



March 26, 2015

Friends,

Since learning of the shortened winter break scheduled for the 2015-16 academic year, the USG Senate has been working hard to understand how this change will affect us all and, through extensive meeting with administrators, make the case for a standard, three-week break. Your response to the winter break referendum was overwhelming, with turnout exceeding some recent USG presidential elections. 96.2% of voters supported a three-week break and called on the administration to increase transparency surrounding how the academic calendar is determined. In recent weeks, we, along with past USG Academics Chair Jimmy Baase and USG Vice President Aleksandra Czulak, have met with various administrators, including President Eisgruber, Dean of the College Valerie Smith, Deputy Dean Clayton Marsh, Senior Associate Dean Claire Fowler, and Registrar Polly Griffin.

From these meetings, we learned that the faculty, which has full control over the academic calendar, typically sets the calendar four years in advance. Furthermore, we learned that the administration has already used next year's calendar to set varsity athletic schedules, University contracting and sub-contracting obligations, and the dates and planning of freshman orientation. However, several members of the administration also acknowledged that the shortened length of winter break next year had been poorly communicated.

We communicated the concerns of the student body, emphasizing that we view winter break as a mental health issue, that winter break constitutes an important time for students to reconnect with their families and communities, that upperclassmen use the break to conduct independent research, and that international students and low-income students are disproportionately affected by a schedule that requires making travel arrangements so close to the holidays. Although the administration told us that they will not revisit next year's calendar, we do feel that the administration is sensitive to these concerns and is open to working with the USG Senate in the future to achieve a consistent and reasonable academic calendar.

Fortunately, the University's ongoing [strategic planning process](#) to determine the University's long-term plans and trajectory present a timely opportunity to work with Nassau Hall as it revisits the academic calendar and many other aspects of undergraduate life. It will continue to be a priority of the USG Senate to increase student involvement in designing and revising the academic calendar—in particular, the scheduling of finals and breaks—alongside a host of other important issues. Ramie and U-Councilor Dallas Nan will also be active voices as the student representatives on the search committee for the successor to Dean Valerie Smith, with whom we have collaborated on academic initiatives in the past. While Dean Smith's departure may mean that broader academic changes will be more difficult to achieve this spring semester, we will continue to conduct all the research and student outreach efforts necessary to advocate for calendar reform in fall 2015.

We firmly believe that a greater role at the table for students is vital for more transparency, more creativity, and outcomes better tailored to fulfill undergraduate needs. While it is still incredibly frustrating that winter break will be shortened next year, we are confident that we can make progress towards a more sensible calendar in future years. Along the way, we are always open to your input. We will continue to use surveys, focus groups, and other methods at our disposal to represent your ideas and sentiments. Please contact either of us or any member of the USG Senate to share your ideas, advice, and concerns.

All the best,

Ella Cheng, USG President
Ramie Fathy, USG Senate Academics Committee Chair