



# — the — PRESIDENT'S PAGE

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## #MAKEaBREAK

Comprehending the gravity of a fall break:  
Siobhan discusses how student input is needed to move forward



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Throughout my time at McMaster, I have constantly heard students talk about the intensity of the fall semester regarding both the work load and the lack of time to reflect or catch up on work. When I ran for MSU President, one of my major goals was to elevate the conversation of this issue to one of the highest priorities of the MSU. I have done just that, spending considerable time on this since taking office. A fall break of some kind is now an issue that is on the radar of University administration, with people interested in exploring this topic more thoroughly with students. This is why we need you to fill out the #MAKEaBREAK survey, located at [www.msumcmaster.ca/fallbreak](http://www.msumcmaster.ca/fallbreak). This is the first time that we have formally reached out to students to ask what they would like to see and we want

all of the feedback that we can get in order to ensure that we are getting the most holistic perspective possible. Have your voice heard and help us bring your opinion to the appropriate decision making tables.

### Challenges and Barriers

Some of the challenges related to achieving a break in the Autumn term that differ from the Spring term is that the fall term happens to take place between two major holidays; Labour Day and the Holiday break in December. That only leaves the days in between to fit in months of teaching, followed by examinations. In addition, physical space for examinations and a large number of exams put additional pressure on trying to find more time in the fall term. There are also a number of accredited programs (Engineering, Commerce, etc.) that each has unique needs that must be addressed. Moreover, there must be further exploration of first year students' needs and details on their transition to university. As you can understand, these are some big challenges and barriers to achieving a break in the fall term. However, we have begun a dialogue with the University and at

this stage we are assessing our options.

### Reality Check

There are some questions surrounding what the fall break will look like, or could entail. Realistically, we can achieve something small (a day or two) for next year, but we will need to engage in a more detailed, campus-wide conversation before defining a long-term objective. In order to define a long term goal, it must be the right design for the entire student body and cognizant of the unique concerns based in different sectors on campus.

### Forward with Integrity: Our Chance to Think BIG About Change

This is also an opportunity to examine what is going to create the greatest amount of student success. McMaster President Dr. Patrick Deane has started an interesting dialogue on campus with his letter *Forward with Integrity* that aims to improve the undergraduate experience. My interpretation is that we need to not only look at what we do well, but also what we need to do differently. In the paper written by the Forward with Integrity: Student Experience Taskforce, there was a large amount of discussion surrounding the concept of a reflective week, where there would be optional programming available for students to attend. Some of this programming would include volunteerism and experiential opportunities in the community. A reflective week such as the one described herein could be what becomes a fall break at McMaster. So, even though there are challenges associated with trying to implement a break in the fall term, I think it is possible with creative solutions. However, student feedback in this matter is essential.

One of the larger questions that we should discuss is the possibility of offering different modes of evaluating learning, which would reduce the duration of the traditional exam schedule. A central tenet of *Forward with Integrity* is to explore academic flexibility and creativity in the classroom as a means of developing educational quality. The MSU has always stood by the principle that students at McMaster should receive the very highest quality education. By encouraging instructors to opt for alternative ways of testing academic progress, a new educational paradigm could be established that could be

more conducive to a fall break. This would be a long term but sustainable solution to establishing a week-long break in the fall semester.

Another option is increasing the amount of physical space in which to write exams, and/or perhaps administering exams on Sundays. Both options could shorten the exam period and increase the time to add a fall break. Students with religious requirements could be granted alternative accommodations for a Sunday exam, no different from what currently takes places during our exam cycles when a religious or cultural obligation and an exam overlap. Or perhaps an option could include developing a more secure system to enable writing examinations in classrooms, creating more flexibility in the schedule.

Other institutions such as Ryerson University and the University of Ottawa currently have longer breaks in the fall term and these were the types of changes that took place. They also took years to establish. I think we can establish something short for next year and continue to have further dialogue on a longer break.

### The MSU and You

The MSU is committed to ensuring that appropriate conversations will happen with the groups that need particular attention with regards to establishing a fall break. We are looking at all of the options. But for the MSU to move forward we need to understand what students want a fall break to look like. For immediate gratification, we can have one to two days without much impact, but if students want a full week in the fall we need to have a serious talk and likely make some sacrifices. You need to let us know what is acceptable to you.

I need to understand what people are looking for in order to be able to present the perspectives of students with regards to establishing a break in the fall term. So while you can fill out the survey at [msumcmaster.ca/fallbreak](http://msumcmaster.ca/fallbreak), you can also join us for an online chat on **Thursday, November 15** from 3:30-5:00pm via the MSU website. In addition, we will be holding a focus group discussion on **Tuesday, November 13** in MUSC 220 from 2:30-3:30pm. Please attend and have your opinion heard. Finally, feel free to email me personally with your thoughts at [president@msu.mcmaster.ca](mailto:president@msu.mcmaster.ca). Let's #MakeaBreak!

NOMINATE YOUR PROFESSORS  
& TEACHING ASSISTANTS



NOV. 5<sup>TH</sup> - 16<sup>TH</sup>

MAKE YOUR NOMINATIONS AT  
[msumcmaster.ca/tac](http://msumcmaster.ca/tac)



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