

EP.21.018 — Spring 2021 Academic Calendar Revision FAQ

Q: What principles guided the proposed revisions to the Spring, 2021 Academic Calendar?

Revisions to the Spring, 2021 Academic Calendar are necessary in response to the COVID-19 global health pandemic. The proposed revisions:

- Acknowledge the importance of protecting the health and welfare of stakeholders, including students, faculty, staff, their families, and the community;
- Provide time in January for a staged return to campus for COVID testing and isolation protocols;
- Minimize the number of times students leave and return to campus;
- Recognize the need for breaks and wellness by adding single days without instruction;
- Avoid Mondays, Thursdays, and Fridays as days off to discourage three- to four-day weekend travel;
- Preserve the end date of the semester so as not to create conflicts with employment and/or appointment dates, Commencement, and the Summer, 2021 term.

Q. Why start a week late?

In a normal winter break, the majority of the undergraduate student body returns to campus over the course of the 3-day MLK weekend. Such a return would be catastrophic this year due to the large number of students returning to the area and requiring COVID testing in an extremely short time span. To improve safety and minimize virus spread, we worked with the SHIELD team on a “staged” return plan. This plan spreads out student returns over the course of a week, allowing a reasonable number of tests to be performed per day, providing time for all students to be tested twice, and for those for whom it is necessary, to undergo isolation/quarantine before classes start. If the semester starts on the scheduled date of January 19, 2021, staging would have to begin the week of January 4. We were concerned that many students would refuse to return to campus that early in the new year, which would ruin the staging plan. An early return would also require opening residence halls earlier than anticipated, leading to additional costs and staffing challenges for University Housing. Thus, the proposal is to delay the start of the semester by 1 week, using the week of January 19 for a “staged” return and COVID testing, putting our campus in a significantly better position for a safe spring semester.

Q. Why not have a spring break week?

Health and safety of the campus and community are the primary drivers in this proposal. Based on the science behind and data from the COVID testing program, the SHIELD team strongly believes comings and goings must be minimized. A higher COVID positivity rate followed even the three-day Labor Day weekend, when students and staff were more likely to travel away from then return to campus. Any lengthy period of time in which there are not instructional days opens up more opportunities for such travel and, as a result, greater likelihood for positive cases, which can have significant impacts on the health and safety of not just those who are testing positive, but the larger campus and surrounding community as well. Hence, the proposal does not include a spring break week nor vacation days that are easily transferred to long weekends.

Q. Why not have a later spring break week then pivot to remote, similar to the Fall, 2020 semester?

This fall, we have learned that in spite of a pivot to remote later in the semester, many students are indicating they plan to be in the Champaign-Urbana area through the end of the semester. Many are bound by leases which factor into this decision. As such, and also based upon our experience with the Spring 2020 semester, we expect the same would be true if the pattern of a later break followed by a

pivot were planned for spring. This means that those who travel over the respective breaks will be returning to the area following it, which increases health and safety risks. Additionally, pivoting to remote means faculty need to adapt their courses to fit this model. Finally, the pivot this fall also was factored into student fees, with a prorated reduction in certain fees when taking into account that students would have all online instruction after fall break. The fee structure for the fall semester has proven to be unwieldy and confusing for students and their families, and steps to streamline the fee assessment process moving forward has been called for by students, families, and the staff who work with these students to try to reduce confusion.

Although remote instruction at the end of the semester would help limit on-campus (e.g., classroom) transmission, we must also consider the health and safety of the broader Champaign-Urbana community. Therefore, large-scale COVID-19 testing must continue throughout the semester regardless of whether we are fully remote. If the semester were to end with remote instruction, understanding which students are local and which are not is quite challenging, making it more difficult to ensure that we are carrying out comprehensive COVID testing of all students.

Q: What are the calendar policies impacted by the revision?

- 1.1, There shall be no fewer than 14 of each instructional day per semester and 13 weeks that have five full weeks of instruction (M-F). With two of the proposed days off being Wednesdays, the Spring, 2021 calendar will have 13 Wednesdays.
- 3.1, Classes shall begin on Monday 8 weeks after Thanksgiving week. If Monday 8 weeks after Thanksgiving week is a holiday, then classes will begin on a Tuesday 8 weeks after Thanksgiving week. The proposed calendar puts the start of the spring semester on Monday 9 weeks after Thanksgiving week.
- 3.2, Classes shall not be held on Martin Luther King Day or during a Spring Vacation that will be scheduled for either the ninth or tenth week of the semester. The proposed spring calendar does not include a Spring Vacation during the ninth or tenth week of the semester.

Q: What is the impact on instruction days?

The proposal reduces total instruction days for the Spring, 2021 semester from 72 to 70. By weekday:

- 15 Mondays (1 extra)
- 14 Tuesdays (1 fewer)
- 13 Wednesdays (2 fewer)
- 14 Thursdays (same)
- 14 Fridays (same)

Ideally, sharing an updated calendar will allow time for instructional adjustments for MWF or MW courses such that the material “lost” in the 2 fewer Wednesdays can be distributed to the additional Monday and condensed if necessary then across other meeting dates. TuTh courses would need to condense material from the “lost” Tuesday.

Non-instructional days should be left entirely free of any mandatory course obligations.

Q. What about courses with weekly lab cycles?

Single days off during the week does impact lab rotations. Knowing of this issue, Kevin Pitts, Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education, has been in contact with several departments that have weekly lab cycles. These departments understand the issues and are willing to work with it.

Q. Why not “reprogram” one of the days of the week to avoid missing two Wednesdays?

These mechanisms have been used in the past and abandoned due to the significant confusion caused for students, faculty, and staff alike. Calling a Friday “Wednesday” to catch up on that particular day of the week is not manageable.

Q: How does the proposed revision compare to other Big 10 schools’ plans for spring, 2021?

- At least three other schools (Purdue, Wisconsin, and Iowa) are delaying the start of the spring semester by a week.
- Ohio State (1 week) and Indiana (3 weeks) will start the semester remotely.
- As of October 13, at eight Big 10 schools (Ohio State, Purdue, Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin, Penn State, Iowa, and Nebraska) have announced they are not having a spring break.
- Three of the above institutions (Ohio State, Purdue, and Wisconsin) are adding a single day or multiple single days off over the course of the spring (Ohio State – 1 Tu, 1 W; Purdue – 1 Tu, 1 W, 1 Th; Wisconsin – 1 F).
- Michigan will end their spring semester one week early.

Q. Why revise the calendar now rather than waiting until closer to the start of the semester to have a better understanding of the status of the pandemic at that point in time?

- Instructors need as much time as possible to make adaptations to their spring syllabi;
- Students, faculty, and staff need to know what to expect for the spring for a variety of reasons, including those who are planning obligations or travel over the winter and/or spring breaks;
- Decisions on the calendar is necessary for purposes of academic advising, adjusting dates such as add and drop deadlines accurately, and to allow the SHIELD Team to prepare plans for the return to campus testing and isolation.
- Once a calendar is settled, University Housing can begin concrete implementation plans for move-in/move-back for the spring. This planning is essential for students’ returns to minimize density and stage testing schedules to ensure students, faculty, and staff can all be tested as needed with results returned for the start of instruction.

Q. What is the communication plan regarding the Spring, 2021 Academic Calendar?

A comprehensive communication plan is in place with Public Affairs. This plan includes key target audience messaging for students, faculty and staff, as well as publication of information via social media, websites, and the like.

The plan will be reflective of what is passed by the Senate and therefore dissemination of communications is pending Senate review and approval.