

STRATEGIC PLANNING AND ANALYSIS COMMITTEE

**Implementing the New Strategic Plan:
Reimagining Time at Macalester**

Discussion Paper

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1. Introduction

The new strategic plan obliges us to “redesign the academic calendar to reimagine our use of time.” Specifically, it commits us to:

- *establishing* an academic calendar and work schedules that intentionally center well-being by creating time for reflection, integration of ideas, community connection, and rest;
- *exploring* flexibility in time-to-degree to maximize use of the campus during summer and January term, potentially allowing for new models like a three-year B.A. or an accelerated pathway to graduate/professional school; and,
- *assessing* the feasibility of summer/January break programming to increase flexibility, grow opportunities for international experiences, and maximize use of our facilities and resources.

At a similar strategic level, in its “Elements of a Developmental Four-Year Experience” discussion paper, SPA has suggested that “the college explore options such as a hybrid calendar (mixing more traditional semesters with shorter terms), and expanding part-term options (1 or 2 credit courses that meet for only part of a semester).”

In addition to these strategic-level imperatives, the need to reimagine the way the college uses and structures time also derives directly from the lived experiences of students, staff and faculty.¹ And, of course, the imperative to reimagine the way we use and structure time at Macalester is in part driven by the need to enhance our value proposition – the need to create an educational experience that is both distinctive and “irresistible” to prospective students and their families.

In order to respond to these imperatives – i.e. to reimagine the way we use and structure time at Macalester – SPA spent the spring semester reaching out to individual departments and teams to understand the benefits and challenges posed by the current academic calendar and other alternatives, fielded a survey of faculty, staff and students on the timing of semesters, courses, vacations and rest, reviewed relevant academic literature, explored interesting and innovative use of time at other higher ed institutions, and iterated with specific constituencies as we fine tuned our report.

The result of our study is the following catalog of innovative “temporal building blocks.” For each of these building blocks we specify:

- its nature;
- its level of support on campus (as far as we can gauge it);
- the factors favoring its adoption; and,
- the constraints, tradeoffs and other considerations that might work against its adoption.

Ultimately, of course, whatever innovative building blocks the college thinks worthy of adopting will need to be combined into a coherent academic calendar – all the parts must work together, and the whole should be greater than the sum of the parts.

¹ In this study, we use the terms “calendar” and “academic calendar” in a holistic way to refer to the overall structure of time (days, weeks, breaks, academic year, etc.) at Macalester.

2. How We Structure Time Today

Macalester college operates on a semester system with two 15-week semesters. Each semester, full-time students take 3-4 courses (each course worth 4 credits). Students may enroll part time in either 1 or 2 courses.

The fall semester typically begins in late August and ends mid-December (inclusive of 2 study days and 5 days of finals). The spring semester typically starts in mid-January (the week of the federal MLK holiday) and ends in mid-May (inclusive of 2 study days, 5 days of finals, a senior celebration week, and graduation).

The academic calendar also includes several breaks throughout the year, including a fall break mid-way through the fall semester (Thursday through Sunday), Thanksgiving break (Wednesday through Sunday), a 4-5 week winter break, and a week-long spring break halfway through the spring semester.

During the summer break, the campus remains active, but in very different ways. Facilities Services is active during this time completing about 90% of the annual capital improvement projects as well as disruptive preventative maintenance. The campus is also host to a number of outside camps and conferences that bring revenue to the college.

All four-credit courses at Macalester meet for three hours per week. Classes may meet for an hour every Monday, Wednesday and Friday, an hour and a half every Tuesday and Thursday, or three hours every Monday or Wednesday evening. Students in the arts, sciences and languages may also have weekly lab obligations. Some one and two-credit experiences are available through Music, Physical Education, Theater and Dance, and independent study or internship.

While classes may meet over the noon hour on MWF, Tuesday and Thursdays between 11:30 and 1pm are reserved for community activities. Faculty may attend faculty meetings, department

meetings, chairs meetings, and academic search meetings at this time. Convocation, holiday celebrations, and other ceremonial gatherings also regularly occur during these hours.

Throughout the year, time is also spent on students, faculty, and staff creating a social calendar that has a few recurring events. These events include Winter Ball, Pushball, Spring Fest, parties in the Kagin Commons, and end-of-the-year award ceremonies. All of these events occur in conjunction with a myriad of opportunities for small-scale and spontaneous events organized by various student affairs staff, faculty, student organizations, and the surrounding community. Together, these events do translate to a significant use of time at Macalester.

Other significant features of today's structured time include the programmatic onboarding and off-boarding of students. Today, new student orientation occurs four days before classes begin, and senior week programming lasts for a week leading up to commencement. These two segments of time are significant to shaping the college experience for students, staff, and faculty alike and include many Macalester-specific traditions like the playing of bagpipes, the initiation of students into their houses, and the procession of flags representing our current student body. Later in the paper, we consider the potential for further use of these windows as an opportunity for further onboarding of returning students.

3. Reimagining the Days of the Week

Faculty, staff and students at Mac express a variety of preferences when it comes to organization of the workday/week and the length and frequency of class meetings. Some folks prefer 90 minute courses, others 60 minutes, others still 180. Folks tend to prefer a 60 minute class period for lecture-based courses and 90 minutes or more for discussion-based courses or labs.

Preserving a variety of course times/lengths will ensure that a variety of preferences are satisfied with course offerings while also presenting challenges in terms of imbalance in preferences. For example, offering 90 minute class periods two days a week limits the number of 90 minute

courses that might be offered in any given semester. Many students and faculty already struggle with 8/8:30am courses, and athletics, music, theater, dining services and student club meetings preclude us from offering courses after 4:30pm. The popularity of specific class times (T/Th 9:40 or 1:20) butts up against space constraints and a need to offer courses throughout the day for students who must meet a variety of requirements. However, providing 90 minute courses on four days of the week would mean eliminating or greatly reducing the number of 60 minute course options. Offering 90 minute courses 3 days a week may prove challenging given the need for each 90 minute course to meet twice per week (and our limit to a 5 day week).

Some colleges and universities offer 55 or 75 minute courses. It would be possible to move toward a schedule with these options, allowing for more 75 minute (longer course) blocks but for HLC purposes this may require adding days to the semester. Further, faculty may need to alter their content much as they did amidst the pandemic with a pivot to the pandemic induced Modular system.

Most folks would appreciate more “community time.” Again, this would involve tradeoffs. As noted elsewhere in this report, this time could be built in through wellness or community days sprinkled throughout the semester, we could continue to preserve the T/Th community hour (11:30-1pm) and encourage the many standing committee and department meetings that take place during those times to shift to another course time or before or after courses but that might mean that not all folks in a department or role (faculty, department chair) can attend said meetings. We could push music, theater, and athletics later in the day though practice and gym spaces are already strained by the limited hours we protect for student athletes and extracurriculars.

4. Reimagining the Academic Work Week

Reimagining the academic work week could provide a plethora of benefits to students and faculty: switching to some variation on a four day work week could reduce stress and increase

student flexibility in completing assignments and add time for faculty to work on their own academic projects. Other schools which have experimented with four day work weeks [have saved money](#), but have also expressed concern about reducing time for students to access resources, and students and faculty express [mixed feelings about the impact on learning](#). All variations on a four day work week, however, are unlikely to increase time off for much of the staff; even when classes are not in session, Macalester is still very much institutionally alive and in need of continuous attention from staff.

The most “pure” form of a four-day work week would be one in which classes are no longer taught on a single weekday. This can further be subdivided into five implementations, each on a separate day of the week. SPA is concerned, however, that a three day weekend could result in more travel home over weekends (primarily, although not exclusively, amongst students from Minnesota) and the emptying out of our campus.² An alternative option would be the removal of Wednesdays, Tuesdays, or Thursdays, from the academic work week, which would serve to break up the week and give students a chance to work on assignments.

In all of these four-day academic work week scenarios, however, the current schedule of classes would need to be redesigned. Complicating matters, as noted above, many members of the student body and faculty oppose a full switchover to ninety minute classes, and reducing the number of days of the week might constrain our ability to offer multiple class lengths.

Solving this would likely involve sixty and ninety minute time slots mixed together on a daily basis, although it would not necessarily preclude the introduction of alternative class lengths and schedules (for example, a forty-five minute class that meets four times a week). It would also make scheduling labs incredibly difficult for students.

² Similar experiments at other schools have found [that students typically remain on campus](#)

Particularly where labs are involved, SPA has considered an alternative possibility in which labs are scheduled all on the same day, during which no regular classes meet, thus ensuring a four-day week for regular classes, with the fifth day being a lab-only day. It should be noted, however, that there would only be two or three slots for three-hour labs which could be scheduled, and that given the (general) lack of labs for non-S.T.E.M. students, it could create a potentially divisive dichotomy between students who are not majoring in S.T.E.M. and those that are. Further, students who take more than one lab per semester may struggle to find non-overlapping labs. Alternatively, afternoons of specific days (e.g. Tuesday/Thursday) could be reserved for scheduling labs, which would simplify the scheduling process, but could also result in increased difficulty in scheduling classes in the remaining time frame.

Not all members of the Macalester community need be treated the same when it comes to work scheduling. Perhaps from late December through mid-January and June through mid-August (or other times throughout the year depending on a department's tasks and rhythms) staff could shift to a 4-day work week. This shift might allow Macalester to compete on work-life balance when unable to compete on salary and would go some way toward sustainable well-being for the staff in positions where this might most easily apply.

5. Reimagining Days of Wellness, Rest, Worship and Reflection

SPA thought through the challenges and opportunities related to moving toward a 16 week semester, inclusive of 4-5 wellness days. That is, both fall and spring term would be extended but wellness days would be built in so that no additional class time would be counted toward this 16 week period for HLC purposes.

Sprinkling in wellness days throughout each semester signals the value of rest, reflection, and “play”, and may counter the intensity and pace of the academic calendar. The spring semester, in particular, is noted for the lack of days off in the period before spring break. Wellness days could take several forms: time for individual reflection and time for community reflection. They could

additionally overlap with some religious holidays which would allow students to observe their holiday without the stress of missing class.

One drawback in scheduling a wellness day in the middle of the week is that a number of highly enrolled STEM classes have lab sections on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and sometimes on Wednesdays as well. What this means is that in a given week, the Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday lab sections of a course will all do the same experiment. If one section of a lab gets canceled in a given week, then all of the other lab sections that week have to get canceled as well. Thus, a midweek wellness day will have a disproportionately large impact on STEM courses with multiple lab sections.

There is a general appreciation for the need for wellness days, but not necessarily at the expense of a shortened summer or winter break. We can't create time, we can only reallocate it from somewhere else, so the question becomes, "What are we willing to NOT do in order to do this?" People are generally not disposed to having a shorter summer. The length of summer breaks is seen as important for research, family time, course preparation, and to allow student research and internships. There is more disagreement on the length of winter break. Some feel that the substantial four-week winter break is necessary to recharge before the start of the spring term, and is needed, in many cases, for individual research, especially when summer is focused on student research (funded, for instance, by NSF grants). Others feel that the winter break could be reimagined: shortened, to allow an earlier end to the spring term, or lengthened to reinstitute the J-term (see below).

5. Reimagining Semesters and J-Term

SPA has considered possible changes to the starting dates, ending dates, and lengths of both semesters and the winter break. We have also considered how to structure breaks during the semesters. For the fall semester, one idea is always to start instruction after Labor Day. By Minnesota statute, virtually all public primary and secondary schools in the state must not start

instruction before Labor Day. If Macalester were to follow that rule, faculty with school-age children in public schools would not have to worry about arranging for child care before Labor Day. Students living off-campus would also benefit from not having to start a lease before September 1. On the other hand, a few faculty preferred starting before Labor Day in order to have Labor Day serve as a break from instruction early in the semester and to keep the end of the fall semester well before Christmas. (Many schools in the US, especially in the South and near-South, start their fall semesters before Labor Day, sometimes well before.) If the College were to adopt a rule of never starting fall instruction until after Labor Day, *and* if we add wellness days to the fall semester, years with a late Labor Day (which can occur anywhere from September 1st to 7th) would have fall semester finals ending just before Christmas. Some employees who observe Christmas did not support having only a few days to prepare for the holiday. Additionally, Christmas functions in the US as something of a secular break-point for nearly every educational institution at every level.

Education Minnesota, the public school teachers' union in the state, has its annual MEA conference on the third Thursday in October. As a result, all public schools and many private schools have their fall break, the "MEA weekend," on the third Thursday and Friday of October. There is strong support amongst faculty and staff for having Macalester's fall break always coincide with the MEA weekend. However, we see two drawbacks. First, many Minnesota high school students use MEA weekend to visit colleges, and Macalester would obviously be less interesting to visit if we were on break at the same time. However, Macalester attracts potential high school students from around the nation, so whenever we schedule our fall break, we will disappoint a small fraction of visiting students. Second, since Macalester's fall break is usually a week ahead of MEA, aligning our fall break with MEA would postpone what could be a much needed instructional breather for both students and faculty.

Some members of our community expressed interest in either canceling class all of Thanksgiving week or ending the fall semester at Thanksgiving. The week-long Thanksgiving break would

bring obvious personal benefit to students and faculty who wish to travel for the holiday. However, adding two additional days off during the fall semester, in addition to wellness days we may wish to insert, might require the College either to start before Labor Day or end quite close to Christmas. There is also an equity issue in that hourly staff employees may not have the same latitude to take additional days off the way that students, faculty, and salaried staff will. Another possibility might be to end the fall term at Thanksgiving to avoid the awkwardness (as experienced by some) of returning to campus for just two more weeks of instruction. However, other college calendars reveal that schools which end their fall terms at Thanksgiving are all on a trimester system. There is very little interest in changing Macalester's academic calendar this dramatically. Interestingly, Willamette University in Salem Oregon begins First Year Courses a week before all other courses and ends them before Thanksgiving. This benefits the faculty who sacrifice some summer to the FYC experience and students who are for the first time balancing a four-course load, some grace during the semester wrap-up and finals period.

From the 1960s through the 1990s, Macalester had an intersession instructional term (or "J-term"). Intersession would last the entire month of January. Originally, faculty were required to offer classes during intersession that were not taught in the fall and spring semesters. As faculty interest in offering unique intersession classes waned, the College started allowing faculty to offer "normal" classes during J-term. Intersession ended in 1997, but until 2004, the winter break still lasted through the end of January. In 2004, the College shortened the winter break by one week, but never started the spring semester earlier than Monday, January 22. Since 2015, the College has always started the spring semester on the Thursday after the Martin Luther King, Jr., holiday.

Some faculty and students expressed interest in once again using January as a time for formal instruction. In particular, part-time faculty might welcome the opportunity to earn more money by teaching J-term courses. A January term could also be a good time to offer social curriculum

short courses focused on inculcating life skills, as we described in our fall 2022 report on elements of a developmental four-year experience.

Those who expressed interest in restoring a J-term made clear that participation in this instructional term should be optional. The College would need to decide if we would charge students additional tuition for J-term courses. Most importantly, the College would need to think about how to inspire and sustain faculty and student interest to make this iteration of J-term successful.

An additional instructional term would significantly increase work for the Registrar's Office: there would be another cycle of schedule construction, registration, add/drop, and withdrawals for the Registrar to manage. However, in other logistical respects, the marginal cost of offering a J-term should not be very high: it might not cost the College a lot more to provide the level of dining, housing, library, fitness, and wellness services necessary when classes are in session compared to a January without instruction.

There was strong faculty interest in restoring a winter break that lasts for all of January without adding back formal instruction. There would be more time for faculty to rest, prepare for spring classes, and engage in scholarly and creative activity. This break between semesters would be particularly helpful for junior faculty. There would be more time for students, especially those working on senior honors projects, to do scholarly and creative work as well. \

A longer winter break would also provide the opportunity for more faculty-led field trips or study-away opportunities. Athletes and others who cannot be away from campus during the fall and spring terms could also use a longer winter break for such study-away experiences. However, the study away office advises that such trips should not be seen as a substitute for the traditional semester-long study away programs.

Older faculty recall that when Macalester had a long winter break without formal instruction (from 1998 through 2004), some students and parents complained that the students had little to do during this time. If the College decided to reinstate a long winter break, it would be important to explain to students the rationale behind this decision.

One issue for the spring semester is the timing of the spring break. However, unlike the fall MEA weekend, there is no statewide custom for spring breaks. Having an entire week off is important in that it allows time for both students and faculty to travel. It is important to acknowledge that staff would benefit from having a week-long spring break as well, but it is not possible for many of them to take this much time off during the academic year.

If we delay the start of the spring semester until the end of January, and if we also insert a number of wellness days during the spring semester, we need to be aware of the costs of a significantly delayed start to the summer. This may infringe on students pursuing summer internships, jobs, and research opportunities. However, one benefit to the spring semester ending later in May is that senior athletes would not have to choose between end of season competition (conference finals) and attending their Commencement ceremony as they often do now.

6. Reimagining Summer

A fuller array of summer academic offerings has emerged as an intriguing possibility in our committee deliberations.

Macalester currently has a very modest array of summer offerings. Several dozen students annually do credit-bearing summer research, typically but not always in STEM fields, or have an internship which carries a single credit, sometimes for international-student visa reasons. For at least two decades (until about 2015), Prof. Sung Kyu Kim taught a highly enrolled pair of

summer Physics courses, popular with premeds, and open to non-Mac students. In the pandemic summer of 2021, we ran an early-summer “Mod 5,” about which we’ll say more below.

There are notable motivations for expanded summer offerings. Macalester has a vast physical plant that is under-used for about three months every year. A portion of our staff workforce is not employed year-round, and might be interested in more year-round employment. (Another portion prefers their 9-10 month jobs, and a third portion, such as athletic coaches and maintenance staff, does under-recognized work in the summer.) Some fraction of our faculty might also be interested in compensated or “regular-semester offset” summer teaching.

Student appetite for summer coursework (in general) exists; we don’t know how large that is, and don’t know how it would be impacted by Macalester’s own offerings. Student motivations might include spacing out coursework over a full year (affording, for example, athletes to take a lighter load in-season), covering targeted coursework like pre-med courses, and shortening time to degree, among others. In addition, winter in Minnesota is hard – especially for the vast fraction of our students who come from warmer climates – while summer in Minnesota, when most students are away, is very pleasant. This is not a trivial note.

There are two “base models” of how we might expand summer offerings. The first is the “light” model. This would mean mounting either a handful of staple classes like Intro sciences, entry level Math-Stats-CS, intro languages, or offering “niche” coursework in any field that might appeal to ten or twenty students per course. This light model need not be a full “summer session,” and might not come with on-campus housing, dining, or co-curricular programming. Given the ample supply of cheap summer housing near campus (due to the ubiquity of twelve-month leases signed by our many off-campus students), housing enrolled students beyond Mac would likely not be a major problem. Students could integrate a course or two with other summertime commitments. We merely note this “light” model, and have not thought through

how tuition and/or financial aid might apply. If costs were full-freight, this would raise equity issues.

Any light-model Mac summer offerings would exist in competition with summer academic offerings proposed by other Twin Cities colleges and universities, as well as options far away but closer to any student's summertime abode.

The second summer approach would be the "full" model: that of a true summer session. A full Mac summer session would be a major undertaking, and would involve facilities (custodial, grounds, maintenance, public safety, and more), dining services, residential life, health & wellness, athletics, and many other campus offices, in addition to the central role of the faculty, academic departments, and academic programs. A general lack of residence-hall air conditioning would need to be assessed. A "full" summer session could mix staple, elective, and summer-specific course offerings, affording a menu of enrollment options. The tuition and financial aid model would require serious attention.

Dartmouth College has a widely noted summer term, the "D-Plan," which requires all students to do one summer at Dartmouth, replacing one of the "normal" fall or spring quarters a Dartmouth student would otherwise take. It's a signature feature of the institution, well known to, and cherished by, a half-century of its alumni. It was launched in 1972 when Dartmouth first welcomed women to its undergraduate student body, and had to increase enrollment without major construction. But its initial rationale has long since been surpassed. Setting aside all other considerations, since this SPA report does *not* recommend that Macalester move to Dartmouth's (or anybody else's) ten-week or quarter model, we note that Mac could not fit a full summer *semester* into a May 20th to August 20th span in any year. There's not enough time.

Given the resources necessary to marshal this type of full experience, were Macalester to contemplate a full or near-full summer session, the SPA committee would recommend a partial,

soft, or experimental rollout for one or two summers, building in part off of our experience with Mod 5 in Summer 2021. We would need to ask, as we scale up, what scale of additional services would be required at every step. At what point, for example, would the Max Center, the Hamre Center, or Disability Services need to be involved, even for an initial “light” non-residential offering of fifteen or twenty courses?

In addition to or separate from the other summer ramp-up options described above, the college may explore a “preseason” late-summer sophomore experience. This would bring sophomores back to campus in August, perhaps two or three weeks prior to the start of the year. This could accomplish a number of things ranging from class or cohort building, to providing opportunities to learn about subjects that are normally not able to be directly experienced during the traditional academic year due to weather.

As noted, most of our students miss the opportunity to experience summer in the Twin Cities and the seasonal beauty of the campus. This could correct that and provide a relaxed experience for sophomores as they transition back to college. This might help create connection within the class, as well as to Macalester. In this light, we have heard from parents that the sophomore return to campus is somewhat of a letdown compared to the first-year arrival experience. Providing this opportunity to return early and perhaps play a role in welcoming the incoming class could help to bolster not only the sophomore experience, but first-year arrival too.

The college is already active in August. Typically hundreds of students return to campus between August 10 and 31 to participate in preseason activities in sports, work, and more. The hubbub of first-year student arrival begins in this period too. Adding the starting sophomore class would increase pressure on food service, residential life, student affairs, and other offices, but less than adding a summer session starting in late May. The end of summer timing would also avoid overlap with commencement and alumni reunions. How such a module would be financed is an

open question, as would be the question of whether an initial such module would be optional or required.

We conclude this discussion of a Summer Session by saying this. A summer session of some kind is an intriguing and in many ways appealing possibility for the Strategic Plan's "priority initiative" to "redesign the academic calendar to reimagine our use of time." It could be a difference-maker, at the same time as it would not upset the basic two-semester approach which we advise retaining. At full scale, a summer session would be a very large undertaking involving every academic and administrative unit of the College, and its economic dimensions are unknown. But a "light" and/or sophomore "start-up module," could be rolled out initially in an experimental or limited way for one or two years, drawing in part on our 2021 experience with Mod 5 – thus limiting the risk. Then we could either expand from there (and feature it publicly), or preserve its limited posture, or shutter it as a noble experiment.

7. Reimagining the Time-to-Degree

Macalester's Strategic Plan commits the College to "explore flexibility in time-to-degree [...] potentially allowing for new models like a three-year B.A. [...]." There are many factors to consider in an exploration of a shortened three year timeline. For the purposes of this discussion, we will not consider *transfer* students and [transfer-student credit policy](#). Though important and related to a three-year BA pathway, transfer students are a sufficiently different question (and currently a very small number) as to require separate consideration.

Notably, it's already possible to complete a Macalester B.A. by May of the junior year, under some circumstances, without any changes in Mac policy or tuition. A very recent (late March 2023) EPAG decision has raised the cap on incoming pre-matriculation credits from 20 to 32, and has somewhat broadened the scope of which *type* of credits (AP, IB, community college, PSEO, etc.) can be brought in. We also permit up to 18 credits per semester at no extra charge, which many students complete via arts instruction or ensemble participation, activity courses,

and so forth. A standard-pathway Macalester degree entails $8 \times 16 = 128$ credits. This total can also be achieved via $(6 \times 18) + 20$, or $(6 \times 16) + 32$, hence 128 credits after six semesters at Mac. We don't promote or advertise this option, and vanishingly few students do it – though seven-semester or 7.5 semester graduates using a similar strategy are not rare.

Macalester students may also participate in January or summer programs offered by other accredited institutions, and transfer credits back to Mac, further accelerating time to graduation. If these programs are abroad, they need approval through the separate Study Away process.

A third option would be to mobilize *Macalester* J-term and Summer term credit-bearing educational opportunities, which are currently few in number. Elsewhere in this document, expanded Mac-based Summer and J-term options are discussed. So, for example, if a student were to enter Mac with no prior credits, took a standard four-course load for six semesters, *and* took twelve credits in each of two Mac summers, plus four credits in two Mac J-term sessions, they'd finish in three years. Put another way, $(16 \times 6) + 12 + 12 + 4 + 4 = 128$.

Whether any of the above acceleration options is a *good* idea is a different question. For the most part, problems abound.

Completing a degree in three years by using both intervening summers and potentially two or three Januarys seems to run counter to the “wellness” and “rest” priorities noted elsewhere in the Strategic Plan and in this use-of-time document. One could imagine a student getting to their third May exhausted. Notably, the “Dartmouth model,” which includes a summer academic quarter, swaps the required summer with a regular fall or spring quarter. Thus Dartmouth's summer-inclusive program is not accelerated: it remains four full years.

Separately, and importantly, if a key priority for the Strategic Plan is a “developmental *four*-year experience,” a three-year pathway seems to run counter to that priority. One would also need to

assess the effects of a shorter pathway on class cohesion, and on durable alumni attachment to the College.

An expanded three-year pathway would also have enrollment impacts. That is, raising our current cap on pre-matriculation credits brought to Mac by first-year students seems to suggest that a three-year Macalester degree is achieved by “less Mac.” Were we to promote this without increasing the size of incoming classes, our overall enrollment numbers would decline. If we were to promote acceleration and seek to *keep* overall enrollment at its current level, we would need to enroll more students in every incoming class, which our current dorm infrastructure is not built to accommodate. This would require careful consultations with Admissions. Separately, some Macalester majors have what we might call “four-year spacing,” making it hard to complete some of our degree programs in just three years.

Expanding or promoting a Macalester three-year B.A. pathway would also require us to assess our position in the wider marketplace. At present, we are aware of no comparable schools which feature three-year BA pathways. Some have experimented with this, but have since dropped their initiatives. To the best of our knowledge, the three-year degree market is more typically populated by schools serving adult, non-traditional, and resumed degree seekers, which would mark a substantial change of focus for Macalester.

Indeed, a recent *Inside Higher Higher Ed* [article](#) detailed a meeting of representatives from a dozen colleges keen to explore a three-year pathway. Only one of the twelve schools was anything like a Macalester peer: Georgetown. The other eleven were the American Public University system (a for-profit online-only entity), Brigham Young Idaho, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Merrimack College, New England College, Northwood University, Portland State University, the U of Minnesota Morris, the U of Minnesota Rochester, the U of Wisconsin Oshkosh, and Utica. Notably, according to the *IHE* article, “their proposal [entails] cutting off chunks of credits and building a tightly packaged curriculum with all the essentials. While the

standard bachelor's program is 120 credit hours, their proposals require 90 to 100 credits." To do this, they focus on a major plus GenEds and distributions, and delete most electives. An approach of this kind would transform Macalester and its liberal arts program into a completely different institution.

Lastly, we ask about the effects of a three-year approach on Mac Admissions. When we lose accepted students to other institutions, lowering our yield, we never hear that we have lost enrollment to three-year pathways. Were we to launch a three-year option to attract *new* applicants, we would want to assess whether this launch would suppress our existing four-year-seeking applicant base.

Setting aside Macalester's "internal" motivations for expanding a three-year pathway, we ask about the motivations of students seeking to pursue it. So far as we know, the primary student motivations to complete a BA in three years would be to reduce costs, enter the workplace or graduate school faster, and/or support family by reversing the financial vectors of a school year vs. a work year. These are laudatory aims. Yet it may be that, over the long haul, perhaps a ten-year time horizon, such students would be better served by a four-year than a three-year pathway to degree. We cannot say for certain that this is true for every student, and a ten-year time horizon might be outweighed by more immediate priorities.

Finally, but not least importantly, we would want to assess the educational impact of a three-year pathway to degree. Would Macalester have provided as full and rich an education, both personal and academic development, to our three-year as to our four-year students, under varying models of a three-year pathway to degree? Under most scenarios, the answer would be no. Whether the benefits of a three-year pathway outweigh that educational disadvantage is an important question.

8. Conclusion

SPA has weighed inputs from the academic literature, a survey of institutions outside of Macalester, and the Macalester community to explore how we use our time. Patterns emerging from this analysis provide valuable insights into what is currently working and what modifications we might consider.

- Our community preferences favor existing course times and durations (e.g., needs associated with lecture, discussion, and lab delivery modes; preserving existing community time; and protecting time for extracurricular activities).
- Shifting from our current five-day to a proposed four-day work week would be accompanied by numerous unintended consequences. A shift to a four-day work week for some staff may be beneficial in between semesters.
- The practice of distributing a small number of wellness days (not so many that summer or winter breaks require shortening) throughout each semester reduces the intensity of the academic calendar.
- The advantages of beginning fall semester instruction after Labor Day and aligning fall break with MEA may outweigh disadvantages.
- At the moment it is unclear if sufficient interest exists from both faculty and students to warrant reinstating a month-long J-Term. The College should consider adding one week to this break period (to match its duration prior to 2004), if it is possible to do so without shortening summer or winter breaks.
- Expanding summer offerings could provide benefits such as making better use of the college's physical plant, providing year-round employment opportunities for staff, and

giving students more options to space out coursework. A summer session would be a large undertaking and its economic dimensions are unknown, but worth considering.

- Shortening the time to a B.A. to as few as three years after high school graduation runs counter to the “wellness” and “rest” priorities noted in the Strategic Plan, would potentially disrupt class cohesion, and would disproportionately benefit those who need it least.

Appendix 1

A Mod 5 Microhistory

Macalester began Academic 2020-21 in a high state of uncertainty. The Covid-19 pandemic was rampant worldwide; our Spring 2020 semester had ended remotely ; Fall 2020 dining was grab-and-go; athletics and performing arts were sharply reduced; no vaccine existed; and classes were nearly all Zoom. Campus was mostly first-years. We broke our fall and spring semesters into two modules or “Mods” each, so students took two courses at a time for 7.5 weeks fall and spring, rather than four 15-week courses on Zoom at once.

This gave Mac the possibility to offer an experimental “Mod 5.” It ran from May 19 to July 7, 2021: eight weeks, including a short exam period. Students could take one or two courses. Tuition was [largely free](#), while housing and dining were largely offered at whatever aid-adjusted price the student paid during the year, though many elected to live cheaply off campus. Faculty were sourced in two ways: either full-time faculty could space out their five normal annual courses one-per-mod, or full or part-time faculty could teach a Mod 5 course as an overload for \$9,000. During that extra Mod, 945 different students generated 1,303 course-enrollments across 77 different classes. Average class size was therefore 17. The times were of course unusual – but these are significant numbers.

Memories of Mod 5 from faculty, staff, and students vary widely. Some thought it was wonderful, others disliked it, and most were somewhere in between. It’s impossible to differentiate our retrospective evaluations of Mod 5 from the general stresses of summer 2021, so Mod 5 doesn’t offer firm overall guidance about a future summer session. However, it can provide targeted lessons and perspectives were we to launch a future fuller summer session.

We know from Mod 5 that there would be some appetite for summer Macalester coursework from our students. We also know that there would be some appetite from faculty, properly incentivized, to offer summer courses. Interested faculty might concentrate more heavily among NTT and NTT-Series colleagues, but that is a general observation rather than a fixed distinction.