Leading an Institution-Wide Academic Calendar Change

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Making A Calendar Change

How did it happen at Dartmouth College?
Goal:

To end fall term by Thanksgiving
Why change the calendar?

• Only a few days left in the term after Thanksgiving break, then pre-examination break, then finals.
  – Not pedagogically sound
  – Students travel home and then travel back for a brief period of academics
  – Dartmouth has a summer term, and faculty/students would have a significant break to do research, internships, work, etc.
• How to begin?

  • “Everyone has an opinion”

  • Various groups see the calendar through their lens and how it impacts them.

  • Even one slight change can have a domino effect.

  • While some shifts sound reasonable and easy on the surface, it is important to dig deeper and to explore all implications.

  • No shortage of advice – even had an alum send a letter insisting we should grant a college holiday for Canadian Thanksgiving.

  • Everyone has a role to play and can help to communicate with different constituencies.
Stages for leading a calendar change

- Exploration
- Research
- Debate
- Problem-solving
- Consensus-building
- Decision/Voting
- Implementation
Exploration Phase – begin discussions

• Beginning in spring of 2009 through spring 2010 the Dean of the Faculty discussed with faculty committees the possibility of changing the calendar to end fall term by Thanksgiving break.

• The Registrar worked on the calendar and presented various possible scenarios to the Dean and the Committee on Instruction.

• In addition, in May of 2009 a working group convened to gather feedback from administrators and students. A total of 17 students and 46 administrators representing 36 departments participated.
Exploration Phase – establish leadership

- Working group members: Registrar; Director of Class Activities, Alumni Relations; Associate Dean of the College; and Director of Admissions Operations and Strategy.
- The Project Sponsors were the Dean of the Faculty, the Provost, the Acting Dean of the College and the Vice President for Alumni Relations.
• The timing of this project was problematic in that it began during the financial crisis, and staff were very anxious about any proposed changes in addition to the usual stresses associated with any major change. There were worries that the goal of the calendar project was to reduce staff hours or to encourage layoffs.
• Despite this, the working group began its work.
Exploration Phase – expand discussion

• The working group conducted a series of discussions with College staff and students, asking them to consider the following scenarios:
  – End Fall term prior to Thanksgiving
  – Start the Fall term earlier than the current calendar
  – Shorten the break between Spring and Summer Terms
  – Shorten the break between Summer and Fall Terms

• The group developed a set of questions to present to administrative departments so they could consider the potential impact of such a change.
Exploration Phase – invite feedback

• Copy of questions sent to staff in advance of scheduled meetings:

  • *In response to the charge from sponsors, we are exploring the many implications that might occur should the timing of the summer and fall terms be altered. Our fact finding begins with talking to the many people around campus most affected by potential calendar changes.*

    – *Fall Term Scenarios*

• What would be the overall impact on your office/area if the following changes occurred:

  • *Start fall term 9 days earlier than the current calendar.*

  • *End the last scheduled final examination by two days prior to Thanksgiving Day.*

  • *End the final examination period by the day prior to Thanksgiving Day and use the last day for unscheduled make up exams.*
Exploration Phase

• Abolish (or revise) the rule that no College-sponsored or College-recognized regular season events (e.g., athletics, performing arts, etc.) may be scheduled during a Pre-Examination break or a Final Examination Period.

• How might this calendar change impact human resources in your area?

• What would be the implications for your programs and activities?

• What would be the impact on students? (Or faculty, administrators, coaches, alumni, as the case may be.)
Exploration Phase

- Are there any sustainability/energy implications?
- Would there be financial implications in making these changes?
- What are the potential opportunities for your area if these changes occurred?
Exploration Phase

Summer Term Scenarios

• What would be the overall impact on your office/area if the following changes occurred:

• Shorten the break between the end of commencement and the start of summer term by one day or by two days.
  – Add one more (total two) extra day of Saturday class to summer term, for a total of two Saturday classes.
  – Add evening classes rather than Saturday classes.

• Shorten summer term pre-examination break to one day

• Offer evening exams to shorten the exam period.

• How might this calendar change impact human resources in your area?

• What would be the implications for your programs and activities?
Exploration Phase

• What would be the impact on students? (Or faculty, administrators, coaches, alumni, as the case may be.)

• Are there any sustainability/energy implications?

• Would there be financial implications in making these changes?

• What are the potential opportunities for your area if these changes occurred?
Exploration Phase

Interim Break Between Summer and Fall Scenarios

• What would be the overall impact on your office/area if the interim break between summer and fall terms were shortened to two or two and a half weeks?

• How might this calendar change impact human resources in your area?

• What would be the implications for your programs and activities?

• What would be the impact on students? (Or faculty, administrators, coaches, alumni, as the case may be.)

• Are there any sustainability/energy implications?

• Would there be financial implications in making these changes?

• What are the potential opportunities for your area if these changes occurred?

• FINAL QUESTION: Is there anything else you would like to share with us?
Exploration Phase – report results

• The working group wrote a report for the sponsors with the finding “The Working Group believes that there is no overwhelming impediment to making the calendar change and that it would be feasible in both theory and practice.”

• Followed this finding with a set of issues and considerations and several addendum listing the steps taken to solicit input.
Exploration Phase – summarize feedback

• Issues and considerations included:

  – staff morale,
  – doing more with less due to recent budget cuts,
  – taking time off in December less appealing than in September,
  – renegotiation of some contracts, i.e. Dining,
  – shorter break between summer and fall may create backlog for some offices,
  – coordinating residential life, alumni affairs, DOC trips, etc.
  – social isolation for students left on campus during long December break,
  – town/gown impact,
  – shortening orientation necessary,
  – preserving first year trips important to students,
  – not having to travel for Thanksgiving appealing,
  – Students holding jobs for a longer time will increase earnings,
  – time to do internships,
  – worthwhile to travel home with extra time.
Exploration Phase – summarize feedback

- Were this change to take effect, we would expect some areas would voice concerns and might require support addressing them. Request particular consideration of the following:
  
  - Delay implementation until a few years out
  - Implement specific rules that govern the calendar, not ad hoc yearly decisions
  - Specify a clear set of objectives for how the December interim is to be viewed
  - Consider traditions (holiday tree lighting)
  - What’s important (to students) – first-year trips
  - What’s impossible (or extremely expensive) – shortening time between end of spring, start of summer due to reunions and turnover of rooms and lack of staff to do it
Research Phase

• Clarify who has the authority to make the change, and how it would be made.
• At Dartmouth the calendar had not been significantly changed since 1972. Tweaks had been made by the Committee on Instruction.
• The Faculty of Arts and Sciences had voted in the 1972 calendar. The Committee on Instruction was the sponsoring faculty committee, of which the Registrar is a member.
• Eventually the calendar came to a full Arts and Sciences Faculty vote.
Research Phase

• Identify the primary source document for calendar rules, if it exists. Dartmouth’s “Principles of the Calendar” is where most of the changes would occur.
• There were other faculty rules that needed to be changed as well:
  – When grades would be due in the fall
  – Rules on when certain activities around finals could take place
• The Committee on Instruction was the appropriate committee to sponsor the legislation and provide feedback.
  – We benefited by having a very capable and well-respected chair of the Committee.
Research Phase – unexpected issues

• Dartmouth/Princeton Football game became a big issue to resolve
  – Our final exam period now fell in such a way that it created conflicts with Ivy League rules.
  – We can re-schedule any winter sports with events in the fall to avoid our exam period so that problem was resolved.
  – Therefore the one football game with Princeton became the isolated issue of concern.
  – With a combination of waivers and creative scheduling, this was eventually overcome after significant involvement of many, and several negotiations
Debate Phase

• COI reviewed various calendar options
  – Shorten summer? Lengthen the class day? Add additional “X” hours? Many iterations considered.

• Presentation of those calendars to the Faculty
  – by COI chair, by Registrar (with updates on progress)

• Faculty participated in an online survey, weighing in on 3 options
Problem-Solving Phase

Formation of new working groups to start investigating questions that faculty raised:

• **Steering Committee** (mostly Provost and Registrar, but eventually other senior staff convened by Provost)

• **Special Students Working Group** - Charge: To gather data and analyze impact and implementation of calendar change for all student housing, international and low income students and Dartmouth Athletics.

• **Trips/Orientation/Advising Working Group** - Charge: To explore impact on and implementation of calendar change for DOC trips, orientation & advising and housing.

• **Facilities/Revenue Working Group** - Charge: to review and assess impact of calendar change on summer facility and dining use by conferences, summer camps, etc.
Problem-Solving Phase

• Working groups were encouraged to consider solutions for making the change work.
• If resources were required, they were asked to prepare a budget and discuss it with their senior leadership.
• Focus was on how to make it work – a psychological shift from earlier discussions.
Consensus-building phase

• Faculty were beginning to see that this may be a good thing for them and for the students, despite some negatives.

• Efforts to make calendar changes in the past had been unsuccessful; sense that it was time to give it a try and then could always re-evaluate.

• As time went on, more got used to the idea and more positives started to be expressed.
Consensus-building phase - communication

• Communication is important throughout, however as more become aware and involved in the process, communication increases in importance.
  – Updates are helpful, even if the update is that a decision is still pending
  – Parents and others who plan ahead will be anxious and training staff to respond appropriately will be necessary
Decision/Voting Phase

• Have the old versions of all rules that require change/vote and new versions put forward all together for final decision
• Clarify when the new calendar will take effect
• Prepare your communication plan in advance with your Public Affairs office and appropriate others (Dartmouth had a news release)
• Dartmouth Human Resources prepared an FAQ to address any anxieties staff may have about their jobs related to the calendar change
Decision/Voting Phase

- Celebrate! This type of campus-wide project is time and labor intensive, and deserves a moment of recognition.
- At Dartmouth it took 2 full years to get to this point.
Implementation Phase

• Transitioned leadership role from COI Chair and Registrar to a general Project Manager to implement the institution-wide changes
  – Dartmouth has a Senior Project Manager who manages a central project management team
  – Once the focus shifts from the academic to college-wide administrative implementation issues, it should not remain the responsibility of the Registrar.
  – The Registrar continues to play an advisory role.
Implementation phase

• Once again, working groups, built on prior ones, were formed to focus on implementation issues.
• Everyone was encouraged to look at their processes to consider how this change might impact their operations.
• Those areas with inter-dependencies were asked to collaborate.
Implementation phase

• A special website dedicated to the calendar change was established with links to the Registrar’s website and to other key offices.

• Whether certain offices/facilities would be open during the extended break were communicated by having departments post their hours on this site.

• The new project manager met with various offices to ensure that everyone was planning for the change.
Implementation phase - surprises

• Just when you thought you were done...
  – A new wrinkle with Athletics; problems when Thanksgiving is late in November vs. years when it is early
  – Do we start the term early and end a week prior to Thanksgiving, or start later and end just before the holiday?
  – Athletics admitted that they had neglected to address this, and had been given the future calendars, but the reality was it now caused a problem if we started early (there would be a 2 football game problem, among others...).
  – Fortunately the COI supported the later start and hopefully faculty will also be supportive.
Implementation phase - surprises

- Some faculty began to view the extended break in new ways, seeking immediately to extend courses beyond the end of the term.
- Challenging when proposals came forward which did not fit within Faculty guidelines.
- Concern about creating a 5\textsuperscript{th} term?
- Be sure to seek support for “taking it slow” if new ideas crop up
Summary

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Summary/Questions

• Questions?

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