



Council will vote in March on the proposal below. Members of the University may contribute views to their Council constituency representatives (see Almanac Supplement October 18) or write to the Council Steering Committee c/o Office of the Secretary, Room 121 College Hall/CO.

On the Academic Calendar

During the past few years, students have felt steadily increasing stress in the University environment. Tensions resulting from a strong competitive preprofessional atmosphere, incessant workloads, financial concerns and social pressures overwhelm some and burden many other students. This problem is exacerbated in the fall semester as students face over two and a half months with no vacation relief from these pressures. Having talked to several members of the University health services, administration, and faculty, we have concluded that a two-day vacation in the fall semester would effectively reduce stress.

To determine the extent of stress on our campus, we first consulted Director of Student Health Psychiatry Dr. Mark Giesecke and Director of University Counseling Dr. Steven Mullinix (see Exhibit 1). Both emphasized that their services have been seeing more students each year and treating problems of greater severity. They also mentioned that these trends are most pronounced between mid-October and mid-November. Data collected by the student health services also indicate that the most stressful period occurs during that stretch, since it is at this time when University Counseling and Student Health Psychiatry receive the greatest number of new intakes (see Exhibit 2). College advisor Dr. Gretchen Wood, who is also in a position to gauge stress in students, reiterated the observations made by Dr. Giesecke and Dr. Mullinix (see Exhibit 3).

We believe a two-day fall break would successfully combat student stress. This time would allow students to get away during the extended weekend, catch up on their work, or just relax in Philadelphia. Furthermore, student activities, such as seminars, retreats, group trips, or even stress management workshops, could be organized for this period. We realize such a break may not relieve all student stress, but as Drs. Giesecke, Mullinix, and Wood agree, such a vacation would help alleviate at least a substantial part of the problem. Also, as Dr. Giesecke alludes, the emotional anticipation of a vacation in and of itself mitigates stress.

To determine further whether a fall break will reduce stress, we investigated the situation at Duke University, which implemented a two-day mid-October vacation two years ago. As Dr. Mullinix reported, the Duke counseling center witnessed a definite reduction in stress felt by students and staff. We also talked to several Duke seniors who had experienced two years without a fall recess and two years with it. All emphatically agreed that the break provided considerable relief during the long stretch from school's opening to Thanksgiving.

In Exhibit 4, we have generated the fall semester calendars for the next four years. Under our proposal, classes would begin on the Thursday after Labor Day, following a two day drop/add period (no change from the current calendar). Two days would then be allotted for reading days, and six for final examinations. Finally, two days would be set aside in October for the fall break. (We suggest the second to last Monday and Tuesday of the month.) Under this proposal, there would be 13 teaching days for each day of the week (for the years 1984-1986). This would result in 65 total teaching days for the fall semester, which is two more than the fall semester just completed. The 65 days are also comparable to the number of teaching days at peer institutions. Our proposed calendar also avoids conflicts with science labs, for the Monday/Tuesday fall break compensates for the Thursday and Friday lab days missed during the first two days of classes and Thanksgiving.

As a result of our research into the problem of stress in the fall semester, SCUE strongly recommends the implementation of a two-day fall break. Both the opinions of professional counselors at this University and the experience of other universities support the effectiveness of such a break in alleviating the stress problem. Fortunately, a Monday/Tuesday fall recess seems not to cause scheduling difficulties. SCUE, therefore, urges that this Council approve the fall break proposal.

—James Lystad for The Student Committee on Undergraduate Education

Exhibit 4: Proposed Fall Semesters

See page 6 for Exhibits 1-3.

		1983	1984	1985	1986	1987
		September	September	September	September	September
		Su M T W Th F Sa	Su M T W Th F Sa	Su M T W Th F Sa	Su M T W Th F Sa	Su M T W Th F Sa
		1 2 3	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3 4 5
		4 5 6 7 8 9 10	8 9 10 11 12 13 14	8 9 10 11 12 13 14	7 8 9 10 11 12 13	6 7 8 9 10 11 12
		11 12 13 14 15 16 17	15 16 17 18 19 20 21	15 16 17 18 19 20 21	14 15 16 17 18 19 20	13 14 15 16 17 18 19
		18 19 20 21 22 23 24	22 23 24 25 26 27 28	22 23 24 25 26 27 28	21 22 23 24 25 26 27	20 21 22 23 24 25 26
		25 26 27 28 29 30	29 30	29 30	28 29 30	27 28 29 30
		October	October	October	October	October
		Su M T W Th F Sa	Su M T W Th F Sa	Su M T W Th F Sa	Su M T W Th F Sa	Su M T W Th F Sa
		1 2 3	1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4	1 2 3
		2 3 4 5 6 7 8	7 8 9 10 11 12 13	6 7 8 9 10 11 12	5 6 7 8 9 10 11	4 5 6 7 8 9 10
		9 10 11 12 13 14 15	14 15 16 17 18 19 20	13 14 15 16 17 18 19	12 13 14 15 16 17 18	11 12 13 14 15 16 17
		16 17 18 19 20 21 22	20 21 22 23 24 25 26	20 21 22 23 24 25 26	19 20 21 22 23 24 25	18 19 20 21 22 23 24
		23 24 25 26 27 28 29	27 28 29 30 31	27 28 29 30 31	26 27 28 29 30 31	25 26 27 28 29 30 31
		30 31	28 29 30 31	28 29 30 31	28 29 30 31	28 29 30 31
		November	November	November	November	November
		Su M T W Th F Sa	Su M T W Th F Sa	Su M T W Th F Sa	Su M T W Th F Sa	Su M T W Th F Sa
		1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	1 2	1	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
		6 7 8 9 10 11 12	4 5 6 7 8 9 10	3 4 5 6 7 8 9	2 3 4 5 6 7 8	8 9 10 11 12 13 14
		13 14 15 16 17 18 19	11 12 13 14 15 16 17	10 11 12 13 14 15 16	9 10 11 12 13 14 15	15 16 17 18 19 20 21
		20 21 22 23 24 25 26	18 19 20 21 22 23 24	17 18 19 20 21 22 23	16 17 18 19 20 21 22	22 23 24 25 26 27 28
		27 28 29 30	25 26 27 28 29 30	24 25 26 27 28 29 30	23 24 25 26 27 28 29	29 30
		December	December	December	December	December
		Su M T W Th F Sa	Su M T W Th F Sa	Su M T W Th F Sa	Su M T W Th F Sa	Su M T W Th F Sa
		1 2 3	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4 5
		4 5 6 7 8 9 10	2 3 4 5 6 7 8	8 9 10 11 12 13 14	7 8 9 10 11 12 13	6 7 8 9 10 11 12
		11 12 13 14 15 16 17	9 10 11 12 13 14 15	15 16 17 18 19 20 21	14 15 16 17 18 19 20	13 14 15 16 17 18 19
		18 19 20 21 22 23 24	16 17 18 19 20 21 22	22 23 24 25 26 27 28	21 22 23 24 25 26 27	20 21 22 23 24 25 26
		25 26 27 28 29 30 31	23 24 25 26 27 28 29	29 30 31	28 29 30 31	27 28 29 30 31
		# teaching days	# teaching days	# teaching days	# teaching days	# teaching days
		15 16 16 14 14	15 16 16 15 15	15 16 16 15 15	15 16 16 15 15	15 16 16 15 14
		Drop/Add -1 -1	-1 -1	-1 -1	-1 -1	-1 -1
		Reading days -1 -1	-1 -1	-1 -1	-1 -1	-1
		Final exams -1 -1 -1 -1 -1	-1 -1 -1 -1 -2	-1 -1 -1 -1 -2	-1 -1 -1 -1 -2	-1 -2 -1 -1 -1
		Jewish Holidays -1 -1	-1 -1	-1 -1	-1 -1	-1 -1
		Totals 13 13 13 12 12	13 13 13 13 13	13 13 13 13 13	13 13 13 13 13	12 12 13 13 13
		Total no. of teaching days = 63	Total no. of teaching days = 65	Total no. of teaching days = 65	Total no. of teaching days = 65	Total no. of teaching days = 63
		Drop/Add Sept. 6, 7	Sept. 4, 5	Sept. 3, 4	Sept. 2, 3	Sept. 8, 9
		Classes Begin Sept. 12	Sept. 6	Sept. 5	Sept. 4	Sept. 10
		Fall Break(sug.) Sept. 8, 9 (Jewish hol.)	Oct. 22, 23	Oct. 21, 22	Oct. 20, 21	Oct. 19, 20
		Thanksgiving Nov. 24, 25	Nov. 22, 23	Nov. 28, 29	Nov. 27, 28	Nov. 26, 27
		Classes End Dec. 9	Dec. 11	Dec. 10	Dec. 9	Dec. 11
		Reading Days Dec. 12, 13	Dec. 12, 13	Dec. 11, 12	Dec. 10, 11	Dec. 14
		Exam Period Dec. 14-22	Dec. 14-21	Dec. 13-20	Dec. 12-19	Dec. 15-22

Exhibits

Referred to in the SCUE proposal for change in the academic calendar (overleaf) are two letters from heads of student services (Exhibit 1) with supporting data on the pattern of student visits to those services (Exhibit 2). These and the letter of Dr. Gretchen Wood (Exhibit 3) were addressed to SCUE's James Lystad.

Exhibit 1

I am writing to you about the fall break which I understand is being proposed by the Student Committee on Undergraduate Education. As Director of the Student Health Psychiatry Service, I see some of the severest consequences of student's stress, and I am interested that your proposal may help decrease the level of stress which Penn students experience.

The highly distressed students seen on my service probably represent a "tip of an iceberg" in terms of a barometer of overall stress at the University, and there are two observations which may be relevant to consider at this point. The first is that each year between mid-October and mid-November, my service definitely sees an increase in the number and in the severity of student situations presenting. The long stretch between September and December, interrupted only by a brief Thanksgiving holiday, seems to give stress an opportunity to build without relief. Late October and early November seem to be particularly difficult for students in this regard.

My second observation, and one shared by my colleagues at the University Counseling Service, is that students seem to be feeling more stress this year than in previous years. We are seeing both a larger number and a greater severity of situations through Student Health. Included are a growing number of students who seem simply overwhelmed by the pressures of academic work, competition, part-time jobs, and financial concerns. This trend has been noted on other college campuses, and has been speculatively connected to the rise in the suicide rate for college students in the United States. (See "Suicide: A Blot on the Romantic Image of College Life," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Sunday October 23, 1983). Another distress signal from the increasing number of students who seem to feel boxed in with no room in which to maneuver, may be the increasing prevalence of eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia.

These observations pertaining to increased psychological stress in the student body lead me to think this year would be an especially appropriate time to institute a stress reduction measure such as a fall break. My staff have noticed that with spring break and even with the very short Thanksgiving break, student stress seems to decrease both before and after the recesses. Students seem to be able to catch their breath and regain their perspective even during a short recess. Some students would undoubtedly use the proposed break to catch up with the relentless march of classwork; others may take the time to renew family and friendship ties, or in other ways remind themselves of the broader context of their lives beyond academic competition and stress.

The chief objection I can anticipate to your proposal relates to whether the number of fall term class days would be appreciably reduced, or whether days at the beginning or at the end of the week would be disproportionately reduced. I understand that these questions are being addressed in the proposal which SCUE plans to submit.

—Mark E. Giesecke, M.D., Director,
Student Health Psychiatry Service

I very much appreciate the work you and other members of S.C.U.E. have done to investigate the need and feasibility of instituting a fall semester break. I also am glad that your group is continuing to study this option in the absence of Sam Fager.

As I mentioned to you earlier this fall, our counseling service data continues with a similar profile to last year (except a 22% increase of new student appointments); rising to a peak around mid-terms and remaining high the remainder of the semester. We began having a "waiting list" for continuing appointments in late October and, in spite of high attendance at our stress management workshops, have about 25 students on the waiting list for individual counseling.

As was the case last year, the Counseling Service staff are very supportive of the concept of the fall break to reduce some of the pressure students are feeling. Whether students choose to play, go home, or catch up on their work during the break, I feel it will go a long way toward helping to break the pattern of stress and tension many students feel this time of the semester. For some of the students the break may make little difference; however, I cannot conceive of the break doing harm to anyone.

I recently spoke with the Director of Duke University's Counseling and Psychological Services Center. She informed me that Duke has experimented with a two-day fall break for two years. Her staff's "qualitative" evaluation is that the brief vacation did reduce stress for significant numbers of students (and staff). She reported that the break will be continued in the next year and that Duke will be adding a full vacation week at Thanksgiving for 1984-85 to further reduce the pressure during the fall semester prior to exams. I find the Duke information particularly helpful for our own decision-making as the student body there is similar to Penn's in regard to student characteristics and the competitiveness found in "preprofessional" students.

I hope the above information will be useful as the University further discusses the feasibility of a fall break. I strongly support the idea, at least for a trial run, for next year. Please contact me if you need further information or assistance.

—Steven D. Mullinix, Ph.D., Director and Psychologist
University Counseling Service

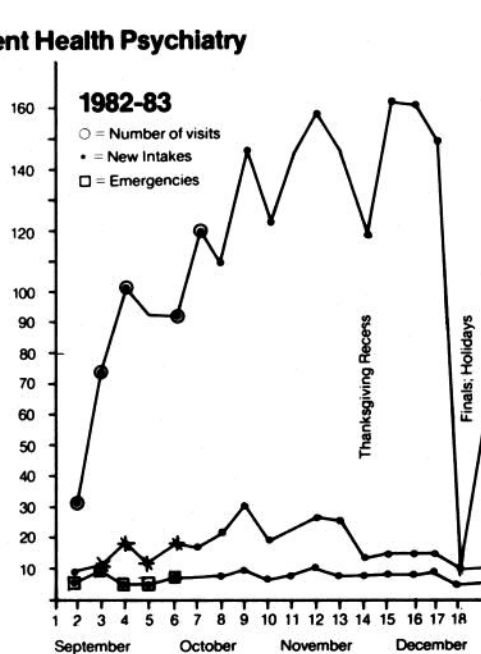
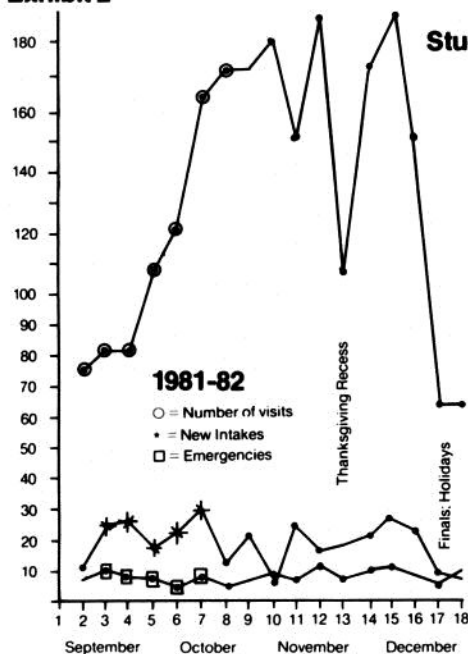
Exhibit 3

I am writing in support of the suggested fall semester break for Penn. The College Office, in which advising of undergraduates takes place, is in a good position to observe the typical strains and stresses of students and it is my strong opinion that the level of stress has risen in the past few years. While I am not in favor of shortening the time spent in the classroom, I feel that a semester unrelieved by a break is counterproductive (Thanksgiving comes so late as to be useless). Because of an increasingly competitive environment, this office sees many students who are either seriously depressed or frantic about the work that they feel needs to be done by the end of the semester. They often opt for taking incompletes, or withdraw from courses, or at least lose any pleasure they might have had in their studies. Some even choose to take leaves of absence in the middle of the semester. I believe that a long weekend, optimally away from campus, would do a great deal to relieve such stress and would help a student regain perspective. Even if the time is spent studying, some relief would still result.

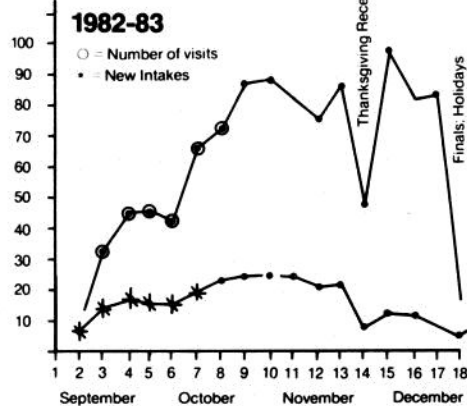
I know faculty at several colleges and universities in the local area. All testify to the usefulness of a semester break. I hope The University of Pennsylvania will take steps to institute a similar practice.

—Gretchen A. Wood
Vice Dean for Academic Advising

Exhibit 2



University Counseling Service



Source: Adapted from SCUE's Exhibit 2