

Optimizing the Schedule of the Academic Week

a report by the Strategic Planning & Analysis Committee¹

Final version: February 15, 2024

Executive Summary

Macalester's weekly academic schedule has been largely unchanged for more than two decades. That, plus the recent rollout of a campus-wide strategic plan which imagines but does not specify many new initiatives, makes this a good time to revisit our weekly campus schedule. The present report by the Strategic Planning & Analysis committee is based on a Fall 2023 review of other institutions, an extensive all-campus survey, and much consultation and discussion. The weekly schedule shapes and interlocks with nearly every feature of collegiate life, thus adjusting it is tricky. Yet Macalester faculty and students (but mostly not staff) have considerable latitude in arranging their individual schedules.

The present report recommends several meaningful though modest adjustments to our weekly schedule. It also considers and rejects a variety of other options. We have paid particular attention to providing time for more course-based off-campus learning, though we note that the weekly schedule is not the only barrier to enhancing that priority. Overall, we recognize both the importance of the weekly schedule, and its limitations as a general solution.

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¹ SPA membership for Fall 2023: Elected faculty Alan Chapman (Geology), Pete Ferderer (Economics), Wynn Fricke (Theater & Dance), Christie Manning (Environmental Studies), David Moore (Chair of SPA; International Studies and English), and Kari Shepherdson-Scott (Art & Art History). Elected staff Nathan Lief (Facilities), Minerva Muñoz (Institutional Equity), and Katie Reed (Admissions). MCSG-named students Mayande Mamba '26 and Emma Salomon '24. And ex officio members Lisa Anderson-Levy (Provost), Patricia Langer (Administration & Finance), and Bethany Miller (Institutional Research & Assessment).

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Preface

In Fall 2021, Macalester began to develop a strategic plan. That plan, "Imagine, Macalester," was approved by the Board of Trustees and published in October 2022. Work on implementation has continued ever since. One of the plan's nine Priority Initiatives is to "reimagine our use of time." Last Spring (2023) our Strategic Planning & Analysis committee (SPA), a longstanding body that exists separate from the current strategic planning process but is keen to support it, produced a broad report, "Reimagining Time at Macalester," dated June 2023. That report ranged widely, exploring everything from the four-year degree to the length of a single class session. Other bodies connected to strategic plan implementation are currently furthering these discussions at a macro timescale: the length of semesters, the disposition of January and summers, the timing of breaks, and so forth. The present report is focused more narrowly: exclusively on what we call "the shape of the week."

By this we mean primarily the schedule of weekly classes: the start and stop times, assignable course options, no-class blocks, and so forth. Macalester's shape of the week has been almost unchanged since at least 1996, other than a long Tuesday and Thursday mid-day no-class block

that was rolled out in the early 2000s. Thus, even in the absence of a major strategic plan, it would be good to re-examine this long-static subject.

Four broad priorities animate our study.

First, we explore *problems*: what problems are we trying to solve, how do we know they are problems, and can changing the weekly schedule help solve them?

Second, we explore *opportunities*: in light of our current strategic plan, what new opportunities are we seeking to pursue, and can changing the weekly schedule support them?

Third, we explore *tradeoffs and costs*. As our committee examined the existing weekly class schedule, we were astonished at how much non-class activity is built around it, in particular how much of Mac life is scheduled for times that appear un-scheduled. A good example is Tuesday evenings. Currently we offer classes – typically upper-level seminars – on Monday and Wednesday evenings from 7:00 to 10:00, but not on Tuesday or Thursday evenings. So why not add a Tuesday option? That time is free, is it not? As it turns out, our lack of Tuesday classes means that student orgs, arts and athletics activities (both varsity and intramural), and (in the words of one survey respondent) “much of the learning outside of the classroom hosted by staff” schedule Tuesday evenings for their work. Notably, this Tuesday evening dynamic didn’t show up in our survey of faculty, who determine the weekly calendar. But it was evident in survey responses from students and staff.

Another example of a tradeoff or cost emerges when contemplating a fresh college-wide time block devoted to a key priority, like community-linked courses, to serve perhaps 400 students in any semester. The tradeoff and cost of blocking out that time would come in two forms: the need to find new temporal homes for what we used to do in that time, and the inability of our remaining 1700 students to take any class in any set-aside block.

Fourth and finally, we’re aware of *the limitations of time as an independent tool*. Mac’s October 2022 strategic plan speaks of “creating time for reflection, integration of ideas, community connection, and rest.” Though we admire this aim, we note that we can’t actually create time: we can only borrow, shift, and exchange it. And then our behavior, more than a calendar, determines what we do with that time.

Take rest, for example. We can’t, for example, create rest by having the College not-schedule anything on Thursdays from 1-3 pm. We’d have to put what we used to do on Thursdays somewhere else, and we’d likely fill our fresh Thursday void with something other than rest. In truth, you can only rest more if you do less. For students especially, this is often a matter of individual choice. There is no schedule salvation.

Our methodology:

We began the fall semester with a general discussion, a review of the broader-scoped Spring 2023 report, and an examination of the current calendar with Registrar Timothy Traffic. We examined the weekly calendars of 31 other institutions, about half of them private liberal-arts colleges like us, and the other half ranging from large universities to nearby community-serving St. Paul College to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. We then crafted an extensive

survey circulated in versions tailored for faculty, students, and staff. We received 164, 603, and 80 responses respectively to those surveys, which included Likert-scale and open-ended questions. We discussed all of the above at a dozen SPA meetings, and all of us got informal feedback from fellow faculty, students and staff. We then began writing, editing, and revising the current report.

Macalester's current (and longstanding) weekly schedule:

For the past two decades or more, our academic week has been divided primarily as follows:

- seven MWF one-hour class slots, from 8:30 am to 4:30 pm
- four T&Th ninety-minute class slots, from 8:00 am to 4:30 pm: the first of them rarely used
- Monday and Wednesday evening three-hour class slots, 7-10 pm
- Passing time between classes is typically ten minutes
- Science and language labs, studio art classes, and other academic sessions are scheduled in other blocks.

We offer no regular classes at the following times:

- T&Th 11:10 a.m. to 1:20 p.m.
- any day between 4:30 and 7:00 pm, before 8:00 am, or after 10:00 pm
- Saturday or Sunday

Various other smaller but rarely used blocks exist, such as M&W 8:00-9:30 a.m., and M&W 7:00-8:30 p.m. Also, faculty occasionally petition the Registrar and the Educational Policy and Governance committee (or EPAG) for a custom schedule for a given course.

Sixteen questions asked and answered:

1. Who controls Macalester's weekly class schedule?

SPA is an advisory committee, by statute to the President but typically to the entire campus. Thus we can research, propose and advocate, but cannot make changes. The Faculty Handbook answers our question as follows: "The Educational Policy and Governance committee (EPAG) advises the appropriate administrative officer concerning the College calendar and class schedules."

2. Should we hold any classes before 8:00 am or after 10:00 pm?

No. Early discussions of this question on SPA generated no support for such an option.

3. Should we hold any classes on Saturday or Sunday?

No. Early discussions of this question on SPA generated no support for such an option.

4. Should we offer no classes on Fridays, reserving that time for other activities, and/or reducing our general footprint to a four-day week?

No. The “four-day week” question has emerged in recent years in many institutional and workplace contexts outside of higher education. It has proponents as well as detractors. Its appeal varies considerably by industry and type of work. For example, one cannot run a dairy farm, manufacturing plant, or retail store four days per week. Few offices at Macalester could be open just four days per week: not facilities, dining, wellness, athletics, the library, and many more; indeed many of them are open all seven days, and facilities works 24-7-365. But whether every employee in any industry or Macalester area should work on five consecutive days is a separate question. We have no view as to whether (and which) staff at Macalester should work five-day weeks: that question is beyond our purview. We likewise don’t control the teaching schedules of any individual faculty member, most of whom are not in the classroom all five days in any week. And, more broadly, we do not want to become a “four-day campus.”

We recognize that opening time blocks for fresh educational initiatives is a current and worthy priority; on this, see the questions at the end of this report. However, to push all of Macalester’s regular classes for 2,100 students into Monday-to-Thursday would involve sharply more dislocations and compressions than the benefits of a no-class Friday would provide. This is one reason why we didn’t even raise the no-Friday question in our otherwise broad survey.

5. Einstein showed that space and time are linked.² Can’t we solve some of our problems not with schedule adjustments, but by building more classrooms?

For the most part, no. Macalester has a classroom space crunch MWF mid/late morning and afternoons, and T&Th on either side of lunch. But that is primarily because the faculty offers a high fraction of its classes at those hours. Were we to build more classrooms to serve those hours, we’d have even more simultaneous classes at peak hours, reducing student choice. Greater schedule *spread* would increase student choice, and that would not require building more classrooms. Thus we are seeking instead (along with efforts currently underway by others) to offer a wider array of appealing schedulable hours.

We also note a sustainability dimension. Having a large physical plant unused most of the time, and building more to accommodate peak-hour faculty schedule preferences, runs counter to our campus-wide emphasis on sustainability. That said, Macalester may have unmet classroom-space needs for particular types of untypical classes. That question is outside the scope of this study.

6. Should we alter our policy of no regular classes weekdays between 4:30 and 7:00 pm?

For the most part, no. This policy, which dates back at least 25 years, affords our varsity athletics and performing arts programs a dedicated time for their practices and rehearsals.

² “Zur Elektrodynamik bewegter Körper,” in *Annalen Der Physik* 17:891, 1905.

Here, scale is important. In the most recent year, Macalester had 256 fall varsity athletes, and 347 winter and spring varsity athletes. Music had 334 students registered for fall credit-bearing musical ensembles, and 315 in the spring. Theater & Dance had scores more. Nearly all of them rely on the weekday 4:30-7:00 pm availability of their students for practices and rehearsals. Presuming a non-overlap between the participating athletics and arts populations in any semester, this means that about 600, or 30% of all Macalester students (excluding those on study away) in any given semester are involved in athletics or music in the 4:30-7:00 pm window, both fall and winter/spring.

Interestingly, a large school like the University of Michigan, which has on an absolute basis a far larger commitment to athletics and the performing arts, would not wholly block out time for athletics and arts ensembles. Though they have many people in such activities, that population is only a small fraction of their 30,000 undergraduates: not 30%, as with ours.

However – and this is a substantial however – SPA does advocate for late-afternoon schedule blocks *only* for 4th, 5th, or 6th sections of courses with large enrollments. This would include sections of multi-section introductory courses in popular or high-demand areas. Doing this offers five benefits: 1) faculty who might prefer late afternoons would have an additional option; 2) students who might prefer late afternoons would have an additional option; 3) space crunch at peak hours might be slightly alleviated; 4) no faculty or students with late afternoon obligations would be obligated to teach or take such classes, since sections earlier in the day would remain available; and finally 5) students (such as varsity athletes or ensemble musicians) who require classes earlier in the day would benefit, since modest late-afternoon options would take some enrollment pressure off of earlier-in-the-day sections. A solution which makes some better off and no person worse off is termed “Pareto superior.” We believe that this is such a solution.

7. Our Tuesday & Thursday 11:10 am to 1:20 pm no-class block is among the longest no-class blocks at any comparable college. Should we shrink it, in particular using it as a source of time for other daily priorities?

No - but with one small exception.

About twenty years ago Macalester cleared out a long mid-day block on Tuesdays and Thursdays, with no classes to be held during that time. It was the last substantial change to our present calendar. Motivations were multiple. Monthly all-faculty meetings had been held on late afternoons, and attendance was down. A vision of all-campus programming during long open T&Th lunchtime blocks was also discussed, to counter light attendance at things like panels and talks.

Now this time-block is baked into our culture. Our survey asked what faculty, students and staff do during this time, and the answer is essentially “a lot.” As an example, 154 of 159 faculty respondents reported regularly attending meetings during this block, as did 64 of 76 staff respondents. Staff largely don’t have this time “off,” but they rely on the knowledge that faculty and students don’t have course obligations during this time. Among the 576 student surveys, top responses after (of course) “lunch” were coursework (419), relaxation/informal conversation, and “meetings (department, organization, all-college, etc).” Several students noted that they weren’t

even aware that no classes were scheduled at this time. Our long Tuesday & Thursday no-class block is so “full” that almost nobody thinks of it as free. It’s class-free, but much happens at a college in addition to class.

Recognizing that we need this kind of time, our committee discussed whether it has to be *this* particular time. And the answer is, in general, yes, primarily because lunch dovetails well with many types of events, including unstructured time, and time for conversation. If we devoted some *other* block to what we currently do Tuesdays and Thursdays mid-day, we’d have to shift many of the consequently displaced courses into Tuesday-Thursday at lunch. In short, our existing block works.

We would, however, propose one small adjustment. Later in this document we ask whether we should increase passing time between classes from 10 to 15 minutes. We will recommend that we do. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, we’d need 10 minutes to achieve the goal. Those minutes can come from either end of our T&Th no-class block. The block would now run from 11:15 a.m. to 1:15 p.m. For more on that, see below.

8. Should we reduce the amount of time spent in class, to allocate that time to other priorities?

We approach this question with caution, and our response is mixed. This is a multi-part question.

Our survey of 31 other institutions, many of them like Macalester, revealed that our standard class times of three hours per week (whether MWF, T&Th, or once per week) are somewhat longer than that of almost any other school. In some cases this is explained by the other schools offering 3- rather than 4-credit classes, but our classes also run longer than those of several 4-credit schools. Other schools offer 55- or even 50-minute MWF classes, with comparable reductions for 2x-per-week and 1x-per-week classes. Some committee members and survey respondents view this as a signal that we should reduce our time in class; others see this as an advantage or a mark of distinction, since courses and faculty instruction are (or should be) the central focus of any college or university.

We discussed – and a number of survey respondents noted – the widespread belief that federal or accreditation bodies require a certain number of “seat hours” per semester, and that shrinking class time would put our accreditation at risk. As it turns out, this is not the case. Schools may make a case to accreditation bodies to provide alternatives or adjustments to “seat time” that go beyond the standard framing of a course. This already happens, for example, with labs, studios, internships, and other types of classes. A detailed discussion of this question (but without recommendations) was offered in a December 2022 “White Paper on the Credit Hour” by UMN-TC professor Rebecca Ropers, who was a visiting ACE Fellow at Macalester at that time.

Our survey results are of interest. Staff, who are least impacted by this question, were largely neutral on shortening class time. Faculty skewed negatively on this question, but not extremely so. Students had a bimodal distribution: relatively few were neutral, while balanced larger numbers were both in favor and opposed to reducing class time.

The *comments* on the surveys, however, clarified the mixed numerical results. Our survey question asked about “reducing 60-minute classes by 10 minutes, 90-minute classes by 15 minutes, and/or three-hour classes by 30 minutes.” The comments show that both faculty and students overwhelmingly oppose reducing 60-minute classes; the phrasing of their opposition is sometimes intense. Ninety-minute classes elicit more mixed comments: though many defend the 90-minute classes, others seem more open to reducing that block. Finally, three-hour classes (which are typically held from 7-10 pm) are more frequently seen as too long. Attention fades, and the hour grows late. Some students report that these classes often end early; nearly all faculty who teach such classes take a mid-session break. In the light of these divergent views on 60-, 90-, and 180-minute classes, we note that so far as we understand, Macalester is not free to vary the weekly seat-time of courses depending on schedule: that is, for example, we cannot offer the MWF version of a course across 3 hours, but its T&Th version across just 2.5.

Relative scale is also important in considering this question. A Macalester student taking a standard course load is in class 12 hours per week, or about 15 if taking a lab or studio-art class. This means that such students are *not* in class between 153 and 156 hours per week, with wide latitude in how they configure that time. Mac faculty standardly teach a 2-3 load. This puts them in class 6 hours per week in one semester, and 9 in the other, for 28 of the 52 weeks in each year. It’s unclear how this specifically constitutes a heavy workload that requires reduction.

It was not clear to the SPA committee what problem shortened class time would aim to solve, or opportunity it would aim to seize. On the one hand, there’s the possibility that classes are seen as simply “too long,” like a movie that you are itching to leave, or that could have been better delivered in less time. On the other hand, there’s the possibility that class-length unduly reduces the amount of time available for other priorities, consistent with the common sentiment that our lives are too crowded. And yet class time constitutes only a small fraction of any week, for only 28 weeks per year. Our discussions of these questions were inconclusive, and our views on them were mixed.

We are certain that 60-minute classes should not be shortened, and recognize that three-hour classes are broadly seen as long. We are also uncertain whether class-length reduction would pass an all-faculty vote. With these varied observations, we turn the question over to the Educational Policy and Governance Committee.

9. Should we increase passing time between classes from 10 to 15 minutes?

Yes, but exactly how to do this is not yet clear.

Macalester has a small campus, even compared with many other liberal-arts colleges of similar student-body size. What’s more, nearly all of our academic buildings – the relevant buildings when discussing passing time – are close together. In what we might call an “ideal” situation, ten minutes is more than enough time to get from Carnegie 404 to Olin-Rice 350, the two furthest-apart of Macalester’s main classrooms. And many students take back-to-back classes in the same building, or have no classes back-to-back, making ten minutes even more of a non-problem. But these “ideal” situations presume the following for students with back-to-back classes: the first professor ends on time, the student is conventionally abled, the campus walkways are clear of snow and ice, the professor in the first class doesn’t wish to chat with the

student right when class is done, and the student likewise doesn't have a post-class question or quick discussion item for their first professor, nor a pre-class discussion item for their second.

After reviewing survey comments and discussing the question on our committee, we conclude that increasing passing time by five minutes would have broad potential educational benefits. We know that important instruction often occurs informally, one-on-one or one-on-three at the end of any class, and that students who have to hustle off don't benefit from these informal and often bonding moments. We are likewise all familiar with the distracting sound of zipping backpacks with two minutes to go in any class, driven by the students who have to run. We are likewise all familiar with the late-arriving student whose previous class ran over, or the student with insufficient time to press a cognitive reset button as they shift from one subject to another.

We believe that for all these educational reasons, it would be worth increasing passing time from ten to fifteen minutes.

How would we get this done? Given the existing course schedule, there would be different MWF and T&Th solutions. MWF has seven class periods between 8:30 am and 4:30 pm, thus six gaps between classes. Adding five minutes to passing time would thus require an additional half hour each day. If we cannot extend past 4:30 pm, one solution is to start MWF classes a half-hour earlier, at 8:00 am. But MWF 8:30 is already unpopular, and the T&Th 8:00 am class slot is barely used. Another option would be to go from 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., but this would render final-period classes off-limits for the 25-30% of students who participate in artistic ensembles or varsity athletics in any semester. As noted above, we do not believe we should obtain this time by reducing MWF class length from 60 to 55 minutes. We would be keen to explore solutions to this problem with EPAG and the Registrar.

Extending passing time on T&Th is simpler, since there are only two passing times to solve: between the two morning blocks, and the two afternoon blocks. Since very few classes are offered in the current T&Th 8:00-9:30 a.m. block, extending passing time from 10 to 15 minutes would affect only the roughly 2% of Mac students who take a class in both T&Th morning blocks. Many more students take classes in both T&Th afternoon blocks. The five minutes could be gained in both instances by shrinking the T&Th no-class block from its current 11:10 am to 1:20 pm, to 11:15 am to 1:15 pm. This still affords a full two-hour T&Th period with no scheduled classes.

10. Should we schedule a regular (for example, MWF or T-Th) daily “pause,” of perhaps 20-25 minutes, during which nothing is or can be scheduled?

This is an interesting idea with merits, but our overall answer is No.

An interesting result of our review of weekly schedules at 31 other institutions was the presence at four comparable liberal-arts colleges of a short MWF or T&Th unscheduled block devoted to rest, reflection, music, meditation, pause, or prayer. Interestingly, all four colleges are Lutheran: Augsburg, Gustavus Adolphus, Luther and St. Olaf. Though Macalester is less centrally religious than these other four schools, much in the *idea* of time for rest and reflection resonates with priorities in the current strategic plan. This makes such a “pause” worth considering.

Importantly, such a time seems to need to be *short*, for if it were longer, people would fill it with meetings and other forms of work. Also, such a period would need to be a campus cultural commitment to do nothing, or be the opposite of busy. Such a period couldn't be the first or last thing in the day, since that would simply delay arrival or hasten departure from campus. Likewise, to have the desired effect it shouldn't connect to the lunch hour.

Survey responses were mixed on this idea. Faculty were largely indifferent: low numbers both favorable and unfavorable, and most answering "neutral." Students tilted somewhat favorable. Staff tilted quite favorable, but not overwhelmingly so.

Overall, our committee recognizes the interest of such a period, but recommends against it for two main reasons. First, we are unsure whether it would have the desired effects. Without great enthusiasm, centrality to campus culture, or institution-wide commitment, it might become another void to be filled. Many offices and activities might not observe it, or be unable to observe it, such as dining, wellness, athletics, facilities and more. Second and perhaps more important is the tradeoff: Where would 25 minutes three times per week come from? Starting the day earlier, or ending it later? Shortening class times - a question we addressed two questions above? Also, readers will recall that in the immediately preceding question, we recommend extending passing time between classes by five minutes, which itself would "cost" thirty minutes per day on MWF. Since we lack the bandwidth to add both increased passing time *and* a near-daily pause, we recommend the one with guaranteed positive effects: increased passing time.

11. Should we add a Tuesday evening 7-10 block?

This is another interesting idea to which the answer, on balance, is No.

Currently Mac offers three-hour, once-per-week classes on Mondays and Wednesdays from 7-10 pm. These evening classes don't dominate the weekly schedule, but are sufficiently popular to play an important role in our overall lineup of times. So why not then add one more day to those options: Tuesdays from 7-10 pm? This would seem Pareto superior: making some better off (those who prefer to teach or take classes at this time), but harm none, since the time is already "free."

However, our surveys and discussions revealed that the absence of Tuesday (and also Thursday) evening classes means that many clubs, organizations, offices, intramural teams and varied other constituencies schedule activities and events for Tuesday evenings, since they know that nobody has class at that time.

We also observe that the need for an extra evening of classes is low. Faculty who prefer an evening class, and/or teach classes particularly well-suited to that slot, already have two options per week. It is extremely rare for any faculty member to teach *two* such classes in a term. A similar dynamic holds true for students. Survey results echoed this general view: most respondents across faculty, students and staff reported themselves "neutral" on the Tuesday evening question; strong proponents and strong detractors were few in all three sectors. Thus overall, adding a Tuesday evening class block is not a bad idea, but it's not a particularly good idea either: it has meaningful indirect costs, and doesn't meet a significant need.

12. Should we establish one or more additional 90-minute Monday-Wednesday blocks, for example 12:00-1:30 pm, 2:30-4:00 pm, or 3:00-4:30 pm?

This is a good idea, and should be pursued, with details carefully worked out.

At present, Macalester offers seven 60-minute MWF slots, but, in a functional sense, just three 90-minute T&Th slots: 9:40-11:0 am, 1:20-2:50 pm, and 3:00-4:30 pm. (We do offer twice-weekly 90-minute slots T&Th 8:00-9:30 am, MW 8:00-9:30 am, and MW 7:00-8:30 pm, but these slots are barely known and barely used.) Despite the thin availability and usage, faculty and students both report enthusiasm for the twice-weekly 90-minute class format.

Adding such blocks on a Monday & Wednesday basis then seems like a good idea that would be welcomed by both faculty and students. However, these longer MW slots would “interact” with the standard MWF 60-minute classes in complex ways, both in time overlap (taking such a class would necessarily preclude two other class hours from a student’s schedule) and in room assignment. Candidate slots might include MW 12:00-1:30 pm, 2:30-4:00 pm, or 3:00-4:30 pm, or others. We therefore recommend that this idea be pursued, with options and details carefully reviewed with the Registrar and other appropriate staff. We also recommend greater publicity and encouragement for the three existing under-used twice-weekly 90-minute class slots.

Four Questions (and answers) on course-based off-campus learning:

Preface to this section:

A “priority initiative” in the October 2022 Strategic Plan is to “expand the metaphorical boundaries of the campus to include the broader Twin Cities Metro Area as an extension of our living and learning environment.” Thus a major objective of our study has been to see whether schedule adjustments could support that priority initiative.

But before rushing to block out time for increased off-campus learning, we need to know a) whether there is substantial demand for off-campus linked courses, b) what sorts of places faculty and students would find of interest, c) what are the current *barriers* to greater off-campus linked courses, and d) whether schedule innovations could play a role in removing such barriers. After all, there would be no point in blocking out large chunks of time if interest in such time were small, or if time itself were not among the barriers to increasing off-campus linked classes. Hence we break down this topic into the four questions (and answers) below.

13. Is there substantial interest in more course-based off-campus learning?

Yes. The student survey asked “How interested might you be in an increased availability of classes that involve visits to off-campus locations?” Of 547 responses to this question, 306 replied “very interested” or “extremely interested,” against just 33 who replied “not interested at all.” (“Slightly interested” and “Moderately interested” received 90 and 118 votes respectively.) Faculty were somewhat cooler on the prospect, with roughly even numbers answering Slightly, Moderately, Very, and Extremely Interested. But just ten percent of faculty answered “Not

interested at all.” The bottom line is that substantial interest exists among both faculty and students.

14. What sorts of places are students and faculty interested in for course-based off-campus learning?

In brief, a vast and dizzying array of places. Policymakers, senior leadership, and all those involved in strategizing and facilitating increased off-campus learning should request from us a “scrubbed” compendium of all the survey answers we received from both faculty and students to this question. It is a rich trove of existing current data. Notably, faculty responses were often very specific: Mill City Museum, Dodge Nature Center, Minnesota History Center, Mercado Central, a specific local tech conference, and scores more. Student responses were more often heartfelt and diffuse: “people doing things that we’re learning about in class,” “archives,” “businesses,” “labs or other spaces at other universities,” “an art museum,” “live performances,” and most succinctly “anywhere.” It’s understandable that faculty would be specific, and students diffuse: faculty are more mobile, and have typically been in the Twin Cities years if not decades longer than our students.

The great majority (but not the totality) of places described by both constituencies are within 30 minutes of our campus if reached by direct van or non-public transportation – but longer if reached by bus or light rail. A good fraction are ecological and geological in nature: domains with which our faculty in those fields are already quite familiar. Another good fraction describe cultural events typically held on nights or weekends, thus not addressable via adjustments to the standard class schedule.

But, in short, the range of faculty and student interests here is vast, and greatly exceeds the existing Macalester presence in course-based off-campus learning. In addition, both faculty and students describe myriad benefits or potential benefits of such courses.

15. What are the current barriers to more course-based off-campus learning?

Primarily time and money. Linked to that, transportation. Also ideas and logistics.

Faculty, students and staff agree on the current barriers to more course-based off-campus learning. The barriers are significant, and copiously reported in our survey. Time and money dominate the list, and both time and money connect to transportation. Faster transportation is typically dedicated, private, costly, and hard to arrange. Current pool-van seating limits are low, qualified drivers enrolled in any class are few, and large-capacity school buses are hard to find before 9am or after 2pm. Budgeting is tricky and, for many, opaque, especially if one adds destination costs like theater or performance tickets. Students regularly have schedule conflicts for longer trips.

Interestingly, in our survey, just 21 of 576 students, 11 of 159 faculty, and 2 of 76 course-facing staff reported using the long Tuesday-Thursday lunch block for course-related field trips, even though that block could be combined with the class period immediately before or after. Also interestingly, just 20 of 152 faculty report that it is “extremely” or “very” disruptive “to have

students absent due to field trips for other courses.” Likewise, just 61 of 517 students report that it is “extremely” or “very” disruptive “to participate in classes with off-campus components.” This may flow from both the limited number of courses that currently go off-campus, and the care instructors take to limit the collateral schedule effects on their students.

The present report does not aim to clarify or resolve all of the barriers to increased off-campus-linked courses. Our focus is on the schedule for the academic week. Thus, as we noted in a related context above, policymakers, senior leadership, and all those involved in strategizing and facilitating off-campus learning should request from us a “scrubbed” compendium of all the survey answers we received from faculty, students and staff to our question about general barriers to off-campus study. It is a rich trove of already-gathered, objective, high-N data.

Macalester is distinctively positioned to offer robust access to the Twin Cities’ countless off-campus learning opportunities, consistent with a priority initiative of our strategic plan. Thus we strongly recommend that funding structures, transportation solutions, logistics assistance, and faculty support – all of which are beyond the scope of this report on the weekly schedule – be put in place.

16. Can we support more course-based off-campus learning via the weekly schedule?

Yes. We can’t remove all barriers, but some schedule adjustments will help.

In our survey, and in our own deliberations, we asked whether an all-college “set-aside” block should be provisioned for off-campus learning. We polled specifically on blocking out Wednesday or Friday afternoons for this purpose, but didn’t rule out other options. We recommend *against* doing this, for three main reasons. The first is that off-campus linked classes will have varying needs for extended time. If we block out (for example) Wednesday afternoons college-wide, this does not help courses whose off-campus activity is unsuited for that window. The second reason is that if we concentrate all our transportation needs into one weekly window, we’ll create a problem we cannot solve. Faculty currently have trouble arranging and paying for vans or other transportation for a single class. Now imagine if we had 20 classes totalling 400 students all needing transportation on the same afternoon each week. The third reason not to block out a single time each week are the knock-on effects. Again staying with our Wednesday afternoon example, if that block serves, optimistically, 400 students in any semester, this leaves Macalester’s other 1600 on-campus students unable to schedule a class at that appealing hour. The fully blocked Wednesday afternoon also squeezes all other classes into a reduced set of available times.

Instead, we recommend that EPAG, the Registrar, and other relevant parties collaborate to create a list of 4-6 “class time plus long block” options, similar in ways to the blocks now used by lab-science and studio art classes, from which faculty teaching off-campus linked courses could select. At present, there is a little-known and little-used mechanism by which courses with atypical schedule needs may petition EPAG and the Registrar for a *custom* alternative course time. Though this mechanism has been helpful, it would be too time-consuming, cumbersome, and administratively disruptive to roll out at scale. One could begin by examining current lab-science and studio art options, using them as templates for further schedule innovation.

Students taking such classes would necessarily limit their options for their other three courses in a semester, but this is always the case with any schedule choice. We recommend that faculty and course-facing staff with existing experience in crafting off-campus linked courses be tapped for their expertise. We would expect that an initial rollout of options might be adjusted after greater experience with the options is obtained.

We believe that such an approach will meaningfully help Macalester increase its offerings of off-campus linked coursework, though it will not remove every barrier that currently exists.

With that note, we conclude this report.