

Consultation DRAFT: Proposal for a Fall Reading Break at McGill University
June 10, 2015

This proposal addresses the request of the Student Society of McGill University (SSMU) to adopt a Fall Reading Break, consistent with many other universities in North America. The proposal was developed following the establishment by the Deputy Provost, Student Life and Learning, of a working group tasked with considering the implications of such a change, surveying McGill students and evaluating their preferences, and reviewing practices at other universities in Canada.

McGill University has traditionally included two non-statutory breaks for students during the academic year: Winter holidays (approximately December 22 to January 5) and the Winter Reading Week (during the first week of March). Additionally, during the fall term the University is closed on Labour Day and on Canadian Thanksgiving Monday.

This proposal contemplates the inclusion of an additional fall break of two full days that are appended to the Canadian Thanksgiving Holiday. Trade-offs are also proposed to accommodate this change, while preserving a 13-week term, including routinely beginning classes before Labour Day. A second trade-off may be necessary in some academic years. There are two potential options proposed for consideration: 1) When necessary, hold exams on one Saturday during the Fall official examination period, or 2) return to the earlier practice of allowing for some flexibility regarding whether to make up class hours lost due to Monday statutory holidays and, in this case, to allow two days for a mid-term fall break.

Rationale:

The beginning of the school year includes many transitions and pressures for students, particularly those who are entering university for the first time. These include being away from the support network of home for the first time, the pressure of integrating into a new and unfamiliar environment, meeting new friends, and learning how to navigate the new academic context. The stress of preparing for mid-term exams and performance anxiety are two contributing factors to the creation of a high-pressure time.

These pressures can lead to new, or exacerbate existing, mental health challenges for some students. McGill Health Services has reported a general increase in the student need for mental health care during October and November over the last five years.

Many other Canadian universities comparable to McGill in student population have implemented Fall reading breaks to address student mental health and well-being. Notably, a Queen's University study resulted in a strategy for Student Mental Health and Wellness (2012)¹ and recommended a creation of a Fall reading break. A May 2015

¹ Queen's University. 2012. Student Mental Health and Wellness FRAMEWORK AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGY

survey of Canadian postsecondary institutions indicated that 68% of respondents have a fall break. Of these, 58% hold that break during October. The breaks range in length from one to five working days.²

Preparation for mid-term exams requires time and focus for both students and faculty. Overwhelmed students report needing a break to prepare for the extended mid-term exam period. Research has shown that Reading Breaks are also introduced to alleviate Faculty stress, reduce absenteeism, and accommodate off-campus research and experiential learning (EAB 2012)³

Consultation and information gathering:

A survey of undergraduate and graduate students, including Macdonald campus students, regarding their motivation to have a fall break and the trade-offs necessary to make it possible was conducted in April 2015. Members of ESAAC (associate deans and directors of advising) were also consulted at two meetings, before and after the student survey. Further consultation with ESAAC is planned. The working group consulted with Mental Health Services and will consult with academic colleagues. SSMU colleagues conducted a study of practices at other Canadian universities. Finally, a 2012 report of the Education Advisory Board regarding the Fall Reading Break practices of North American universities was reviewed.

Outcome:

The working group found through consultation and research that the inclusion of a Fall Reading Break has become a regular practice of many universities across Canada. Further, the results of the April 2015 survey of 5112 McGill students indicated that the majority of respondents (71.5%) agreed with the addition of a Fall Reading Break, even after reviewing the trade-offs required to include one. The majority (69%) of respondents preferred two days off in October, next to Canadian Thanksgiving weekend instead of a two-day break in November or one day in either October or November. Notwithstanding the challenge of fitting a break into the already very tight fall term schedule, the working group was compelled to find a way to make this possible at McGill. The following proposal is supported by the findings of the group's research.

Proposal:

It is proposed that McGill University:

- adopts a two-day Fall Reading Break,
- schedules the break to coincide with the October Canadian Thanksgiving weekend, resulting in five consecutive days off for students.

² ARUCC Survey. Fall Reading Break. May 2015. <https://www.surveymonkey.net/results/SM-XK BXG XKD/>

³ Coll, A. and Vasudevan, N. 2012. Enrolment Advisory Board, Custom Research Brief; Implementation of Fall Mid-term Reading Periods

To accommodate the introduction of this break, it is further proposed that:

- fall classes will normally begin in September, before Labour Day, and
- final exams be held on one Saturday during the Fall final exam period, when necessary. Every attempt will be made to avoid Saturday exams during the official exam period, when the annual calendar permits, or
- the University should return to the earlier practice of allowing for some Faculty-based flexibility regarding whether to make up class hours lost due to Monday statutory holidays and, in this case, to allow two days for a mid-term fall break.

Working Group membership:

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