independent Work: many departments have progress reports due after fall break and having more flexible time allows for completion
- Relaxation
- Time with family and friends back home
- Breakout trips
- Volunteering for political organizations
- Service trips
- OA leadership training
- Shadowing professionals
- Visiting friends at other universities
- Staying on campus and taking the time to enjoy what Princeton has to offer outside during a less stressful time
- Catching up on work that had been put off during midterm week in order to study
- Get ahead on work for the week after fall break
- Take home exams
- TigerTrek to Silicon Valley through E-Club
- A capella and other performing arts groups travel
- Freshman seminar/HUM/class trips

Logistical Challenges

- Not the best time to spend time with friends from home because break times do not align
- Some classes assign take home exams or other assignments that make it difficult for some students to travel/try new things during break

Value of Fall Break

- Opportunity to add extra hours for campus jobs to make some extra spending money
- It is cheaper to travel home when not during the holidays, so some students prefer to take advantage of this time to travel
- Relaxation after the stress of midterms
- Catching up on work

II. Fall Break/Thanksgiving Comparison

Key Takeaway: Fall break is an opportunity to try something new or take part in extracurricular activities while Thanksgiving break is reserved for returning home and seeing friends and family. Thanksgiving break is a unique opportunity to see friends because our fall break does not coincide with other schools' schedules. Additionally, fall break is crucial for mental health due to its timing following midterms. The time off gives students a chance to regroup, reflect, and refocus their efforts for the remainder of the semester. Thanksgiving break does not serve the same function since the timing is toward the end of the semester.

Staying on Campus

- Nice to see Princeton without the pressure of work
- Some expressed an interest in more organized activities or ways for people to interact rather than isolating; would like to see more intentional outreach to develop community feel (possible niche for residential colleges to fill)

Potential for Travel

- Some students would prefer the opportunity to visit home over Thanksgiving because it is a family holiday

- Others noted that travel prices are high around holidays making fall break an easier travel time
- Some students felt they would not be able to justify traveling home for Thanksgiving and winter break when they are so close together, even if a full week Thanksgiving Break were to be instated

Classes on Wednesday Before Thanksgiving

- Some get cancelled at the last minute, creating uncertainty and possible last minute changes or missed opportunities for travel plans
- Many students had classes canceled entirely
- When classes are held, attendance is reduced; some professors hold make-up classes to accommodate the *expectation* that students will not be attending

III. Proposals

Key Takeaway: There was nearly unanimous support for starting Thanksgiving break on a Wednesday and starting classes one day earlier. Other proposals elicited mixed feelings from students in the focus groups. Many were concerned about losing the opportunities associated with fall break should that break be altered.

Main Proposal

First Day of Class and Thanksgiving Break Begin on a Wednesday

1. Positives:
 - a. Overwhelming support from the students: Aside from this proposal achieving unanimous support within our focus groups, multiple USG surveys have found strong support from students for making this change. The ALTA survey conducted in January 2012 found that **82%** of students strongly or somewhat supported this change (See Appendix III for the graph and data). Furthermore, a survey in September 2012 asking students which potential USG projects students

preferred found that getting the Wednesday before Thanksgiving off was the *most popular student response* (see Appendix IV).

- b. Travel is significantly *more affordable and less time consuming* on Tuesday than Wednesday before Thanksgiving
- c. Professors often cancel the Wednesday class and few students attend regardless
- d. Students often see the Wednesday before Thanksgiving as an “optional” class
- e. Some students said that they have avoided taking Wednesday seminars just to avoid having class the day before Thanksgiving!
- f. This change would *improve shopping period* at the beginning of the semester by giving students an opportunity to see M/W classes during the first week
- g. Currently, uncertainty around class scheduling the Wednesday before Thanksgiving adds to frustration of making travel plans because some professors don’t announce whether or not they are having class until the week before. Having Wednesday off would create a *more uniform policy* that classes will meet on Tuesday, but not on Wednesday.

2. Negatives

- a. Students might skip the entire week before Thanksgiving

Main arguments for/against additional proposals:

Full Week of Thanksgiving off in exchange for fall break

3. Positives:

- a. Could help people’s travel plans significantly, especially those who live far away
- b. Removes the awkward few weeks between fall and Thanksgiving breaks
- c. More continuity in classes

4. Negatives:

- a. Lost opportunity for breakout trips and other typically fall break activities
- b. Unable to decompress after midterms. A long Thanksgiving break isn’t as important for mental health as it is after midterms
- c. Fall break needed to catch up in classes after midterms
- d. Having a full week vacation so close to Winter break may not be helpful since it is hard to justify buying plane tickets so close together for students traveling far

away (might not actually solve the problem of giving people who live far away a chance to get home; as a result, students with financial constraints might just have a longer period on campus without class over a holiday)

Full Fall and Thanksgiving Break; Start Classes on Monday

5. Positives
 - a. Could improve shopping period
 - i. Students would be able to see all of their classes during the first week of the semester whereas now they only see classes that meet on Thursday or Friday.
 - b. More time between breaks to improve continuity of the semester
6. Negatives
 - a. Concern that professors will assign more work given the longer breaks
 - b. Students like having a few days back on campus before jumping into classes
 - c. Overall, mixed feelings from students

Full Week Thanksgiving Break and Columbus Day (or other long weekend) Break

7. Positives
 - a. Ease travel concerns during Thanksgiving
 - b. Retain the opportunity to “decompress” after midterms but gain the logistical benefits of a full week off for Thanksgiving
8. Negatives
 - a. Students feel that many would not go home over the Columbus Day Weekend break
 - b. Adversely affects student group trips

No Classes During Midterm Week

9. Positives
 - a. Would make midterm week a lot less stressful
 - b. Could move breakout trips to the beginning of winter break
10. Negatives
 - a. Difficult to move from midterms directly back to classes without a break
 - b. Some students do not have midterms, creating a break for part of the student body
 - c. Members of student groups are concerned about losing Fall Break activities

IV. Other Ideas that Arose:

- Establish a central place to collect midterm schedules to avoid conflicts (especially useful for groups of classes that tend to have overlapping enrollments)
- Consider engaging RGS's in planning activities/events over breaks
- CJL being closed over break makes it difficult for students to keep kosher
- Recommend that professors set the schedule for Thanksgiving week classes and precepts at the start of the semester. This would allow students to make travel plans earlier when more significant discounts are available.
- Is there a way to use online/video lectures for students who miss class for travel?
 - However, would students then be incentivized to miss class?

Appendices

I. Email Announcing Focus Groups

Voice Your Opinion on Thanksgiving Break, the Presidential Search, + More!

Inbox x



Bruce Easop <beasop@princeton.edu>

11/8/12 ☆



to usg-list ▾

Hi **Tigers**,

1. Thanksgiving Break Focus Groups 2. Presidential Search Committee
3. CPUC Agenda 4. Volunteer Opportunities 5. USG Movie

1. **USG** Thanksgiving Break Focus Groups

At President Tilghman's request, we are convening a series of focus groups to consider a possible change to the academic calendar. We are specifically interested in your perspective on proposed changes to the schedule of **Thanksgiving Week**. This initiative is, in part, inspired by ALTA and other USG survey data, so we hope you will continue to use your voice to make an impact by signing up below to participate in one of approximately a dozen focus groups.

[Sign Up Here!](#)

Can't make a focus group, but still want to comment? Answer this question below!

Talk to **USG!**

What did you do over fall break?

(Or if affected by Hurricane Sandy, what were your original plans?)

Submit

II. Sign Up Forms

See Sign-Up Forms using this link: <http://princetonusg.com/?p=1354>.

III. ALTA Survey

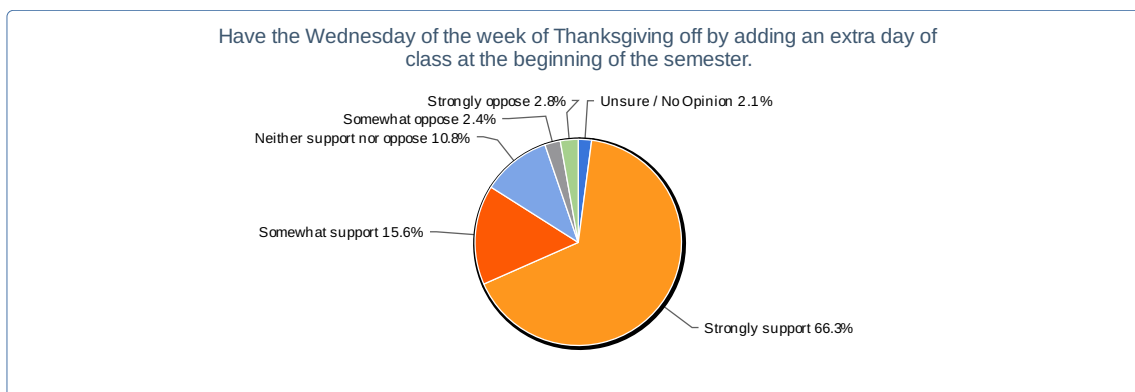
Academic Life Total Assessment (ALTA): Wednesday Before Thanksgiving Off

When: January 2012

No. of Responses: 2,538

Percentage of Student Body: 49%

Percentage Strongly Support or Somewhat Support: **82%**



77. Have the Wednesday of the week of Thanksgiving off by adding an extra day of class at the beginning of the semester.

Value	Count	Percent %
Unsure / No Opinion	53	2.1%
Strongly support	1686	66.3%
Somewhat support	397	15.6%
Neither support nor oppose	274	10.8%
Somewhat oppose	62	2.4%
Strongly oppose	71	2.8%

Statistics	
Total Responses	2,543

IV. Thanksgiving Break Survey

Would You Rather Survey

When: September 2012

Responses: 19,841 Votes from 979 students

Percentage of Student Body: ~19%



[Cast Votes](#) [View Results](#) [About this page](#)

Which would you rather see from your Undergraduate Student Government (USG)?

Allow us to rescind the PDF option after final grades are reported

More fresh produce options available on campus

19841 votes on 73 ideas

Which would you rather see from your Undergraduate Student Government (USG)?

Ideas	Score (0 - 100) [Ⓢ]
Get Wednesday before Thanksgiving off	83
Allow us to rescind the PDF option after final grades are reported	76
Friday Late Meal	75
Lanterns/holiday lights up along McCosh walk during winter season	71
Two free meals for upperclassmen eligible at Late Meal	70
Updated Course reviews on ICE	70
More fresh produce options available on campus	70
Get Campus Club and other facilities to stay open 24 hours, or at least have extended hours	66
More late night dining options	65
Bring in more outside events/organizations to Princeton University	65

Note: Students selected the Wednesday before Thanksgiving response 83% of the time over other options as their preferred potential project. This made it the most popular student response.