

Brown University Faculty Forum
Subject: University Academic Calendar
December 13, 2011
4:00-5:30 p.m.

Dietrich Neumann (History of Art and Architecture), Chair of the Faculty Forum
Members of the Academic Calendar Committee (**boldface = present at the meeting**):

Robert Fitzgerald, University Registrar
Stephen Lasonde (Deputy Dean of the College)
Joseph Meisel (Deputy Provost)
Harold Roth (Religious Studies, East Asian Studies)
Peter Shank (Molecular, Microbiology & Immunology), Chair, FEC
J. William Suggs (Chemistry and Biochemistry)
John Tyler (Education)
Jonah Allen Ward (Senior Associate Dean for Student Life)

The Chair of the Faculty Forum, Dietrich Neumann (History of Art and Architecture), convened the forum at 4:05. He informed those present that the discussion would focus on scheduling issues associated with the University's current academic calendar. They include:

- an occasional conflict of Rosh Hashanah with either 1st-year orientation or the first day of fall semester (which happened in 2004 and 2010, and will occur again in 2013)
- the uneven length of the two semesters and of their exam periods
- having enough time to conduct final exams without too many conflicts or forcing students to have too many exams on the same day, and whether to use Sundays as an exam day to alleviate the problem

Broadly, said Prof. Neumann, the forum must consider whether to address regularly occurring conflicts on an *ad hoc* basis, in some systematic way, or not at all. Specifically, those present would discuss four possible approaches that had been suggested by the Academic Calendar Committee (which were presented at the December full Faculty Meeting):

- A= change the calendar permanently to begin fall semester one week earlier (the Wednesday **before** Labor Day)
- B= start classes the Wednesday **after** Labor Day, as now, and eliminate all consideration of religious holidays from planning (classes would always start when they do now, regardless of any potential religious holiday conflicts)
- C= leave the calendar as is and postpone substantive calendar reform, but accommodate the 2013 conflict *ad hoc* by moving the start of classes a week **earlier**, so that in that year classes would begin on the Wednesday **before** Labor Day, on August 28th.
- D = leave the calendar as is and postpone substantive calendar reform, but accommodate the 2013 conflict *ad hoc* by moving the start of classes a week **later**, so that in that year classes would start on the **second** Wednesday **after** Labor Day, on September 11th.

Having gone over these options, Prof. Neumann declared the forum open for discussion.

James Allen (Egyptology) noted that, although Brown was founded as a religious institution, no one would argue it is now. He worried that observing one religious holiday meant accommodation could become an issue for others as well (“where to stop?”); if we accommodate Rosh Hashanah, why not provide similar accommodations for other holidays? He acknowledged that it is a sensitive subject, and suggested that the best solution would be not to observe any religious holiday, but also change the calendar permanently to start classes a week earlier (option A).

Peter Shank (Molecular, Microbiology & Immunology, and Chair, FEC) noted that we need to consider as well the number of days in exam period, which are different in the fall and spring semesters; this too relates to the question of religious observance, as a solution to that problem might involve scheduling exams on Sundays, which we do not currently do. If we were to give exams on Sundays, that would solve the problem of students potentially having three exams on the same day. He asked if there is agreement that we should give exams on Sundays in order to make the two semesters’ exam periods of equal length.

James Allen responded that we currently give exams on Saturdays, and have had observant Jews ask for separate exam times because they cannot sit the exam on that day.

Thomas Banchoff (Mathematics) said he had noticed in his 30 years at Brown that the conflict with religious holidays has been a bigger problem for first years than for students in other years, and opined that classes should start before Labor Day on a regular basis. He also noted some incongruities between first and second semesters: in the 2nd semester we have a one-week break, which is a good thing that students need. In fall everything is compressed, including Reading Period and exams. For faculty who normally teach Tuesdays and Thursdays, the fall schedule means those classes have only one day off in the entire term: Thanksgiving Day. Monday-Wednesday-Friday teachers get more days off, and the semesters are in that and other ways asymmetrical. For him, Prof. Banchoff continued, the primary thing is to have the one-week break in the middle of the term. In his opinion this would allow more time for Reading Period (he would have no objection to holding exams on Sundays). He added that he had taught at other institutions, and most others start before Labor Day. Finally, he said, the reason calendar reform did not occur 30 years ago had to do with a faculty member whose national meeting was over Labor Day weekend.

Seth Rockman (History) responded to Prof. Banchoff, suggested that there was nothing wrong with saying that we have two semesters, each with its own rhythm. He noted that an earlier end to the summer also means an earlier end to research time. Many faculty members use that time to work, and as research has become more important at Brown, giving up a week seems to be at odds with the profile of the university.

Prof. Banchoff replied that a week off in mid-semester would allow time for that kind of research. He agreed that is nice to have a longer summer, but did not think faculty need to think of summer as their sole research time; there is no need to wait until the end of May to start work,

as we stop teaching in mid-May. He concluded that in his opinion there are enough reasons to change the calendar (to a pre-Labor Day start).

Hal Roth (Religious Studies, East Asian Studies, FEC, Academic Calendar Committee) said that before we begin discussing when the semester should start, we need to talk about the pros and cons of having a longer fall break. He said that if we decide that we want to have a fall break (of more than the current one day), then it follows that we must start before Labor Day. If we don't want a fall break (and thus keep the post-Labor Day start), it would better accommodate faculty research interests and childcare issues at the end of summer. If we start classes the Wednesday before Labor Day, that would really mean losing the entire week before the holiday, as faculty would need to be on campus for advising and orientation, which would take place from the start of the week. A decision about when to start the term, he concluded, is about whether we want a fall break. If we do, he asked, when would we want to have it? Take a full week at Thanksgiving? Add days off at the time when the current Fall Weekend occurs?

Peter Shank responded, noting that the report of a survey conducted by the Academic Calendar Committee, with 306 respondents, yielded a result of 60% favoring a fall term start after Labor Day, with only 20% in favor of starting prior to the holiday.

Robert Fitzgerald (University Registrar) added that the remaining 20% of those 306 were in favor of not accommodating Rosh Hashanah by starting later.

Thomas Banchoff pointed out that the mid-semester break in the spring, coming at the very end of March (nine weeks into the term) is very late, and there isn't much time left after students get back. In the fall term the Thanksgiving break creates even worse issues: students come back with only two weeks left, which he described as very hard, especially for 1st years. He said he was not sure when exactly a fall break should be, but considered it should be earlier and closer to mid-semester. He said he would like to get more information about how faculty feel about length and schedules of breaks, with more specific questions asked on that subject.

Dietrich Neumann suggested that perhaps a different survey could gather that information.

Youenn Kervennic (French Studies) pointed out that students already leave for Thanksgiving early, sometimes taking off as soon as the weekend before and skipping the Monday-Wednesday classes scheduled; he wondered what would happen to pre-holiday attendance records if they were to have an entire week off. He agreed that students are very tired at semester's end, but was not in favor of expanding the break to an entire week, as he felt that students would simply take to leaving campus still earlier.

Melinda Rabb (English) spoke, as she put it, "on behalf of asymmetry," saying that it was fine for each semester to have a different shape and rhythm. For one thing, she said, certain holidays like Thanksgiving and Easter affect the calendar in their own ways, but also there is a different feel to each semester for us as teachers--when we start in September there has been a long period of us doing other things, and we don't hit the ground running, so it's to be expected that each semester would have a different shape to it. She said she did not consider that the imbalance worked to ill effect.

She noted that when we come back after Thanksgiving there is also excitement--students know the end of the term is near, and the holidays are coming soon. Prof. Rabb concluded by speaking in favor of keeping the semester start after Labor Day, saying that losing a week at the end of the summer would be a significant cost to scholarship.

David Jacobson (Judaic Studies) said he was uncomfortable with linking the discussion of accommodations due to religious observance with questions of “symmetry” and the issue of whether Brown should have a fall break. He hoped that the faculty would be able to think about them separately. In two previous discussions over last few decades, he said, the faculty had voted to accommodate (i.e., to adjust the schedule ad hoc) when there was a conflict with Rosh Hashanah. He hoped the University would continue the practice, as not to do so would put a number of students and faculty in a bind. He said he was not aware of other holiday that would affect the current calendar in exactly the same way.

Prof. Jacobson added that the shortness of Reading Period is a key problem, as there is almost no Reading Period in fall. He pointed out that instructors use Reading Period in different ways: some observe it to allow students to do work; others use that time to make up missed classes. He said that having the leeway of extra days is important, and not having it limits our flexibility. He recalled that at the University of Pennsylvania the equivalent of Fall Weekend was a bit longer, and suggested that we could perhaps have a longer fall weekend mid-semester rather than a whole week off at Thanksgiving, which he said is not going to help students psychologically (given how late in the semester it comes).

Seth Rockman (History) asked those present whether new technologies (specifically the online delivery of course information) could alleviate concerns about students potentially missing class for Rosh Hashanah (if the calendar were not to be shifted to accommodate it).

David Jacobson (Judaic Studies) answered that a lot would then depend on individual faculty members to make information available, and the university would have to ensure there would be no penalty for missing a class. He worried that it would be difficult to enforce, and suggested that would really have to be a change across the board to work.

Peter Shank (MMI, FEC chair) noted that among the information about peer institutions in the committee’s report was the fact that University of Pennsylvania never observes Rosh Hashanah and takes a longer fall break than we do (they have off both Monday and Tuesday). The downside, he said, is that they have only two days in fall Reading Period.

Robert Fitzgerald (University Registrar) responded, noting that at Penn has just voted to extend the length of the semester, and in the future they will start before Labor Day and have a longer semester than Brown does.

He added that there are pressures coming from outside Brown as well that pertain to our accreditation and particularly affect the discussion of whether to have a longer fall break. He referred to the recent (July 2011) change in the federal definition of what constitutes a credit hour: the term length should be 15 weeks, and in each week there must be at least one hour of class meeting per credit hour of a given course. At Brown a one-credit course is equivalent to a

four credit hour course elsewhere, which by the federal definition would require four hours of class meeting per week for a standard course. Brown's meeting patterns, particularly for seminar courses, do not come close to matching the definition, and the current calendar is barely 15 weeks with Reading Period included in the reckoning.

Peter Shank asked Fitzgerald whether that would improve if we started in the week before Labor Day.

The Registrar responded that a longer fall break would only be viable if the start of term were before Labor Day. If we had no days off in the fall at all we would be over-compliant, as then we would have 69-73 days in each term, depending on when Labor Day fell. If we had off only at Thanksgiving we would have 67-69.

Currently, with Reading Period included in the count of days, we have 65-69 days per term. If we were to extend Reading Period in the fall the decision would be subject to scrutiny by accrediting bodies. As of now the spring Reading Period is 12 days.

Janet Cooper Nelson (University Chaplain) suggested that it was extremely important to think in terms of accommodating conflicts with Rosh Hashanah, and to think about whether a pre- or post-Labor Day start was the best way to do this. She noted that there is the potential for the conflict, if there is not any accommodation, to affect up to 25% of the student body, and said that having no accommodation at all would create chaos; we are obliged to think about the problem, she said, by virtue of the sheer number of people involved.

How to do this well, Cooper Nelson continued, is extremely important. She noted that the conflict that occurred in 2004 resulted in a post-Labor Day start, when the semester then started and ran very late, and students complained about staying. She argued that we should not try to create a calendar that doesn't exist. She said it was important to have Thanksgiving break, but noted that shortening the summer by a week to start early would be bad for students working in summer. In addition, it would mean that Meikeljohns and other students working at orientation would have to come back even earlier, thus shortening further their earning time at their summer jobs. She suggested thinking about the economics for students (as well as about research time for faculty). She concluded by saying she would push for a regular start on the Wednesday after Labor Day, as now, but also to accommodate segments of the community when a significant conflict occurs (option C or option D).

Thomas Banchoff asked those present about the relative importance of Yom Kippur versus Rosh Hashanah.

David Jacobson answered that the 1st of the Hebrew month starts Rosh Hashanah, and the 10th of that month is Yom Kippur. However, the way the calendar falls, it would not be likely to have Yom Kippur fall on the first day of classes, so in effect, Rosh Hashanah is the issue. It can involve two days, although some celebrate only one. In 2013 it would start on the evening of the 1st day of classes (the eve is Wednesday night September 4th), so the first Thursday classes of the term would fall on Rosh Hashanah, which would affect the Wednesday class as well if people were traveling.

Hal Roth asked Janet Cooper Nelson to clarify what she was suggesting: did she want to give students a week off at Thanksgiving, and also make adjustments for Rosh Hashanah?

Cooper Nelson answered that she had no opinion about a weeklong fall break, but said that the reality is that students will leave early at Thanksgiving if it's Thursday-Friday, and that we cannot really fight against that effectively. Classes are half empty on Monday and Tuesday, she said, because many students have already left.

Prof. Banchoff asked about the length of Rosh Hashanah and how many students go home for it.

David Jacobson said in his opinion it tends to be students who live closer who go home. In 2013 the first full day of Rosh Hashanah will be on a Thursday, but it moves around, so from year to year it can fall on various days of the week (in the Gregorian calendar).

Janet Cooper Nelson noted that, however much students may love to be home for religious holidays, the policy at Brown has been to offer support in the way of religious services at the university, rather than ensuring every student can go home. She said she has had faculty ask her about whether the policy includes them as well. We don't specifically set aside days for religious observation in our employment policy, and we have not said to students that they have time to go home; we have offered them services here.

David Jacobson agreed, saying that the University should not accommodate student travel home; we have services here.

Elizabeth Bryan (English) said she supported separating discussion of the two issues of accommodation for the religious holiday and the question of a fall break.

She also stated her support for a term start after Labor Day, noting that research can involve things like visits to archives, and the time there is precious. If we think of ourselves as a research university, starting after Labor Day would help preserve that time.

Mirena Christoff (Center for Language Studies: Arabic) said she supported the suggestion to start after Labor Day. She noted that as a teacher of language she is in the classroom every single day doing three classes per semester, plus working as a 1st/2nd year advisor, so the only time at all for research is in the summer. From the date classes start, the real date she would need to be back is two weeks ahead of that; there are course materials to be put online, orientation meetings with Fulbright Foreign Language TAs, new colleagues, and it is really a busy period. She noted that in 2010, when we started in late August, she had to be back at Brown around August 10th, which shortened her own research trip by nearly a month.

As far as length of semester goes, she saw no problem with the two semesters being asymmetrical and said it was just a matter of planning the work for the year would fit in both terms.

Hal Roth remarked that some peer institutions do continue to hold classes on Rosh Hashanah,

noting that the Registrar had prepared a report for the Academic Calendar Committee: an equal number of them observe it as do not. He asked what the consequences would be if a student missed the 1st day of class. On that day we typically go over the syllabus and take some kind of attendance; shopping period is crazy, and there may or may not be a substantive lecture. We could also put things on MyCourses. He said he supported starting after Labor Day, and appreciates the extra week at the end of the summer.

Thomas Banchoff said that when the same course is taught both fall and spring terms, the calendar differences mean the course itself is noticeably different depending on the term. Students expect to get the same content in the same course, but they don't, as it depends on which semester they take it. He said he was not suggesting we have exams after Christmas, although he was probably one of the few people on campus who was here when that was the case. He suggested that faculty generally want to keep things the way they are and are "lethargic" about change, but noted that once Brown changed to its former calendar to a pre-Christmas exam period people got used to it quickly.

Prof. Banchoff suggested that a survey might ask about the desirability of having a four daylong weekend (Monday and Tuesday off in the fall break). He asked if classes could start on Labor Day, noting that some institutions do schedule classes on the holiday. He concluded by saying that he was not necessarily suggesting that be done, but noted that we can get half a week back that way. With the current calendar those teaching Monday-Wednesday-Friday, he said, have already had three separate meetings of their classes before he and other Tuesday-Thursday instructors have had their second.

James Allen (Egyptology) agreed that the start on Labor Day might not be a bad idea. He said he was in favor of starting before Labor Day, but noted that we may be stuck with starting after. Our contracts say we are paid for nine months of work, and if you have one extra week added to the term, then lawyers may say that all our contracts may have to be revised, which may be a problem.

Melinda Rabb asked Prof. Banchoff if a course like Math 0180 (or any course offered both fall and spring) could just be taught in fall only.

Prof. Banchoff replied that the department teaches multiple sections of that course in both semesters.

Prof. Rabb asked how well we communicate with students when see a calendar conflict coming up. She suggested that a faculty member might want to reschedule a class if it conflicts with a religious holiday. She said that she is Jewish and recalls once being asked to introduce a visitor on Yom Kippur. She agreed to do it but thought as she was doing the introduction, "I will never do this again." She said it seemed to her that there are ways to communicate better to students - for example, informing students that there will be a makeup session of the class, maybe, or informing that materials fro the missed class would be on available on the web.

Janet Cooper Nelson endorsed the idea that faculty should proactively communicate their intentions to accommodate student observation of a religious holiday. She said she probably

fields between 25 and 50 questions a term from students related to this issue. Sometimes, she added, she gets a bcc on an email exchange with a faculty member (about excusing a missed class), occasionally with the faculty member taking a tone that results in putting the student in a difficult position. She recommended that faculty be proactive. She concluded by saying that for her the need to ensure that Rosh Hashanah did not coincide with the 1st day of classes is what she described as “a deal breaker” -- not doing so would create chaos and disorder, as it would affect the newest members of the campus community (1st years) and their families (who have no previous experience at Brown to draw on).

David Jacobson noted that it was the 1st day of classes (for example, in 2013) that is the issue; in his opinion no other accommodation would be needed. If we did not do so, and then shopping period started, he asked if we were really going to get every faculty member to agree to keep positions open in crowded courses for those who were not there. He said it would put a lot of pressure especially on 1st year students, but older ones also. Given, he said that the conflict does not happen often, he would recommend accommodating it with some kind of calendar shift when it occurs.

Hal Roth asked, if Rosh Hashanah starts on Wednesday evening at 8 pm, and classes start Wednesday morning, is there really a conflict? How do we define “conflict” in this case?

Prof. Jacobson said that Thursday and Friday is very common (although the holiday moves). He asked whether in 2013 it made sense to start on Tuesday.

Robert Fitzgerald reminded those present that there needs to be enough time to conduct orientation, and the new version of orientation is now shorter than it was (currently students move in over the weekend and have required meetings and advising Sunday, Monday and Tuesday) precisely because the old schedule gave students too much free time with a whole day off on Labor Day.

Thomas Banchoff asked again about having classes meet on Labor Day.

Fitzgerald replied that there could be issues relating to union contracts for staff.

Prof. Banchoff noted that other institutions do schedule the term that way, and Fitzgerald replied that that was true, even at some state institutions.

Janet Cooper Nelson (University Chaplain) asked whether, in a year when Rosh Hashanah conflicted with the start of term, whether there might be a way to make orientation more compressed, and then start classes on Tuesday.

She also noted that, contrary to what several present had said, we do not currently “observe” Rosh Hashanah--we go forward, just with some people not participating. She said that if we can start in 2013 on the Tuesday, then we could at least get two days of classes in before the religious holiday.

Robert Fitzgerald mentioned the scheduling of convocation on the afternoon of the first day of

classes.

Thomas Banchoff suggested that we could move convocation to another day.

David Jacobson suggested that if both MWF and TTh instructors can each have one first day on Tuesday and Wednesday, then everyone would at least have had their initial meetings before any disruption in attendance due to Rosh Hashanah.

At this point Dietrich Neumann noted that the group had looked at some of the details creatively, as well as ways to disentangle the two issues (Rosh Hashanah accommodation and fall break/length of term).

Thomas Banchoff raised a question about whether technology could help with attendance problems around Thanksgiving, noting that this year he gave a lecture on that day that was videotaped (and also had a large percentage of the students present).

Lynne deBenedette (Slavic Languages) noted that language classes, which grade participation based on classroom interaction of students using the language with one another, would have a harder time creating an online experience that matched a face-to-face one.

Youenn Kervennic (French Studies) asked if one option might be to extend the length of the semester at the end rather than at the beginning.

Robert Fitzgerald (University Registrar) noted that we were already going nearly as late as possible, that we cannot have exams on December 24th.

Hal Roth asked if there were consensus about the fact that having exams on Sunday would give us two more days of exams.

Fitzgerald said that exam period generally runs from the 12th to the 21st, with eight exam days in the period. There is one fewer exam day in the fall than in the spring, which causes multiple conflicts (courses have the same exam times); this is the result of the switch years ago to an exam schedule that would be finished before Christmas. He noted that only 20% of classes at Brown actually hold in-class (i.e., not take-home) final exams.

If, Fitzgerald said, you wanted to extend the fall semester by three days (for example, if you were to increase the length of Thanksgiving break, or add a longer fall break), you would have exam period running from the 15th to the 24th if you wanted to have same number of instructional days in the term. He reminded everyone that Labor Day is always a moving target. When Labor Day falls on September 1st Brown winds up with 69 days inclusive of Reading Period, plus eight days of final exams. When Labor Day is as late as the 7th we get 65 days with Reading Period included, and we still have only eight days of finals from December 12-21. If we were to add days we would run into Christmas.

Thomas Banchoff (Mathematics) and Melinda Rabb (English) both expressed surprise that only 20% of classes give in-class finals. Prof. Banchoff asked if there were finals given during

Reading Period, or on the last regular meeting day of classes.

Robert Fitzgerald noted that those were not approved final exam times. He added that the 20% figure was actually not unusual nationally.

Prof. Rabb asked the Registrar about how many students were affected by the problem of final exam conflicts, given that there are only eight days of exam period.

Robert Fitzgerald answered that the total was less than 100.

Prof. Rabb suggested that perhaps we need creative thinking about how to avoid that problem.

David Jacobson asked why every course taught needs to be assigned to an exam period; why, he asked, could we not assign exam times only to courses that actually give finals.

The Registrar answered that currently they find out which courses are actually giving final exams only at mid-semester. Requiring faculty to notify about that earlier would mean a change to the faculty rules. He added that we have no way of controlling whether students register for classes with versus without exams. The time conflicts, he said, occur only the fall semester when the exam period is one day shorter. We could fix it by having evening exams, as other institutions do.

Peter Shank (MMI, FEC, Academic Calendar Committee) suggested that the Sunday exam issue would be easy to solve. We could also get faculty to notify the university before the start of the term whether they will actually have an in-classroom final. He noted as well that our fall semester is longer than that of our peers, to which Robert Fitzgerald replied that it was no longer true of the University of Pennsylvania since they had changed their calendar (to start before Labor Day).

David Jacobson (Judaic Studies) asked what would the procedure be to get faculty to see the two calendar issues (1. Rosh Hashanah accommodation; 2. issues related to length of term and breaks) discussed and voted on as entirely separate, with two separate votes.

Peter Shank replied that it certainly could be done. He said there would be a decision at the February faculty meeting about whether there would be a 2013 accommodation for Rosh Hashanah.

Janet Cooper Nelson spoke to the need to disentangle the two issues. She mentioned that in her undergraduate years there were self-scheduled exams; she wondered if some group could look into the question of exam period separately, suggesting that there may be options. We could look at different ways of categorizing courses; perhaps faculty would need to notify about intent to give an in-class final earlier than currently. In any case we may be able to relieve the problems students currently have. She noted that for some student athletes who play winter sports they may finish their last exam on the 21st and then have to return to campus as early as the 27th; if those students' exams all fall late in exam period, they may have to sit here for 10 days with nothing to do. She asked if it were possible to build more flexibility into the system, and

suggested forming a group to study Brown's exam scheduling policies.

James Allen (Egyptology) said that it seems there is a strong argument to be made for having at least one more day off during Thanksgiving week. He wondered whether that could be accomplished by doing away with fall weekend.

Thomas Banchoff returned to the discussion of exam scheduling, noting it would be primarily 1st and 2nd year students affected by changes to the schedule. He said it may not be easy to move exams around, but said he did think it would be possible to create policy to accommodate extreme circumstances (like having three exams fall on one day). He said students could get permission to take a makeup exam.

Hal Roth asked if we were able to restructure exam period to make it more amenable, given that only 20% of classes use it.

Robert Fitzgerald said it was not feasible to shorten exam period. We need to leave the number of days intact. However, we could change to having three exam periods per day.

Prof. Banchoff and Jacobson thought it would be possible to accommodate any students who wound up with three exams scheduled on a day and suggested we give that option.

Melinda Rabb pointed out that students can find out easily at the start of the term when they enroll in a course if there is an exam, and when it is.

Fitzgerald agreed that students do know this, if they actually look.

As there were no further questions, Professor Neumann thanked all those in attendance for their participation. He adjourned the forum at 5:15.

Respectfully submitted,
Lynne deBenedette (Slavic Languages)
Secretary of the Faculty Forum