Resolution 2021-S6-1104

Student Mental Health Days

The Undergraduate Student Government
Legislative Body
First Reading: March 1st, 2021
Second Reading/Voting: March 1st, 2021

Chief Sponsor(s): President Wasan Kumar, Vice President Hana Ahmed

WHEREAS, numerous universities around the world have adopted the concept of a ‘Reading Week’ or ‘Reading Period,’ which is a set period of time before final exams during which classes, examinations, and assignments are canceled. Across the U.S. several universities have implemented this with varying lengths of time, from 1 week (Harvard, Northwestern) to several days (UofChicago, UofTulsa) to one day (UIUC, UofArizona). Currently, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign their non-instructional reading day comes as a result of the removal of one instructional day.

Proponents of these initiatives claim that this gives students an opportunity to prepare for final exams, catch-up on readings and assignments, evaluate your progress through the semester, apply for summer internships or complete other applications, and further ease the transition into college life for first-year students. This also gives faculty the opportunity to work on any grading or evaluations they must complete before finals. This break facilitates additional time for students and faculty to spend with friends and family, and to dedicate to self-care. Ideally, this will improve campus mental health, which is perpetually an area for improvement and especially critical during this pandemic.

1 UPSC Civil Services Study Materials, Higher Education in the UK and the USA. https://www.upscpdf.in/2020/01/higher-education-in-uk-and-usa.html
4 Weinberg College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Reading Period. https://weinberg.northwestern.edu/undergraduate/courses-registration-grades/reading-period.html
5 University of Chicago, Academic Calendar. https://www.uchicago.edu/academics/calendar/
6 University of Tulsa, Academic Calendar. https://utulsa.edu/academic-calendar/
7 University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign, Academic Calendar. https://registrar.illinois.edu/academic-calendars/spring-academic-calendar-21/
8 University of Arizona, Academic Calendar. https://catalog.arizona.edu/2020-2021-academic-calendar
9 https://wwwf.imperial.ac.uk/blog/student-blogs/2015/02/17/why-reading-week-is-important/
Detractors may claim that this program may not achieve these goals by not reducing non-academic stress (i.e. interpersonal problems, financial stress) and be detrimental by allowing for procrastination and reducing class/instruction time. Professors will also need to adjust their syllabi to accommodate this change. This may inadvertently lead to a significant increase in assignments and programs crammed into the first 2 instructional days of the “Reading Period.”

A study by Pool, Khan and Agnew examined Canadian undergraduate students who were granted an additional one-week long Fall Break. Over 1,100 students were surveyed, out of whom 80% viewed the break as positive, 69.1% indicated the break decreased their stress, and 53.6% indicated the break improved their academic performance. Salivary cortisol and Dehydroepiandrosterone (DHEA) levels were measured, and those who experienced fall break showed a lower cortisol to DHEA ratio, indicating less stress.10

A study by Cramer and Pschibul reviewed stress and student time usage during Fall Reading Week (FRW) in University of Windsor students. They surveyed 177 students over 21 days, and found that students who engaged in schoolwork during FRW had significantly less perceived stress after the break, while those who did not saw little change in their perceived stress levels;11 and

WHEREAS, at UIC we recommend such an initiative be implemented with no extension to the academic calendar. Further, to waylay some of the concerns listed, we recommend that aggressive programming by the Student Success units and the Counseling Center on final exam studying, stress management, and career development be offered alongside this. We also recommend that Faculty are given adequate time and provided with the tools to best support any changes to their syllabi.

LET IT BE RESOLVED, that the USG calls for the inclusion of 3 non-instructional ‘Reading Days’ at the end of each Fall and Spring semester before Finals. During this period, no student will be required to submit any homework assignments, and no examinations of any type will be administered. In Fall 2021, these days will be December 1st, 2nd, and 3rd. In Spring 2022, these days will be April 27th, 28th, and 29th. From then, this initiative will exist in perpetuity during the final 3 academic days preceding Finals week.

President,
Wasan Kumar

Speaker of the House,
Daisy Stancheva

10 Poole, Heather & Agnew, Michael. (2017). One Week, Many Ripples: Measuring the Impacts of the Fall Reading Week on Student Stress. Collected Essays on Learning and Teaching. 10. 10.22329/celt.v10i0.4757.