

March 03, 2023

Proposal in Support of a Resolution on Graded Academic Coursework During Scheduled Breaks

Purpose of the Resolution

The proposed resolution is intended to supersede a Sense of the Senate [Academic Work During Scheduled Breaks Resolution](#) that the Faculty Senate passed in 2011. That resolution sought to limit academic work over scheduled breaks by “strongly discouraging” faculty from “necessitat[ing] academic work over scheduled breaks.” The proposed resolution would formalize, strengthen, and provide more specificity to the 2011 version. Since 2011, students have sought these enhancements, some finding that their scheduled breaks are not actually breaks, and as part of a 2019 review of student mental health, external reviewers recommended “adherence” to the resolution as an “immediate” measure to reduce unhealthy academic stress. The sponsors of this resolution believe it is critical to heed this recommendation and ensure that students have the respite they desire and need.

Background

The 2011 Resolution was Aimed at Addressing Concerns About Student Wellbeing

The 2011 Sense of the Senate [Academic Work During Scheduled Breaks Resolution](#) notes that “student workloads have become an increasing cause of concern in relation to student mental health and stress . . .” and that “short breaks from academic requirements are intentionally included in the academic calendar to provide rest, respite and a break from schoolwork.” The resolution also notes that “while students are always expected to be prepared for class . . . [they] should be given sufficient time to carry out assignments and prepare for classes without being required to devote their breaks to such preparation.”

The 2011 Resolution Provides Recommendations Only

The 2011 resolution does not constitute Faculty Senate legislation; rather, a Sense of the Senate resolution serves as a means for the Faculty Senate “to communicate its sentiment.”¹ Moreover, not only does the [Academic Work During Scheduled Breaks Resolution](#) lack binding authority by virtue of its form, but it also lacks authority by virtue of its content. It does not contain a prohibition; rather, it “strongly discourage[es]” faculty from “framing assignments in such a way that necessitates academic work over Fall Break, Thanksgiving Break, February Break, or Spring Break”

The 2011 resolution seeks to discourage faculty from assigning coursework over break by regularly bringing this issue to the fore, tasking the Dean of Faculty with “remind[ing] the

¹ See the [Faculty Senate description of a Sense of the Senate resolution](#).

faculty in the beginning of the semester reminder not to frame assignments that necessitate academic work over scheduled breaks.”

Student Complaints of Work Over Break and Their Efforts to Strengthen and Enforce the 2011 Sense of the Senate Resolution

Despite these regular reminders, presumably, due to the resolution’s discretionary nature, lack of particularity, and/or differing interpretations about what, if any, work over break is appropriate, since its passage, in different forms, students have complained about work over scheduled breaks. In 2016, the Student Assembly (S.A.) sought to put teeth into the Sense of the Senate resolution by passing a [Reducing Academic Work Assigned Over Break Resolution](#), which the Faculty Senate did not take up. According to the [S.A. resolution](#), the S.A. “created and distributed a survey to determine the scope of work being given over break and found over forty-five credible examples [i.e., forty-five courses] of work being given to students in six of the seven undergraduate colleges”²

The [S.A. resolution](#) requested that (1) “members of the faculty abide by the 2011 Faculty Senate resolution and refrain from assigning work to students over academic breaks,” (2) “the Faculty Senate adopt and enforce stronger language in the faculty handbook against assigning work over break,” and (3) “the Faculty Senate establish an ongoing reporting system for faculty members who violate this policy, and that this reporting system be housed within the Office of the Dean of Faculty.” There is no record that the Faculty Senate took up or responded to this resolution.

On March 1, 2022, the Cornell Daily Sun featured an article titled [First-Years Question If Workloads Allowed for a February Break at All](#). According to the student author, “first-years experiencing the break for the first time found it overtaken by a large workload.” Several students interviewed for the article indicated that they had work to do, or even due, during break, causing them stress and negating the break, in whole or in part. One student interviewed for the article said: “It’s always nice to catch up, eat good food and be back at home . . . [h]owever, with homework due on Sunday and Monday and prelims next week, it made it really difficult to truly feel that this was a break.” Another student stated: “The amount of work assigned confuses me Why is it called a break when there are assignments due?” And another student noted:

The University’s current policy . . . strongly discourages instructors from posting assignments for completion over break periods, but it does not prohibit assignments entirely. This stance puts assigning work over break under the complete jurisdiction of course instructors, who abide by the University’s wishes to varying degrees.

² The resolution did not specify the number of students surveyed, the nature or amount of the “work” over break, or the circumstances of the assignments.

The Mental Health Review Report Recommendation for “Adherence” to the 2011 Resolution

In recent years, even preceding the pandemic, the number of students who reported significant and sometimes debilitating stress has increased to a worrying degree, prompting the university in 2019 to undertake a comprehensive review of student mental health. The review included an external review team. This team worked with an internal Mental Health Review Committee; conducted a site visit; consulted widely with students, faculty, staff, and college and university leaders; reviewed Cornell data; and administered a survey to students, faculty, staff, parents, and alumni. In April 2020, the external reviewers issued a [Final Report](#) delineating the mental health challenges faced by Cornell students and containing a detailed set of recommendations.

The [Final Report](#) noted that at Cornell, as is true nationwide, the number of students reporting excessive stress has increased significantly in recent years, compromising both students’ mental and physical health and their academic wellbeing. The [Final Report](#) offered specific policy recommendations for improving the academic environment at Cornell so as to reduce unhealthy academic stress. For each recommendation, the external reviewers suggested a timeframe for implementation: immediate (goals that will likely require limited time and resources), intermediate (goals that may take a year or more to achieve), or aspirational (goals that involve a significant investment of staff time and financial resources or long-term culture shift) ([Final Report](#), page 10). One of the policy recommendations is “adherence to Faculty Senate Resolution 85: Academic Work During Scheduled Breaks”; the recommended timeframe is immediate. ([Final Report](#), page 14).

A Formal Policy That Clearly Delineates Limits is Warranted

Despite the 2011 resolution, students lament that they are required to do work during scheduled breaks to an extent that impedes their ability to have needed rest during their breaks. The sponsors of the present resolution believe this is deleterious to student well-being. As previously mentioned, the 2011 resolution expressed a concern with student mental health and stress. In 2023, the problem of unproductive student stress is more acute; as the Mental Health Review [Final Report](#) made clear, unhealthy academic stress has increased to an alarming degree. The sponsors believe that the degree to which excessive academic stress encumbers Cornell undergraduate students needs now to be addressed and can be addressed through actions, such as this resolution, that do not compromise the rigor of a Cornell education.

The sponsors agree with the recommendation in the Mental Health Review [Final Report](#) for immediate action to ensure “adherence” to the Sense of the Senate resolution. It is unclear how many faculty do not voluntarily adhere to the resolution by assigning academic work over break. If the number is small, not many will be impacted by the proposed resolution, whereas any students who are currently overly burdened will find relief. If the number is large, the need to foster adherence is that much greater.

The sponsors believe that to achieve this goal, it is necessary to revise the resolution in form and in content. Regarding form, the sponsors ask the Faculty Senate to replace the 2011 Sense

of the Senate resolution with a formal resolution. Regarding content, the sponsors propose converting what is now a recommendation to a proscription and delineating precisely what students may be expected to do during scheduled breaks (currently Fall Break, Thanksgiving Break, February Break, and Spring Break), thereby clarifying and harmonizing expectations across faculties and students.

The sponsors do not propose any sort of reporting system for noncompliance as the Student Assembly had advocated. We are optimistic that with a policy that is binding as opposed to discretionary, provides specific guidance as to what is permissible and what is not, and is designed to promote student well-being, faculty would adhere to the new academic policy. Student concerns should be addressed through the customary channels in which departments and colleges/schools handle similar university academic policy matters.

Accordingly, the sponsors advocate adoption of the accompanying **Resolution on Graded Academic Coursework During Scheduled Breaks**.