

# **Report of the Ad Hoc Committee to Evaluate the January Term**

**Submitted to the Committee on Educational Policy and the Committee of Six**

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## SECTION 1: THE COMMITTEE'S CHARGE, ACTIVITIES, AND A SUMMARY

In response to the curricular dislocations caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the College offered condensed, full-credit courses in January 2021 and 2022. These intensive terms were conceived of as transitory measures and were introduced without sustained consideration and discussion by the faculty as a whole. On December 8, 2021, 18 faculty members signed a letter requesting a faculty discussion of January Term's future (Appendix 1A). The Committee of Six thereupon drafted a charge for the **Ad Hoc Committee to Evaluate the January Term** (Appendix 1B). Committee membership was finalized in late February and it convened soon thereafter, dividing its work into **three main areas: Pedagogy, Campus and Student Logistics, Resources and Finances**. The Ad Hoc Committee to Evaluate the January Term<sup>1</sup> worked swiftly in March and April to complete the expansive charge, by meeting with or consulting nearly every campus constituency or major office, and by soliciting feedback from all faculty, staff, and students in an online survey in April (see Section 5). The Committee was asked to present its findings to the Committee on Educational Policy by May 1, which would then offer its response to the Committee of Six for the possibility of bringing forward a motion at the faculty meeting of May 26, 2022.

### Summary

While we have completed the charge to the best of our abilities, **at this time we offer no recommendation about whether the faculty should vote to adopt J-Term as a regular part of the College's calendar**. The J-Comm believes that there is real potential for J-Term both to enhance the curriculum and also to address urgent issues affecting our students. Yet whatever "good" a J-Term can offer and whatever problems it might solve should be weighed against the potentially enormous costs to staff, against the logistical complexities, and against the need to resolve the attendant policy questions. Any vision for J-Term should be sufficiently compelling to warrant the potential resource costs. **We believe that faculty discussion of J-Term is called for, but a proposal must first address its effects on campus staff**. We trust that the framing of such deliberations will be ably undertaken by the Committee on Educational Policy and the Committee of Six. We hope this report will illuminate both the exciting opportunities that J-Term could entail as well as the logistical and policy questions the college would need to resolve before addition of a J-Term.

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter the committee's name will generally be abbreviated as "J-Comm" and the January Term as "J-Term" except where such uses might cause confusion.

## SECTION 2: KEY TAKEAWAYS CONCERNING J-TERM

J-Comm has identified several key takeaways concerning J-Term that bear on any future possibility of incorporating it into the regular calendar.

- A) **Students who took J-term courses are enthusiastic** about continuing J-term. They are eager to see opportunities for J-Term instruction, although their reasons are broad-ranging, and many students are uncertain about what these opportunities might specifically entail. This points perhaps to a chicken and egg problem: it is hard to know what J-Term in the future will be until it has already been put into place in some form. Nevertheless, overall it would seem that student enthusiasm is high.
- B) **The faculty is divided about J-Term.** In particular, the issues that have surfaced involve quite contrary views about the effectiveness of J-Term teaching, its effect on students, and its potential to detract from free time and research time. Faculty who taught classes during the past J-terms are largely enthusiastic. **Some who taught in J-Term believe it was among the best teaching experiences of their careers.**
- C) **Staff are generally unenthusiastic about J-Term, if not outright opposed to it, especially in the recent iterations.** While they acknowledged the potential benefits for student flexibility and innovative instruction, the additional workload during a time of the year that was already busy due to supporting the transition between semesters is a significant burden. Unlike students or faculty, many staff found that J-Term's potential benefits came at their cost, and they expressed frustration at not having autonomy in determining how and in what ways to support it. This is also a widespread concern and is not isolated to J-Term, even if it was more acutely felt during J-Term.

In addition there are several main conceptual points about planning or instituting a J-Term that should be recognized.

- A) It is hard to determine if J-Term will fail or succeed without being able to run J-Term in more ideal conditions. The two previous iterations cannot be taken as accurate reflections for how it might succeed, much less for how it should be run. Thus, the committee recognizes the directive from the Committee of Six that "The experiences of students, faculty, and staff during the January terms offered in 2021 and 2022 should be used as an important measure of the benefits and

limitations of January term,” but ultimately we believe that such a directive fails to account for the special circumstances of the pandemic, and that any measures are skewed by (hopefully) fleeting circumstances. **If J-Term will take place in the future, it must be thought of in terms of what that future will look like: past iterations are not appropriate models for designing J-Term.** Previous iterations did importantly disclose logistical problems that are likely to recur if not managed appropriately in the future, especially in terms of staff time and planning.

- B) These two iterations also revealed the pedagogical success and failures of certain types of instruction. Some faculty and students reported both high levels of satisfaction and also identified, sometimes in great detail, the positive results in the learning process that corroborate that sense of satisfaction. Other faculty reported considerable difficulties, as did some students, often in subjects that tended to be especially intensive during the regular semester and/or more information driven, or in courses not designed specifically for the online format. Some faculty also reported that courses were too compressed and may not have covered sufficient material for the aims of their course. As noted in the Survey Data (Section 5), faculty and students involved in J-Term programming were overall more positive than those who had not been.
- C) A key problem in understanding J-Term can be termed “COVID Conflation.” It is virtually impossible to distinguish the effects of J-Term from the effects of COVID-19 and the intellectual and psychological exhaustion of the past two years. As one staff member pointedly remarked, they were so exhausted and so frustrated that it was almost impossible to fairly assess or even imagine how J-term might actually be different, even in different circumstances. The only reality (for them) was that it was yet another problem area in an incredibly difficult period for staff members. We may all need time to reckon with the trauma.
- D) There are no simple solutions to the question of what a J-Term should look like and how best to account for all the competing demands. In some sense this could be termed the “Whack-A-Mole” problem: one seemingly simple solution could cause another unforeseen problem. For example, instituting only half-credit courses rather than full-credit courses in no way resolves the problems of significant student presence on campus, still relies heavily on ADC and instructional staff time, still taxes the registrar, and also removes the significant advantage for some students and faculty of course flexibility; it may even lead to a staffing crisis for courses, were there to be expectations that several half-credit courses be staffed without considering the effects on the curricular ecosystem.
- E) J-term courses affect many constituents at the College and have complicated requirements for support that affect staff throughout the college. However, adding J-term might also affect those not participating – for example, squeezing

in a term between fall and spring semesters is likely to affect the academic calendar by having to start earlier than Labor day and/or finishing nearly in June. Offering some courses only in J-term might change the distribution of departmental offerings in fall and spring.

### **Coda: J-Term or J-Moratorium**

A final takeaway has also emerged from our deliberations. If a suitable version of J-Term cannot be adopted that addresses the concerns laid out in our report, then no organized curricular programming should be offered and the winter period should contain a moratorium on any but the most essential activities. While we understand that there will always be winter athletes, students in labs or doing honors work, and some other number of students present on campus due to exigent circumstances, an explicit minimization of organized activity, along with the explicit protection of staff time, are the best alternative to a formalized J-Term. To mount non-credit programming that draws heavily on staff time in unregulated ways will have disastrous consequences for staff and their morale. It is clear that Interterm was generally not successful despite the best efforts of those running the programming and there is little if any interest in returning to such a model (unless it too is completely redesigned). If J-Term cannot be mounted in a way that fulfills specific pedagogical and personal aims, if it cannot enhance the curriculum in demonstrable ways, if it fails to foreground the needs of staff, then it is better to explicitly choose no programming at all.

## **SECTION 3: SUMMARY OF PREVIOUS JANUARY PROGRAMS: INTERTERM AND J-TERM 2021 & 2022**

There are in essence two versions of previous programming during the month of January: the online J-Term in place during the pandemic in 2021 and 2022 and the Interterm that preceded it up through 2020. Because these are fundamentally different in nature, they are addressed here separately and referred to as Interterm (2020 and years prior) and J-Term (2021 and 2022).

### **Interterm (2020 and earlier)**

Interterm programming was a regular feature of Amherst College up through January 2020. It consisted of non-credit opportunities for students and staff to learn beyond their formal studies. Informal classes ranged from “Thai Cooking” to “Financial Bootcamps,” offered by alumni and other instructors who wanted to provide Amherst students with some of the background needed for careers in various areas, including banking and finance. Several staff members also taught a range of courses in Interterm. It was managed by the Office of Student Affairs. Considerable programming was provided by

the Center for Community Engagement, which produced an interim report on Interterm in 2019 (Appendix 2A). The 2018-2019 Course Catalog states that:

The January Interterm is a three-week period between semesters free from the formal structures of regular classes, grades, and academic credit. It is, in essence, a time when each student may undertake independent study in a subject or area to which they might not have access during the normal course of the year.

Interterm provided several opportunities for students and allowed many of them to be on campus without much structure. It has been observed that this did not create ideal conditions for student behavior or well-being, nor did it provide an oasis for students needing a place to live safely over the break between the fall and spring semesters. Ultimately, interest in Interterm waned, despite efforts to sustain the programming.

One aspect of our examination into J-term is clear: the previous Interterm program was no Golden Age, and any residual nostalgia for it may simply be a fabrication of the pandemic's collective trauma. Whether we adopt a more comprehensive J-term is a matter of inquiry and debate, but the Siren Song of Interterm is best left unheard. Like Orpheus emerging with Eurydice into a hopeful future, looking back will not serve us well.

### **J-Term 2021 and 2022**

The college adopted the proposal of the Ad Hoc Faculty Committee on Academic Structures During COVID-19, which recommended that for the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 academic years, the college adopt a J-Term of four weeks, in which students would have the option of completing a single full course for credit. Faculty who taught over J-Term could have such a course count as one of their four regularly-taught courses. Students could take a J-Term course and three courses as their regular course load during the fall and spring semesters of the 2020-2021 academic year. In 2021-2022 students could take a J-Term course in order to reduce a spring term load to 3 courses, but were not required to do so. These recommendations were designed both to alleviate pressure on faculty and students and to spread out the load of instruction and learning in a (mostly) online environment as well as to promote curricular revision and innovation. In 2021, 813 students took 52 courses. In 2022, 567 students took 34 courses. (Section 5 offers in-depth assessment of the survey data collected about the 2021 and 2022 J-Terms).

## SECTION 4: RESPONSES FROM FACULTY

J-Comm surveyed faculty in several different ways. An on-line survey was sent to all faculty members and had a high response rate (see Section 5). The Committee also sent a letter to all department and program chairs asking that they consult with their members and provide written feedback for the committee to discuss at the meeting with department chairs on April 1. Faculty have expressed a wide range of views about J-Term.

Faculty who expressed enthusiasm for the J-Term courses they taught noted:

1. Students regularly attended class, completed their assignments, and were engaged because they were not distracted by other obligations. Intensive learning also created community among faculty and students. Many faculty reported—including some bearing data—that students expressed greater satisfaction with J-Term courses than in regular versions of them during the semester.
2. J-Term enabled students to access more courses across the curriculum than they otherwise would because of scheduling, lack of space in courses, and the need to fulfill major, program, or pre-med requirements during the semester.
3. Students who needed to make up for a course deficiency could do so at less expense, more convenience and with greater continuity than by taking courses elsewhere.
4. J-Term classes provided welcome relief to students who wanted to take only three courses during a regular semester due to heavy athletic or extracurricular commitments, unusually time-consuming courses, family crises, or physical and/or mental health challenges.
5. J-Term provides an opportunity for intensive, specialized classes and courses with a community engagement, study abroad, and archival research components.
6. A space in the teaching calendar dedicated to the continued development of courses in different modalities benefits all faculty by maintaining a core group of instructors who can share their experiences. It also is a signal opportunity to advance curricular design at a time when faculty members can focus on these innovations without the countless distractions of the regular semester.
7. Faculty could spread their teaching across the semester, thus improving the quality of instruction by allowing them to focus on one course at a time. For some faculty the time lost during J-Term was more than made up for by the

ability to focus better during the spring semester as well. Some faculty even reported that J-Term was intensive and yet relaxing because of this intensity, as opposed to the slow drip of exhaustion that emanates from the spring term. Faculty with large administrative loads also acutely felt how important the J-Term was for completing their duties.

The major concerns faculty noted were:

1. Concerns about overburdening the staff in general and the ADCs in particular and a general concern about the infrastructure to support J-Term courses.
2. J-Term may not provide students and faculty with a sufficient break before the spring semester, increasing stress and fatigue. However, pushing the spring semester back could interfere with activities students and faculty have planned for the summer. Many faculty regard both January and the summer as time that should be devoted to research and/or to personal needs and the presence of J-Term is seen as a threat to that expectation.
3. Some faculty members were concerned that the J-Term might eventually come with the expectation that administrative or committee work could or should be conducted at this time, or that the institution of a J-Term might lead to calls for a summer term.
4. J-term courses end up being more truncated than full semester courses which raises questions about accreditation and equivalence across courses.
5. Some departments do not find the J-Term format conducive to many of the courses they teach. The difficulty of these compressed courses was most acutely felt in courses that develop several new complex concepts and convey large amounts of information. In particular many faculty from STEM fields and instructors of introductory language courses expressed great concern.
6. J-Term may contribute to grade inflation or may be used unwisely by students who are either trying to overachieve, are not ready to make up deficits with extra courses, or do not understand the implications of taking a J-Term course on their wellbeing in the spring term.
7. Some faculty are worried they will be obligated to teach in J-Term. Some are worried that the presence of J-Term will force them to offer certain types of independent study or honors credit that they do not want to offer.
8. Senior honors students who take these courses may spend less time working on their theses during J-Term or may seek honors thesis credit during the J-Term, whereas they previously would have taken that credit in one of the other terms.

There was similarly a range of opinions on whether departments wanted to offer half-credit courses or see them offered during J-Term. While some departments found this



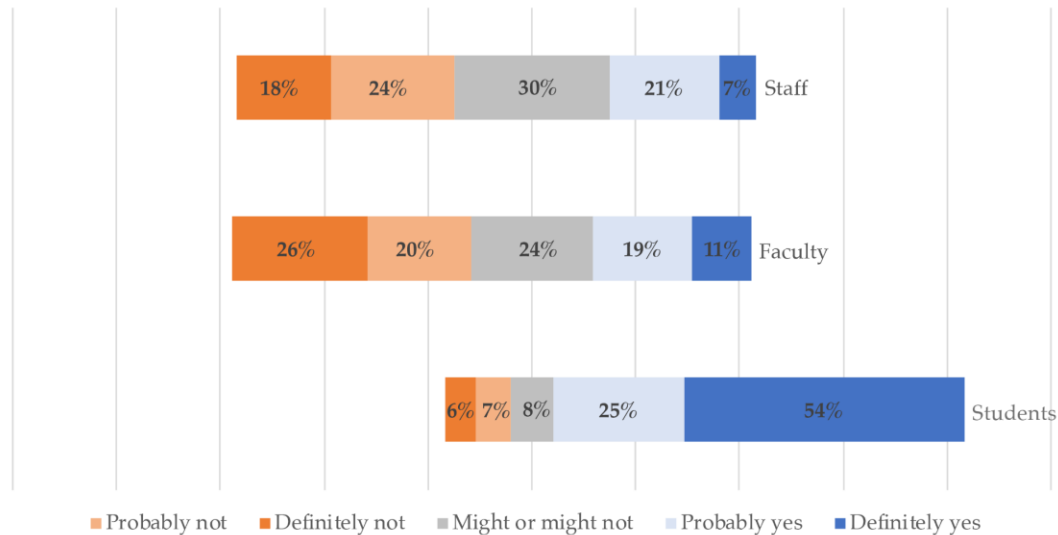
an exciting opportunity to expand their curricular offerings, others did not think these courses could count towards the major. In certain areas, especially in the Arts, half-credit courses were seen as an essential and valuable opportunity to offer crucial courses to students who might not otherwise be able to take these courses because of conflicts during the regular terms.

## SECTION 5: SURVEY DATA ON J-TERM; STUDENT FEEDBACK

At the conclusion of J-term in 2021, the college conducted surveys of faculty and students who participated in January classes. Generally, the feedback on the quality of instruction and learning was positive. Faculty were generally satisfied with levels of student engagement (74% extremely satisfied), quality of student work (74% extremely satisfied), and student preparation (87% extremely satisfied). While generally positive, some faculty expressed reservations about the pace of instruction and the sense of community in their class. The feedback from students was quite similar. The majority of faculty and students who participated were in favor of continuing J-term as a permanent part of the academic calendar (76% of faculty probably or definitely yes, 71% of students). The weakness in the 2021 evaluation was that it only sought the feedback of faculty and students who participated in January term and did not seek the feedback of staff who were required to support these new courses.

To gather a broader set of views on the experiences of the Amherst community with January courses in 2021 and 2022, and to seek feedback on the future of January term, the committee designed a survey that went to all faculty, staff, and students. **Generally, faculty and students who participated in either January 2021 or 2022 continue to report a positive academic experience.** 64% of the faculty strongly agree that their J-term course was pedagogically effective. 79% of students who took a January course say they would do so again.

**There is a more mixed picture when all faculty, staff and students were asked if J-term should continue in the future.** Among faculty and staff, slightly more respondents indicated that J-term should not continue in the future than indicated that it should. Students were far more positive, with 79% reporting that would probably or definitely like to see J-term continue.



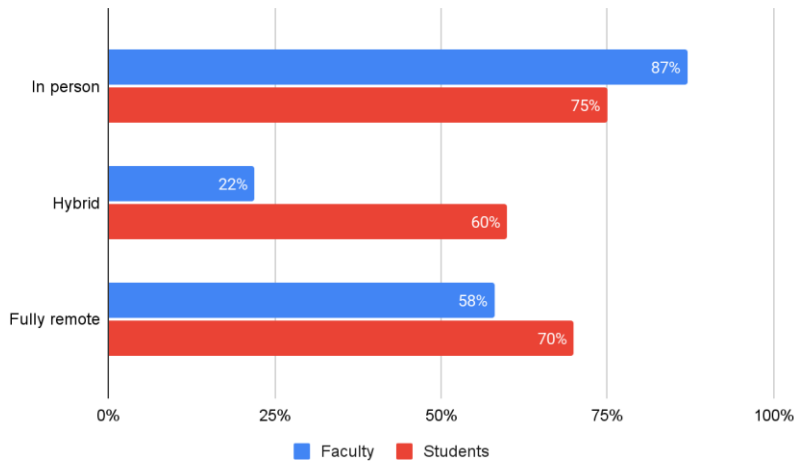
Faculty who were not in favor of a permanent J-term expressed concern about the pedagogical suitability for their courses in the brief J-term, concern about a loss of research time, and a concern that J-term does not allow a sufficient break between fall and spring. Faculty in favor of continuing J-term expressed enthusiasm for the opportunity for curricular innovation, the undivided attention of students in J-term courses, the intensity and depth of discussion, and the flexibility that J-term offers in balancing workload.

**Staff expressed concerns with the additional work that would be created by a permanent J-term.** 45% of staff respondents indicated that a permanent J-term would conflict with work that they or their office currently do. There was also concern that **J-term made it difficult for staff to take vacation time during the winter, or diminish the time they use to prepare for the spring semester.** Some staff expressed an enthusiasm for the prospect of allowing staff to participate in or lead classes in J-term. Many noted that students seemed to enjoy their experience in J-term.

Students expressed appreciation for the intensity and depth of J-term classes, the ability to focus on a single course, the flexibility that J-term 2022 offered in reducing their spring course load, and the time to focus on a course outside their “comfort zone.”

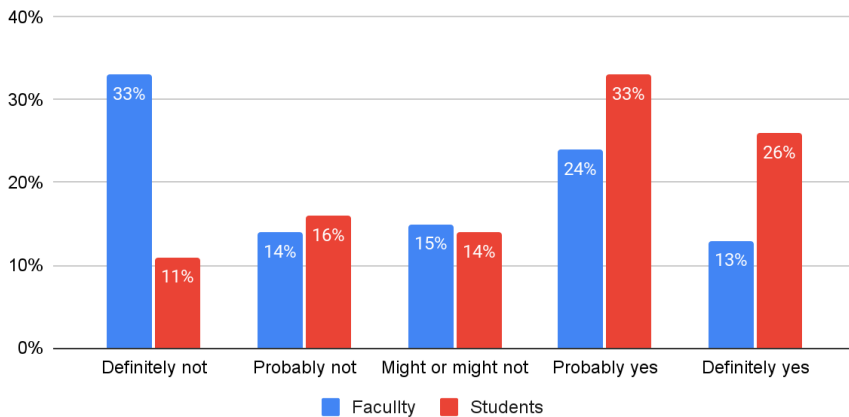
### Modality and Semester Scheduling

Faculty and students were asked their willingness to participate in in-person, hybrid, and fully remote J-term courses. In-person offerings were the highest preference of both faculty and students, but a significant portion of each group were interested in remote options.



Faculty and students were also asked if they would be willing to alter the start and end dates of the fall and spring semesters to accommodate a permanent J-term. Given the need for at least sixteen meeting days to accommodate full courses and a sense that the entire community needs at least a small break between academic terms, the committee considered numerous calendar options (see Section 9).

Would you be willing to have the fall semester start earlier or the spring semester later to accommodate a regular January term?



Students are generally more willing to consider altering the calendar of the fall and spring semesters in order to accommodate J-term.

### Curricular Options

The survey asked both faculty and students what types of courses they would find most compelling in a permanent J-term. The table below presents the percentage of faculty and students who indicated that the curricular option would be of interest to them.

Faculty      Students

Courses in the arts	31%	49%
Travel experiences for study away	64%	66%
Research colloquiums	49%	32%
Archival research (e.g. the Folger Museum)	44%	29%
Courses that provide alternative learning models	50%	50%
Courses that foster community and well-being	41%	39%
Language intensive courses	25%	36%
Experiential learning	54%	54%
Courses typically taught during the fall and spring semester	19%	70%

There are a few notable differences in the preferences of faculty and students for J-term offerings. Faculty are more interested in archival research and research colloquium in J-term. Students are more interested in arts-based courses and language intensive experiences. **The largest area of difference between students and faculty is in a preference for offering Amherst’s typical courses during J-term. Only 19% of faculty indicated interest compared to 70% of students.** There is general agreement on travel courses, courses that foster alternate learning modes and experiential learning, and courses that foster a sense of community and wellbeing. This suggests these may be areas to explore in designing future January offerings.

As noted above, the number of J-Term courses and student enrollment in them fell between 2021-2022. In 2021, 813 students took 52 courses. In 2022, 567 students took 34 courses. This does not, it should be noted, reflect waning interest in J-Term courses. J-Term 2021 was online by design and part of a comprehensive annual curriculum. In 2022 it was originally planned as offering in-person, hybrid, and online modalities. It was also the last year of expected implementation, thus offering little incentive for those who would redesign courses that might only be taught once. In addition, J-Term 2022 was moved to fully online a few weeks before the first day of classes due to a significant rise in COVID-19 cases from the highly-transmissible “Omicron” variant.

### **Coda: Student Feedback**

In addition to the on-line surveys, several committee members held formal and informal meetings with students, via discussion at the AAS, speaking with students in Student Affairs, and through coaches or representatives from athletics. In general it was

hard to organize large-scale meetings (students are perennially busy). Beyond a general enthusiasm for J-Term it was quite difficult to get a real sense of what students wanted or expected, especially from those who were on campus at this time, whether enrolled or not. Some students who were on campus expressed a general desire for more activity, but in both years the pandemic also overshadowed their activities (and many students were in COVID isolation in 2022). Students expressed that, regardless of whether or not the college continues with official J-term programming for credit, the college needs to reexamine what programming it will provide during January break. January in New England is dark, gloomy, and lonely (students remarked), and with few students around, many who were on campus found the experience isolating and detrimental to mental health. The limited activity of January at the college compounded this problem. These overall impressions were, at the same time, partially the result of the pandemic. The experience of students on campus during January may be an area in which only future years will be able to reveal more reliable responses.

## SECTION 6: THE EFFECTS ON STAFF

### Overview and General Questions

J-Term placed a great burden on many staff members in various ways. In some cases it created work that was predictable, simply shifting it from one time of the year to another. More frequently, even when it did not create more work, it introduced uncertainty and chaos into the process of scheduling work. The additional interruption of unplanned work was stressful and had deleterious effects on productivity and satisfaction. In many cases work in (late December and) January also conflicted with other priorities and tasks that staff hoped to complete. These included the ability to conduct long-range planning, to do staff training and reflection, to catch up on delayed work, to undertake preparations for the coming semester, to do professional development, to spend time with family and friends, or to simply relax and recover. Some staff found it difficult to use their accrued vacation time. **There was a pervasive sense that J-Term—along with the extremely stressful working conditions over the last two years—were unsustainable.**

### Staff Needs and Resource Requirements for J-Term

While it is apparent that staff in theory could potentially accommodate J-Term, there are several resource needs, and the effects of J-Term on staff must be recognized and solutions must be found before instituting a formal J-term.

J-Comm has repeatedly heard that the demands on staff are not tenable and that J-Term typically exacerbates pre-existing problems in many areas. It is also worth noting that

not all problems can be solved with additional money or staffing: the overall effect on certain units or individuals may be intangible and amount to a general sense that J-Term simply creates extra complications and burdens that cannot be resolved by sharing work with additional staff, especially as there are some staff roles that require years of experience to develop the necessary expertise, making temporary delegation impractical. It is also not entirely clear to what extent a general sense of exhaustion can be separated from J-Term and/or to COVID-19 related stress and concerns. J-Term may require additional staffing levels, require additional overtime hours or additional compensation. We may also need to adjust the vacation rollover policy to accommodate the fact that staff can no longer take vacation due to a J-Term. These additional resources will have to compete with other institutional priorities and programmatic enhancements during the budget process and may crowd out other institutional needs or wants in order to implement J-Term effectively.

### **Academic Staff (especially Library, Writing Center, CTL)**

For staff in academic support units like the Library, the Writing Center, and the Center for Teaching and Learning, J-Term brought a mix of challenges and lost opportunities. Some aspects of academic support, such as preparing materials for course reserves or planning for research instruction, were as impactful on staff time as if it were supporting a full semester, especially given the reduced timeframe for getting the work completed. Failure to include staff in J-Term planning led to a lack of coordination around resource needs, leaving some units like the Writing Center underutilized and others like the research and instruction librarians scrambling to meet last-minute requests. The loss of staff-led opportunities for non-credit instruction, which was possible during the former Interterm, was seen as a negative. Coming at a time when staff are normally focused on the already extant tasks related to the transition from fall to spring semesters or on projects and planning for which there is no time during an active semester, J-Term takes away the downtime that made it possible to get through the two periods of sustained effort needed to support the regular academic schedule.

For academic staff the central issue is how to provide the necessary support for faculty and students without overtaxing existing staff who need time to both recover from the work of the fall semester and build up reserves to get them through the spring semester. One possible solution is to consider hiring temporary staff. However, the main challenge with quantifying potential temporary staffing needs to support J-Term is that the specialized nature of the work does not lend itself to temporary expansion. For example, hiring a temporary research and instruction librarian to assist with research support or classroom instruction sessions is not feasible due to the quick turnaround of the term, as the onboarding time needed in order to serve effectively in those roles is longer than the term itself. The same would be true for writing

consultants, instructional designers, or any other academic staff with a specific role of supporting faculty or students with their academic pursuits. To hire these temporary staff for longer periods, or to add permanent staff under the guise of supporting J-Term, could result in excess staff capacity during other parts of the year, which may not make sense financially. Regarding other resource needs under the purview of academic staff, such as library materials to support a new class, there may be few to no additional resources required if the total number of classes offered during the academic year is largely unchanged (i.e., if any new J-Term classes take the place of a class that would have been offered in fall or spring). If there is a net gain of classes due to the addition of J-Term, budgets supporting instruction-related materials would need an appropriate increase in order to not negatively impact the resource needs of the fall and spring semesters.

### **Academic Technology**

Academic Technology reported the following **concerns**:

J-Term narrows the window to perform Moodle updates and maintenance during the holiday break. Staff have a reduced holiday over break because they need to prepare for the coming terms. Some faculty require instructional support at the last minute or during the term when it interferes with other priorities.

It also identified the following **benefits**:

Classes served as incubators for online learning, including trying out new technologies (online, hybrid, other applications). The accelerated time frame has spurred creative approaches to digital pedagogy practices.

### **Registrar and Financial Aid**

#### **Registrar**

The primary staffing issue that will be faced by the registrar and other administrative offices is that J-term will overlap with a period in which the college is typically closed and staff take vacations as a part of the winter holidays. Additional staff would allow offices to better distribute the impact of the issue, but would not fundamentally solve the issue. The effect of J-term on the academic administration of the college would also be dependent on the form of J-term the college adopts. Clear policy and expectations will cut down on the number of questions posed by both faculty and staff. A great deal of the work imposed by the COVID-era J-Terms was due to the fact that January is not envisioned or supported by any academic policy in the catalog. This was understandable in the emergency of the pandemic, but even a pilot J-term would require large-scale revision of policy so that students, advisors, and administrators are

all clear on the rights and obligations of all parties. This work would take substantial effort in various units on campus, would require careful vetting by the CEP and the Executive Committee, and approval on several points by the faculty (possibly including several votes). January 2021 and 2022 used two models of a J-term: in 2021 January was open to students enrolled in either fall or spring; January 2022 was effectively an extension of the spring semester for both student course load and eligibility. The 2022 model is more sustainable, as it basically moves J-term offerings into closer alignment with the work of supporting a single semester.

### **Other Issues and Questions that Emerged from Discussion with the Registrar**

–While Workday has the capability to handle the additional registration for a J-term, the software needs to be implemented. (Workday staff noted that policy must be in place before any such implementation could even happen).

–There are several downstream systems that are not set up for J-Term and the concern here is that this might require a significant revision to the enterprise structure. For example, access to facilities and buildings might be dependent on a set of codes that are produced during registration and are passed on to other systems, and those systems are incapable of understanding anything other than fall/spring semesters.

–Confusion about whether a course was a spring or J-Term course resulted in complaints from students (and parents) about course availability.

–Course accreditation will need to be examined. “Block Plan” courses might provide a useful comparanda for our J-Term instruction. These are courses taught in a compressed time frame, usually 17 or 18 days, at primarily two institutions (Cornell College and Colorado College; see Section 7). These institutions are capable of providing a full range of courses that are both accredited and meet their teaching needs and outcomes in this restricted period of time for high-achieving students.

–It is unclear how our J-Term would relate to the other 5-Colleges, especially now that UMass has fully invested in a J-Term, including changes to its calendar (pushing back spring courses one week into February, i.e. February 7 in 2023)? Will Amherst students be able to take J-term courses at UMass, for example, for regular credit?

–Enrolling half-credit courses during J-Term is as problematic for the registrar as enrolling full-credit courses.

–The system of half-credits may need to be assessed, since technically departments pair half-credit courses with other half-credit courses in order for them to be valid. This is a general problem and not a problem restricted to J-term.

### **Financial Aid**

For Financial Aid in particular several policy and accounting questions are in play. To summarize (at points nearly verbatim) the response from Admissions and Financial Aid



The main question is not whether adjustment for J-Term can be done, but rather the impact and challenge to modify what has historically been a very straightforward semester system. The initial iterations did not include a full-scale policy implementation, given the immediacy and conditions that required it to be implemented. The fact that there was no tuition or billing for housing made things simpler and allowed a postponement of a thorough consideration of financial aid implementation.

Several issues would need to be examined before any future implementation:

- The distribution patterns of federal financial aid and annual fund limits--this can be quite complex.
- The required refund schedule for federal and institutional aid (also very complex).
- The costs to students (tuition and/or housing).
- How this will impact the federal definition of satisfactory academic progress.

In addition, J-term would be defined by the Department of Education as a module. While it can be attached (preceding or following) to a standard semester, there are several administrative factors that would have to be assessed in order for the courses to be fully credited for graduation.. How this will affect the administration of financial aid, and how it will ultimately affect student status at various points in their time at Amherst are all pressing questions. Financial Aid will need some time to examine and resolve these questions.

The need to adjust to develop and adjust to a new system and the ensuing complexities and logistical changes will add significant strain to a staff already at capacity and surely will necessitate additional FTE resources. There are also questions involving Experiential or Study Away courses. Would all costs be covered in the comprehensive fee? Would students have to cover some costs (e.g. travel, meals, equipment) and how can this be done equitably?

## **Student Affairs**

### **Overview**

Every winter break Student Affairs anticipates students who will be on campus for personal and curricular or co-curricular purposes. Typically, the students who seek to be on campus during J-Term include seniors who are working on theses, winter season athletes, students involved in specific training such as EMS training, and students who are not able to travel because of international restrictions or because Amherst is their home. The addition of courses during J-Term added additional students on campus, created time and pressure constraints because of the required academic timeline, and highlighted additional policy and practice concerns.

## **Safety**

During the breaks there are health and safety gaps that do not exist during the regular semester. While ACPD and our Community Safety Team are staffed and provide safety support during this period of time there are two specific concerns that should be highlighted related to student presence on campus during J-Term.

First, some of the safety response structures and support measures that exist during traditional semesters, specifically Amherst College EMS (ACEMS) and our in-residence student staff, are essential. ACEMS is often the first health responder for student health concerns and is able to provide medical support after hours. ACPD and the Community Safety Team are able to assist but it reduces the types of support we provide to students. Additionally, the student residential staff, Community Advisors (CAs), are not employed during the break. The CAs serve as a referral and peer support for students. Both of these services often catch student concerns early and assist in getting students the help they may need. They are part of the safety net for students during traditional semesters.

Second, it is vital that we know who is on campus during the January Term. Prior to the pandemic, students would often arrive on campus without a planned activity or without explicit approval. This means that if there were an emergency (fire in a hall, massive power outage, significant snow or ice storm, etc.) Student Affairs could not know who was living on campus. Over the last two years we have been able to implement a housing registration process required for students to be on campus and to share their purpose. Any January term moving forward must include a process wherein students register their presence on campus so that we know who is meant to be on campus as a safety requirement.

## **Class Deans and Academic Support**

The Class Deans expressed concern about the tight timeline between the two semesters and the January Term and policy concerns that need to be addressed. There is also an acknowledgement that for some students the ability to take a full credit course allowed them to balance their schedule or make-up for deficiencies. There are timing challenges with the grading deadlines for the fall term and at the end of J-Term for students who have not made satisfactory academic progress. Students cannot begin another term without all of their grades from the previous term having been recorded. This creates pressure on faculty grading deadlines and complicates the use of extensions.

J-Term allowed little or no down time for staff in the Class Deans Office. Efforts to close out the fall semester, to assess the standing of students going into the spring, and to prepare to support Students of Concern were compromised. The tight turnaround between semesters may be overcome with clear policies and processes for J-term, but the time compression is likely to persist.

### **Accessibility Services and Accommodations**

The short January timeline creates challenges for accessibility and accommodations. Some students report giving up trying to use the accommodations. In addition, note taking, document conversion, and other accommodations take time for implementation. These challenges could be mitigated by inclusive course design (as some faculty successfully implemented in J-Term). The committee's conversation with Larissa Hopkins was especially revealing in this regard. J-Term can offer a valuable "sandbox" for designing and developing courses that are acutely attuned to the complexities and needs of students requiring accommodations, especially if it retains the possibility of online and hybrid learning modalities, since those modalities will not be used in the regular terms. This may however lead to a conflict on the question of accommodations and the policy implications should be considered.

### **Health and Wellbeing**

J-Term courses offered a mixed bag of support for students' wellbeing and mental health. For some students the ability to take a credit-bearing course allowed them to balance their schedules or to relieve some pressure. For other students, taking a course instead of taking a break during January was detrimental to their wellbeing and created a greater sense of anxiety and stress entering the spring semester.

J-Term is one of the few times when staff from Health Services are able to take time off. A significant increase in students on campus may result in staff not being able to take time away. Staff from the Counseling Center noted that the summer is actually a busier time for them than J-Term (at least in recent years), and they are also increasing staffing levels across the board. Wait times for access to Counseling Center services in J-Term was much lower than during the semester.

From the larger perspectives of wellbeing and mental health, students already feel a pressure to always be productive. The J-Term may exacerbate such pressure. Students who didn't participate felt that they "missed out" on something and expressed a need to find something "productive" to do over the break. Finding a way to emphasize balance and rest alongside the use of J-Term or in the design of J-term would be very important in supporting the health and wellbeing of our students.

### **Housing**

Residential Life would benefit greatly from a clear understanding of who can take J-Term courses, who is eligible to be on campus, students' registration and clarification of their reasons for being on campus, and the setting of earlier deadlines from other offices (registrar, GEO, etc.). One major source of conflict involves the timing of students arriving or leaving between the fall and spring terms. This often led to logistical headaches and extra staff work with a very tight turnaround. In some cases staff had to urge students to vacate rooms during the Evaluation Day of J-Term.

### **Winter "Break"**

If the start of J-term were to begin on January 2, that means that all of ORL, OSA Ops, and Facilities will need to be working on New Year's Day. In reality, it also means that an even greater number of staff from 3 offices will be working through the Winter Break in order to manage this quick turnover.

### **Registration Challenges**

The registration timeline for J-term is an incredible challenge from a planning perspective. We were able to get a preliminary roster on 11/30/21, but then after some level of add/drop we got another update on 12/20/21. This is simply not enough time for anyone to problem solve an addition of a student who needs housing on Jan 2 while the College is 'closed.' Add/Drop during J-term forced us to house students who were not yet enrolled in J-term courses, but were shopping, or hoping they could get into a class during the first week. A final list was not produced until January 5th. Ultimately, it may be necessary to limit participation in January Term Courses to students who are on campus for both Fall and Spring semesters. The add/drop period must also be taken into account as students come to campus but may not end up taking a course, leaving them on campus without a structured purpose.

### **Opportunities**

There are certainly opportunities that come from the use of January. We can imagine a range of co-curricular activities and skills workshops that could be beneficial to students. These would need to be carefully constructed and curated to meet the needs of students and to attract students to take advantage of non-credit bearing opportunities.

### **Potential Staffing needs**

A clear response model with hired staff (e.g. ACEMS student staff or something else) Student staff to support students on campus.

Administrative support of Class Deans and Accessibility services to support rapid accommodations and the academic support timelines and process.

Additional medical assistance (part-time provider) to assist students during J-Term and allow staff to take time away.

Additional support to manage the clearing, verifying, and cleaning of housing (this may depend on what policies are in place for who can take a J-term course).

A staff member dedicated to the coordination of co-curricular activities during January. This could also include student staffing.

### **ADCs**

In recent surveys, the ADCs have collectively registered considerable dissatisfaction about their positions. (There is some hope that the ADC Task Force will make recommendations to meaningfully address the issues raised). In the survey responses the ADCs indicated the various ways in which many of them felt a particular burden during J-Term. J-Term is seen as yet another administrative imposition. To cite just one example, ADCs learned at the last minute that they had to mount course evaluations for faculty because IT is not set up to do so. This was incredibly disruptive and frustrating. In general, the extra demands on ADCs were highly variable. J-Term interferes with their ability to do other work during J-Term or simply to recover from the stresses of the fall semester. January is an important month for many ADCs to prepare for the spring semester and to finalize the work from the fall semester, such as creating portfolios of evaluations of pre-tenure faculty, gathering reappointment materials, and completing other duties. As with many other staff areas affected by a possible J-term, any iteration of J-term should entail consultation with the ADCs along with other staff units that unduly bear the burden of the term.

The ADCs would need a variety of forms of assistance that can help them complete their work, including staffing from other units that can take over duties temporarily (the “floater” model applied to J-Term). Direct consultation with ADCs is also essential, as well as the need for faculty to recognize how much they rely on ADCs and how disruptive unscheduled or irregularly scheduled requests for time can be. Would there be some possibility of allowing ADCs who are trying to supplement summer hours to work extra in the J-Term to cover that gap? ADCs have also suggested that other mechanisms for support could be used: can faculty rely on students to do much of the preparatory work for their courses, including the assessment and gathering of materials? **This will necessarily shift some burden onto faculty, but that may be a necessary condition of ensuring the success of J-Term courses.**

### **Meetings with Various Support Staff**

The committee sought out feedback and comment from a broad range of groups across campus. **Food Services** noted the non-stop service expected during the scheduling of classes. The lack of any appreciable down time requires workers to both compress their

turnarounds from one meal to the next each day and there is little planning between terms. **The Science Center** noted that the space could accommodate much of J-Term courses (except studio art or theater). **Campus Security** noted that The Amherst College Police, Community Safety Officers and Community Safety Assistants are hired into a full-year contract, so increasing student presence during J-term would not, in itself, be a staffing issue. Since there weren't many students on campus for the last J-terms, the expanded J-terms over the past two years did not impact staffing noticeably. A main concern is the problems that arise from allowing large numbers of students on campus with no academic or athletic focus. Some students need a safe haven, given their personal circumstances, but limiting the number of students with no structured focus over the month of January is essential. **Athletics** also remarked that students without specific in-season sports should not be on campus. There are about 300 student-athletes on campus in winter and they are busy training for their respective sports. Typically they have benefited from programming but are also busy training. Swimming and Diving in particular was concerned that course offerings might compromise its essential team training trip in January, since the coaches fully support students in their academic endeavors. **Buildings and Grounds** did not notice an appreciable difference. Conversations with this department in future years should be maintained in order for them to make adequate preparations. **Academic Finance** did not experience significant changes in work. A main issue is that the college isn't staffed or budgeted for the 24/7/365 operations which it has grown into. Adding a J-term might make it more difficult for staff to take time off.

## SECTION 7: J-TERM AT OTHER INSTITUTIONS

The committee's charge included the need "to seek information from peer institutions that offer January terms."<sup>2</sup> Many colleges offer some form of January or Winter Term programming, while many offer little or no programming at this time.<sup>3</sup> Most peer institutions have fall and spring semesters with either no formal Winter Term, optional courses and/or programs over January, or required courses and programs that are intensely taught over a 3-4 week period.<sup>4</sup> Winter Term offerings include a range of possibilities: full academic courses, STEM bootcamps that make ready the underprepared, experiential and study away courses, independent courses away from

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix 7A for hyperlinks to the programs noted here.

<sup>3</sup> **No J-Term Among Peers:** Swarthmore (offered only in 2021), Bowdoin, Pomona, Grinnell, Vassar, Bryn Mawr, Haverford, Connecticut, Hamilton.

<sup>4</sup> It is worth comparing the so-called **Block Plan:** Colorado College and Cornell College offer exclusively "Block Plan" courses, 18-day intensive single courses throughout the entire academic year. Carleton College offers a 10-week quarter system.

campus, and variable programs that include enjoyable, exploratory opportunities for anything from auto repair to French noir theater. The details of each program vary widely, and **it is difficult to get a complete sense of how Winter term worked at all the different colleges.** We briefly summarize here the experiences of several institutions similar to ours.

### **Colleges with formal, optional Winter Terms**

Some schools have optional programs designed for students to explore the curriculum and/or travel.<sup>5</sup> These schools offer a handful of courses. At Williams, for example, they are overseen by a “Winter Study Program Committee” (composed of 5 faculty, 4 staff and 4 students) that reviews all faculty and student projects for approval and allocates the dedicated budget provided for the winter programs. Special financial aid is dedicated to support Winter Study courses at Williams.

### **Colleges with Required Winter Term Programs**

Some colleges have heavily formalized Winter Term Programs.<sup>6</sup> The courses seem designed to provide students with alternatives to their regular fields of study and are often pitched as an attempt to offer an intellectually-stimulating break or period of low-stakes inquiry, or the opportunity to explore new avenues of academic and experiential pursuit.

### **Conversation about Middlebury’s Program**

In order to better understand similar programs the committee did one “deep dive” with a peer institution. Members of the Committee met with a Middlebury Professor of Classics, Christopher Star, a current Middlebury student, Jessica (Jess) Fitzgerald ‘22 (Double Major in Biology and Classics), and Amherst College Professor Hannah Hunter-Parker (German), who is an alumna of Middlebury. This triangulation of experiences and viewpoints offered us an ideal way into thicker descriptions of the program’s dynamics.

**Students:** Students must take a Winter Term course every year (4 total) and at least 2 courses must take place on campus. Both Professor Hunter-Parker and Jess greatly praised their J-term experiences. They both thought that their academic experiences during J-term were among the best of their time at Middlebury. In particular the Winter term is an important part of community building and having fun,

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<sup>5</sup> **Optional:** Williams (exploratory, experiential courses), Wellesley College (limited number for credit courses), Wesleyan University (limited number for credit courses), Bard College (no credits given), Smith College (limited, exploratory courses); Cornell University (credit courses), Harvard (non-credit), Princeton (non-credit).

<sup>6</sup> Colby (3 Winter Term courses required); Oberlin (3 required); Bates (2 May “Short” Term credits); Middlebury (4 Winter Term credits; 2 required on campus)

in addition to the possibility of taking serious courses for those who choose to do so (some students refer to the Winter Term as “Play Term.” Professor Star estimated that about 75% of courses are “not really serious” and 25% are “serious.”)

**Faculty:** For faculty matters are decidedly mixed. Faculty teach a 2.5 course-load and so must teach one Winter course every two years. Some faculty have releases or buyouts (e.g. for chairing or labs) and many faculty resent being required to teach in the January Term. Since they must teach a full term in the spring, teaching a course in January is utterly exhausting and immensely frustrating for many. Professor Star teaches **intensive first-year language courses** (Greek or Latin) and noted that the courses themselves were essential to the curriculum (and that some of his departmental colleagues like teaching them). The department several years ago experimented by moving the beginning language sequence from the Winter Term to the fall and, contrary to expectations, the results were disastrous. For language learning the break between fall and spring meant a significant loss of elemental language knowledge in the interim (a common complaint among language instructors). Professor Star nicely summed up the joining of positive and negative: “Winter Term is great if you’re not teaching it and horrible if you are.”

**Course Staffing:** Many courses are taught by non-faculty, including prominent figures (titans of industry, celebrities, state supreme court justices, professional athletes) and alumni. This means that a very high number of the instructors were not regular faculty (and that many courses are not what we would think of as regular full-credit courses). In addition, the stress of teaching these courses leads many departments to seek out adjunct labor. In some years nearly half of all courses may not have been taught by regular faculty.

**Calendar:** The Winter Term at Middlebury is part of the overall curricular design, including 19 instructional and evaluation days, and it is bookended by the 12-week fall and spring terms; only these shorter terms make calendar scheduling easier. Amherst’s 13 weeks of instruction means more serious calendrical compression or the possible shift of the regular terms earlier or later (see Section 9 below).

## SECTION 8: A POSSIBLE J-TERM PILOT

The committee recognizes that recent iterations of J-Term were necessary for their immediate purpose but agrees that repeating past versions should not be our aim in the future. J-Term should not copy or replace the regular fall and spring terms, either in terms of content, goals, or modes of instruction. We are mindful of the concerns of some that students may take J-Term courses as part of a broader culture of overachievement, and that offering required courses for the major over J-Term may reduce the availability of these courses over the fall and spring semesters. We are also mindful that some



faculty relished the opportunities for pedagogical innovation, immersive learning, and the creation of community over J-Term, even in online courses.

What is offered below is **one model for what J-Term could be in light of current aims and constraints. It is not a formal recommendation of the committee at this time.** This section provides a *raison d'être* for J-Term along with one possible implementation. It also serves the purpose of illustration, since faculty members in the Chairs' meeting of April 1 asked that a model would be useful for future deliberations, and members of the committee agreed.

### **The Purpose of the January Term**

**The purpose of a January Term is to enrich and complement Amherst's curricular offerings in compelling ways, by offering innovative courses and by addressing specific pressing concerns in the lives of our faculty, staff, and students.** Such offerings must also consider the constraints and benefits of a different calendar and of logistical complexities, especially the use of staff time. J-Term should offer new types of intellectual and experiential opportunities. It should offer curricular innovation that creates a knowledge-base of Amherst faculty who remain abreast of and contribute to developments in various modes of teaching (intensive, hybrid, online, inclusive), who have implemented their knowledge in the classroom, and who seek out and share feedback on the effectiveness of their courses with the college community. J-Term should provide greater access to the curriculum and it should be one means to help students who are facing or overcoming academic or personal challenges or need a single course to graduate. It should offer experiences that also focus on the student as a whole: developing skills vital to their transition into adulthood; building community through the shared experience of intensive, rewarding coursework; emphasizing well-being and serving as a venue to foster the intellectual and personal skills needed to face adversity and to develop resiliency. In these ways J-Term can both address several urgent problems and further the College's educational mission.

In summary, **J-Term should serve a specific purpose intended to benefit the college and its community, offering an additional "good" (in the moral and pedagogical rather than economic sense) and addressing timely and pressing concerns.** It would simultaneously do two things:

- 1) Offer (new) pedagogical opportunities that are hard to access or unlikely to occur during the regular semester.
- 2) Address urgent issues concerning the well-being of students and the ability of faculty and staff to coherently and proactively address those concerns.

These two areas will be taken in turn, with a general overview of the larger conceptual aims followed by several examples of course types.

### **Pedagogical Possibilities and Logistical Considerations:**

J-Term should offer several distinct yet interrelated curricular possibilities. At the broadest level these possibilities include the types of courses offered, the modes of instruction, the different experience of intensive, deep learning without distraction, and addressing the interconnection of students' intellectual and personal development. This is not to say that courses that simultaneously meet all these goals should be offered. Rather, a panoply of opportunities for diverse forms of learning will benefit Amherst students and will enrich the curriculum as a whole. Again, **the courses are meant to supplement and complement regular offerings, not replace them.**

### **Conceptually, J-Term courses could emphasize the following aims:**

Curricular innovation

Expanded access to courses (including some regularly taught courses)

State-of-the-art knowledge of developing instructional media (hybrid, online, asynchronous, etc.)

Deeply-focused experiences with minimal distraction

Community of learning and well-being

Low-stakes learning in which enjoyment of learning is a key focus

Fostering of inclusive course design and practice

Planning and design of courses in full consideration of their effects on staff

### **Examples of course types especially suited to J-Term**

**Study Away Courses.** These courses would entail several weeks in a foreign country with a specific intellectual purpose (scientific field experience, language acquisition, visits to historical sites, monuments, and archives, or community building). With support from the Provost's office, some faculty have integrated such experiences into their regular courses, but many have reported that they would like to expand the range and depth of these experiences. In addition, faculty report that such experiences, however valuable, offer considerable challenges when integrated into the existing semester structure; they are often too short and yet still often exhausting for faculty members and students alike.

**Community Engagement Courses.** Similar to the Study Away Courses, courses that focus on experiences in specific communities offer an opportunity to integrate the intellectual content of a course or major into the practical experiences of life beyond the campus. This may be particularly urgent for courses in which the divide between

theory and praxis is often unsustainable or is a hindrance to the educational aims of the course.

**Archival Courses.** Archive-oriented courses are an excellent opportunity for students to develop fundamental research skills in a multi-week intensive experience. For example, a course that incorporates an extended stay at the Folger Library or other specialized archives in conjunction with instruction in archival methods and techniques will allow students to undertake future archival work with greater independence and effectiveness.

**Intensive Courses in Creative Fields.** Workshop courses in the Arts and in (Creative) Writing also have tremendous potential and in many respects this is one of the areas in which the J-Term may be a far superior venue than the traditional fall and spring term. Sustained intensive work may have far better outcomes in creative fields than work that is distributed over the course of a semester and its distractions. As some faculty note, J-Term is a good time to invite visiting artists to speak in their classes.

**Intensive Research Seminars.** Similarly, research skills are often best taught in an environment in which students are focusing on acquiring the skills and broader frameworks that allow them to conduct research and to conceptualize complex problems and how to investigate them with a sustained in-depth approach. This might, for example, be an ideal possibility for a junior-year seminar offered in a department that is preparing its students to write honors theses in the senior year.

**Broader Access to the Curriculum.** The above courses are examples of specific types of intensive offerings that are especially apt for the compressed timeframe of J-Term. These would be valuably complemented by a core group of standard offerings accessible to all students that provide an opportunity to explore the curriculum, especially for students whose schedules may not offer them easy access to courses outside their major. Such courses are also ideal possibilities for students who may need to make up for a deficiency or complete a single course to graduate. While some courses covering traditional material should be offered, such courses would not necessarily be the main emphasis of J-Term and would ideally be offered with an eye to several important factors and constraints. J-Term's central purpose is not to offer core courses in a major (even if some courses may still satisfy major requirements). J-Term instructors would ideally develop new curricular models, test out different formats or new approaches in different formats (hybrid, online, etc.), emphasize inclusive learning and the acquiring of core skills as well as the value of deep, intensive learning, and be alert to the demands such courses may place on staff.

## **Urgent Matters that Amherst Students Face**

In discussions with faculty, students, Class Deans, and staff from the Counseling Center it has repeatedly become clear how acutely students at Amherst—and nationally—face a mental health crisis. While the causes and solutions for such a crisis exceed the professional grasp of this committee's members and the logistical scope of its charge, we may nevertheless propose some partial solutions related to the January Term.

There are practical ways in which J-Term may benefit students concretely through administrative mechanisms that provide flexibility. In a broader sense as well curricular offerings and programming for students (and conceivably staff and faculty) can, if framed and implemented correctly, help to shift the College's focus away from achievement and towards habits and practices that better serve the members of the community.

## **Administrative Mechanisms and Flexibility**

A primary benefit of J-Term has been the potential flexibility it offers to students who are facing and overcoming challenges, for example, those who need to make up a course after a personal crisis. **It should be noted that the use of J-Term for such purposes is a powerful tool when wielded effectively, but if misused would have negative consequences.** Some students who face a deficit because of crisis may be best advised not to take on a J-Term course if doing so would only be a further source of distress (the hypothetical analogy being the student who struggles and fails a fall course and unwisely decides to take 5 courses in the spring to remedy the deficit, only then to land in an even larger academic crisis; such possibilities should be anticipated and avoided).

J-Term also allows faculty to shift their loads to address priorities in departmental or institutional governance or individual work habits by shifting one course to a different time of the year. It should be noted that many faculty members will not seek out such shifts and will be better served by using the winter break for other equally important purposes. **Many faculty have expressed that they have no desire to teach during J-Term, and the committee adamantly agrees that no faculty member should be expected to teach when they are fulfilling their duties to the college through research or to themselves by seeking respite between the immense workload of semesters. Similar considerations should exist for staff, and a singular concern, addressed throughout this report is the need to recognize and respect the potential effects of J-Term on staff, to ensure that the mechanisms for addressing these questions exist, and to insist that staff have a voice in how their time and energy are called upon by others.** (See below on limits to the scope of J-Term as one means to address such concerns). This proposal calls for making the use of staff resources a key emphasis in

the design of J-Term courses, and that emphasis may have salutary effects on the design of courses at other times of the year, if faculty develop a greater awareness of staff resources.

### **With that in mind, J-Term offers several logistical advantages to students**

Flexibility for students who need a single course to graduate

Reducing a course load in anticipation of a difficult semester of study

Reducing a course load in anticipation of major extracurricular activities, such as arts performances or athletic participation

Taking a course in preparation for a study abroad experience in the spring term, either in the culture or language of the target country

There are several potential ways in which staff time (e.g. of Class Deans) may be reduced on account of this flexibility, since it can solve certain problems in student course scheduling after a crisis. At the same time, **the appropriate administrative mechanisms should be in place so that such flexibility does not cost staff to lose time, for example by dealing with administrative crises brought about by the lack of clear guidelines or by managing students who are not prepared to take J-Term courses.** We have repeatedly heard from staff (e.g. Research and Instruction and Library Acquisitions staff in the Library, Staff from the Writing Center) that they need to be consulted well in advance of J-Term in order to plan accordingly. Some ADCs report being relied on to do extensive work in support of a course on top of their pre-existing duties and constraints during December or January. We propose that most such scenarios would not be feasible during J-Term. Faculty teaching in J-Term either will need to be prepared to design courses that do not require extensive staff support, will need to coordinate such support well in advance, or will need to rely on alternative mechanisms of support. This is not to say that faculty will not have access to adequate support, but that in planning such courses the needs and limitations of staff must remain paramount.

### **The Broader Advantages of J-Term for Thinking about the Whole Student**

A major concern about J-Term has been the possibility that it will exhaust students. This is a valid concern and one problem noted was the “FOMO” effect produced by the very existence of J-Term.<sup>7</sup> Some students felt that they might be obliged to take courses simply because they could. That said, staff from the Counseling Center reported that students are already under intense pressure to “achieve” during the break between semesters, often through internships or other CV-building activities, and that J-Term became a target for anxieties about such expectations. Some students feel that they

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<sup>7</sup> FOMO: Fear Of Missing Out.

should be doing something simply because their peers are involved in internships, research on campus, honors work, etc. What this points to is a broader culture of achievement for its own sake that also produces several negative and often hidden repercussions. Advisors and class deans will need to play a key role in advising students whether to take J-Term courses and what courses to take. To that end we propose that at the broadest level J-Term should focus on decoupling activity from achievement and should give pride of place to thoughtful consideration of the larger trajectories of individuals at Amherst. From this perspective we envision the implementation of coursework and programming that could benefit the community as a whole and in particular students who need to look beyond their immediate circumstances. This could include:

**Courses** that focus on low-stakes absorptive learning in which the pedagogical experience is most prominent and assessment plays a secondary role. This could include P/F courses for at full or half credit.

**Courses** designed to promote sustained attentive learning environments, including intensive creative workshops, reading courses, and other sources of engaged learning that are not necessarily tied to curricular achievement or prerequisites.

**Courses** that focus on sustained reading, writing, well-being, or some other trans-disciplinary activity that is essential to personal and intellectual growth.

**Courses** that may involve active movement alongside (intellectual or emotional) self-awareness, including courses in the Creative Arts.

**Courses** with Alternative Learning and Assessment Models. Such courses can be one means to address student tendencies towards over-achievement as well as student anxiety in courses. Such a course could shift the emphasis away from grading, performance, and achievement and onto the practices of learning, reflection on the learning process, and a focus on learning as an intense and yet not exhausting process of intellectual development.

**Workshops** designed by staff members that focus on student well-being and that may have a hook into courses taken for credit. For example, a (credit-bearing) course on intensive reading or writing might also be followed up or co-joined with a workshop that helps students understand the relationship between sustained deep learning and their own well-being, or a course that helps students think about the challenges they may face in the impending semester and how their intellectual experiences may help to ground their responses.

It must be noted that while the boundaries between pedagogy and student well-being in some of the above categories may seem porous (as they almost surely are in students' experience), **it is imperative that faculty not be expected to work in areas beyond their competence or that staff be overtaxed with the burdens of faculty teaching.**

Programming that focuses on student well-being, if integrated or coordinated with a course, should be designed in consultation with staff from the Counseling Center, and they should rightly lead the conversation on questions that are in their area of expertise.

### **A Possible J-Term Pilot**

As our report has argued, any J-Term should be implemented with circumspection. What follows is one possible model that takes into account the many constraints and concerns that have been outlined in the report thus far.

### **A 3-year Pilot Program for January Term**

If the faculty decides to pursue a J-Term, we would recommend considering a period of 3 years to allow for full curricular development and for evaluation of J-Term in 2026, when one might reasonably expect it to be revisited with an eye to subsequent planning. This 3-year trial does not include 2023 since that year should be used as a development phase, with years 2-4 containing the live programming. J-Term should be evaluated immediately after the conclusion of the 2026 term and the CEP and Executive Committee should consider whether to forward a motion to continue J-Term programming. **This roadmap recognizes that the campus will not be ready to host a full J-Term in 2023, either administratively or logistically, because several parts of the campus staffing infrastructure must be put into place (Workday and downstream resources that depend on it) and because policies in various areas, including the Library, Residential Life, Financial Aid, Academic Technology, and Educational Policy must be evaluated and formulated.**

### **A tentative roadmap for the January Terms in 2023-2026 (3-year J-Term)**

It is necessary to proceed with circumspection and in full recognition of the several logistical and administrative complexities involved. For these reasons the initial pilot could begin by limiting offerings to 10 full-credit courses (see below). Such courses would be crafted with an eye to the core goals of J-Term: having a minimal resource footprint for staff and meeting the pedagogical needs outlined above. Some mechanism would need to be put into place to determine which courses should be taught during J-Term. A feasible solution might be that the Center for Teaching and Learning provide consultation on courses with faculty, who will craft a brief proposal to the CEP that outlines how their course meets the expectations and stipulations for a J-Term course

(such stipulations will also need to be developed in the coming year of preparation for J-Term in 2024).

Full-credit courses would be complemented by a reasonable, if as-of-yet undetermined, number of half-credit courses and a suite of targeted non-credit programming.<sup>8</sup> These numbers and the timing of the courses (taken from a fall or spring term) should be closely coordinated with the Registrar's office in order to ensure that there is not a deficit of courses in the regular terms. Of these approximately 10 courses, at least 2 courses will be Study Away Courses.<sup>9</sup> Faculty who wish to design courses specifically for this venue will staff these courses, and teaching in J-Term will be voluntary. Students will not be required to take J-Term courses and will be encouraged to do so as part of a broader emphasis on load-balancing, making up for deficiencies, and the value of new experiences rather than on piling up credits or activities.

2023: No academic J-Term programming; (Possible Study Away Courses, see footnote); Development of credit-bearing course suite and non-credit programming for implementation in subsequent years.

2024: First year of full J-Term programming with a panoply of credit courses and non-credit programming.

2025-2026 Continued development and assessment of courses and programming.

Spring 2026: Assessment of J-Term (prior 3 years of pilot) with an eye to determining if it should continue.

### **Rationale for the 3-year Trial**

This roadmap seems to offer the best solution in light of several competing priorities and institutional realities. A new President of Amherst College will presumably bring new priorities. While we can identify areas where J-Term may require resources or have

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<sup>8</sup> It is difficult to propose a number for half-credit courses because some of them, for example in Music or in Theater and Dance, may involve a small number of students, e.g. instrument or voice lessons and so suggesting a limit does not make sense. It will be necessary for the institution to house non-credit programming in an administrative office and ultimately the Provost's office will be responsible for managing any academic programming.

<sup>9</sup> It might be prudent to begin Study Away Courses in January 2023, since they should not require staffing above what is already allocated, and they do not require on-campus resources during J-Term. They are also highly-desired according to the survey data. Janna Baehrens (OGE) indicated that her office could support two such trips with its current staffing, and has supported similar trips in the past that were integrated into courses. It may be that these courses would need to be counted as spring term courses in 2023 and would only be open to students enrolled at Amherst in that spring. It may also be better simply to wait until 2024.



unanticipated logistical implications, it is nearly impossible to calculate all the downstream effects without putting at least some programming into place. And if faculty or students are not interested in the courses and the programming offered, then J-Term need not exist indefinitely. Lastly, if staff continue to bear undue burdens then there will be ample opportunity to hear their concerns and to stop J-Term if it is not also meeting the needs of the whole campus community.

## **SECTION 9: POSSIBLE J-TERM CALENDARS**

Since at least the institution of the Julian calendar in 45 BCE, the framing of time has been inextricable from administrative and social ideologies. Our challenges are perhaps more modest than those facing Rome's first emperor, but the crafting of the college calendar does involve the complex need to balance two rival priorities: the desire to give J-Term as much time as possible for the imperatives of pedagogy and leisure, and the desire to allow the fall semester to begin as late as possible and the spring semester to end as early as possible. There is also the further desire to coordinate in some fashion among the Five Colleges. There are potential calendrical costs to any institution of J-Term, and we address them throughout this section.

### **Calendar(s) for J-Term**

The Committee's Charge includes examining "the possible compression of the academic calendar." There are several issues or requirements to weigh against one another:

- The number of hours necessary to meet external standard of accreditation and internal standard of excellent pedagogy
- Calendrical alignment among the Five Colleges
- The (possible) extended length of winter break if J-Term is held
- The need for meaningful breaks between semesters in order to offer downtime or transitional time between terms for students, faculty, and staff
- The administrative need to process the dossiers of students who may wish to return from a leave of absence or who may need to take a leave of absence (or policies that make J-Term impossible for those in limbo status)
- The need for faculty to turn around grades quickly, both at the end of the fall term and especially at the end of the J-Term (and/or the need to adjust policies concerning academic standing if final grades from the previous semester are not available when the January or spring terms begin)
- The possible shortening of the summer break if the fall semester must be pushed forward or the spring semester pushed back. This has potential effects on the use of holidays and vacation time for staff, the amount of time available for faculty research,

the alignment with school calendars for parents, and the prospects for students to take up internships that begin in May. It does not appear, however, to affect the date of commencement (traditionally, the last Sunday of May).

### **Hours and Calendar Issues**

The 2018 NEASC Accreditation Report provides the following description: "Courses typically meet for three hours per week, with the expectation that an additional nine hours of academic engagement will be spent in class, lab, discussion, studio, film viewing, and preparatory work."

This amount of time is for a "single credit" course at Amherst (which many other institutions refer to as a "four credit" course, using the national standards for course credit hours). A "half credit" course should involve one half the amount of time for coursework.

**In a thirteen-week semester this policy means that students will be academically engaged for 156 hours per course (13 weeks x 12 hours = 156). This number takes into account the reality that student diligence and time to mastery of material is variable and thus the number provides a basic guideline for structuring the expected quantity of coursework.** The two previous iterations of J-Term, which contained 16 instructional days (and 32 hours minimum of in-class time) meant that students were expected to spend 8+ hours per day on their course. This total includes class time, study, artistic practice, group work, meetings, etc. The main complexity, then, in offering a "full credit" J-Term course is that fewer than 16 days of class may not seem pedagogically feasible or may strain credibility about the ability of students to complete the requisite hours and work. A majority of faculty who taught in J-Term thought that they could not have taught their courses in less than 16 days. It is worth noting that the 16 class days of J-Term 2021 and 2022 did not use weekend days for class instruction, so the 16 days are spread over a period of 23 calendar days (not counting the Evaluation Day).

### **Past Versions of J-Term Calendar**

Past versions of J-Term used the following calendar (remembering that the Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday falls on the Monday of the 3rd week of January):

Week 1: M-F

Week 2: M-F

Week 3: T-F (Monday 17th MLK Holiday in 2022)

Week 4: M, T

Wednesday was an Evaluation Day (Final Exam, Final Paper, Final Project / Performance, etc.).

Thus class in January 2022 was held from January 3rd (Monday) to January 25th (Tuesday), with January 26th (Wednesday) used as an evaluation day.

Also note the following calendar dates for 2023 (with the new UMass spring term):  
Amherst College Spring Semester Begins Monday January 30, 2023<sup>10</sup>  
UMASS Amherst Spring Semester Begins Monday February 7, 2023

It is as of yet unclear whether Amherst may delay its spring term to come closer to the UMass calendar.

**A conspectus of possible calendars for 2023 (as an example year), with their several advantages and deficiencies described**

Note that no calendar in the prospectus drops below 16 days of instruction, which seems to be the absolute lower limit in light of the 156 hour expectation. The committee discussed a calendar that would hold class on Martin Luther King Day; it was unanimously rejected. Another point of note: calendars starting on Monday 2nd January (as in 2023) will probably require housing staff to work on New Year's Day if students are to be in residence.

J-Term 2023 "Same as J-Term 2022": 16 days instruction, 1 day Evaluation

January 2-6

January 9-13

January 17-20

January 23-24

January 25 (Wednesday) Evaluation Day

This calendar is compressed, as has been noted, and it is difficult to see how it could be more so. Some faculty report that 16 days were insufficient while others report being able to teach effectively under such parameters.

Grading: In most instances, faculty may need to turn around grades after J-Term in a short period of time (3-5 days) or policy about completed courses may need to be revised slightly. The greatest concern would be for a student who has failed a J-Term course then continuing in the spring term if failure in J-Term would place the student in academic jeopardy and/or facing withdrawal. Such a possibility would need to be communicated to the student's Class Dean well in advance of the beginning of the spring term, and course assessment might need to be structured in such a way as to

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<sup>10</sup> Amherst has traditionally begun spring classes on the last or second-to-last Monday of January.

limit the likelihood of unanticipated last-minute failure (e.g. via even distribution of assessment across the term).

J-Term 2023 "Max": 18 days

January 2-6 (5 days)

January 9-13 (5 days)

Sunday/Monday Break

January 17-20 (4 days)

January 23-26 (4 days)

January 27 Reading Day

January 28 (Saturday) Evaluation Day

This would provide a full 18 days of instruction across nearly 4 weeks. This has the advantage of allowing for more time for material to be presented and absorbed but also means that there is virtually no break between Evaluation Day and the (presumed) beginning of the spring term on Monday January 30. Pushing back the spring start date would alleviate such a tight turnaround, but again this may have costs at the end of term.

J-Term 2023 "14 + 3"

Another possibility would be to plan Saturdays as potential course days (full classes may not necessarily be held, but would be possible, if the course so required). This could provide 17 days of instructional possibilities, with 14 full instructional days. This provides more instructional time, but perhaps at the cost of time for students to process the material on their own or to take some form of a meaningful break. In this instance, a two-day "midterm" break falls during the MLK holiday. The result, using January 2023, would be as follows:

J-Term 2023 "14 + 3"

January 2-7 (6 days)

Sunday Break

January 9-14 (6 days)

Sunday/Monday Break (MLK Holiday)

January 16-21 (5 days)

Sunday Break

January 23 (Monday) Evaluation Day

J-Term 2023 "UMass" Calendar: 18 days instruction

UMass begins already in December. This option avoids over-compression, although it requires some instruction already in late December (see the subsequent entry for only 1

day of December instruction). This would almost certainly require meeting via zoom in December and it seems infeasible, if not impossible, to offer on-campus instruction before the New Year.

J-Term 2023 “UMass” Calendar: 18 days instruction

[This is close but not identical to UMass’s proposed J-Term calendar]

December 27-30 (4 days)

January 2-6 (5 days)

January 9-13 (5 days)

January 17-20 (4 days)

January 21 or January 22 (Saturday or Sunday) Evaluation Day

J-Term 2023 “December ‘Drop’ Day”: 18 days instruction

This model allows for one day of instruction in December (here proposed as December 30) and assumes that this day is a zoom meeting to start off the course (the subsequent instructional modality would be that of the course as planned). This would lengthen the period of time when students might begin preparing for the course (including preliminary readings or asynchronous work on or before January 2nd, the second day of classes). Its greatest advantage is to lengthen the period of time during which material can be absorbed by students. It includes a period between the first and second classes for completion of introductory materials and it contains 18 days of instruction with ample time for assignments. It also leaves a reasonable cushion of several days before the spring term. It may also serve other purposes. It gets around the frequent problem of the first day of instruction not running at full speed because of the need to use it to lay out the details of the class, introduce the course material, and handle other logistics (procurement of or access to course materials). It might also be ideal for a “pre-travel” meeting for a Study Away, community-oriented, or archival course that includes travel. Lastly, it offers a possible “Drop” Day on which students could choose to drop the course, in particular if they were thinking of returning to Amherst in order to take a course but might be on the fence about doing so. Such a decision is easier once students have a fuller sense of how the course will be run and what the instructor’s expectations are. This might alleviate some problems involving housing as well.

J-Term 2023 “December Drop Day”: 18 days instruction (with one Saturday)

December 30 (1 day)

January 2-6 (5 days)

January 9-13 (5 days)

January 17-21 (5 days)

January 23-24 (2 days)

January 25 Evaluation Day (Wed)

An alternative would be to drop to 17 (e.g. removing January 21) or even 16 days of instruction and/or move up the Evaluation Day accordingly (to Tuesday or Monday, 24th or 23rd) to provide a greater cushion between January and spring terms.

## **SECTION 10: POLICY AND ADMINISTRATIVE ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED**

While the committee has carefully surveyed and considered several aspects of policy that would necessarily need to be finalized for a successful J-Term, there are nevertheless several issues that the committee can contextualize and comment on but must necessarily refer to the most appropriate office or group for final deliberations and decision-making. In these cases the committee has referred these questions elsewhere precisely because they are complex and require thoughtful responses from those who are responsible for setting policy or enacting it, or because the matters require coordination between more than one administrative and/or academic unit (e.g. the **Class Deans, the CEP, and the Committee on Academic Standing** may all need to work out a policy concerning readmission for students wishing to take a J-Term course; the Office of Global Education and Residential Life may need to coordinate about housing restrictions for students who take a J-Term course and go on or return from Study Abroad).<sup>11</sup> We believe that these matters are beyond our purview, but do wish to signal their importance and the need for their resolution.

### **Academic Credit and Academic Standing**

There are several questions of academic policy that need to be addressed. As stated in Section 8: “The purpose of a January Term is to enrich and complement Amherst’s curricular offerings in compelling ways, by offering innovative courses and by addressing specific pressing concerns in the lives of our faculty, staff, and students.”

### **Academic Credit**

If J-Term provides the possibility for meaningful engagement in ways not always possible during the regular semesters, then should courses be taken for credit during J-Term only in order to make up for a numeric deficiency elsewhere in a student’s curriculum? I.e. should students not be allowed to use J-Term to take additional courses beyond the normal annual load? For example, students might have a 4-1-3 schedule or a

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<sup>11</sup> Note that the OGE and Associate Provost Pawan Dhingra have already determined that students leaving for Study Abroad in the spring may not take a J-Term course in residence because of the strain that this places on housing staff to turn a room around in time for other students returning to occupy the belatedly-vacated room. Such a restriction seems sensible and others like it will surely need to be put into place after careful deliberation.

3.5-0.5-4 schedule, but not a 4-1-4 schedule, except to make up for a deficiency in a previous year. Concerns have emerged: students may attempt to take extra courses during J-Term to “pad” their GPA for honors ranking; students taking extra courses might essentially be taking unpaid courses, which has staffing-cost implications; some students think that they should take a J-Term course simply because it is offered and because there is immense (peer) pressure to be doing something simply because it is a possibility, to misguidedly align activity with accomplishment. J-Term courses are not meant to be gathered as feathers in a curricular cap.

**The CEP** should consider if it would be useful to impose a limit to the number of courses or credits taken during J-Term over the course of a student’s career. It could, for example, be limited to 2 full credit courses in the student’s curriculum. Or 2 full credit courses for a grade. This would allow for the taking of four ½-credit courses, for example, or two ½-credit and 1 full-credit courses. In light of potential concerns about online instruction, this would also effectively limit the number of courses students might take in this format to 1/16th of their overall curriculum, if a student were to choose online courses during J-Term.

**The CEP** should consider if an additional P/F credit should be possible for full-credit courses (or a combination of ½ credit courses) taken during J-Term. In particular this may be especially useful for courses that focus on supplementing the curriculum by teaching a core set of skills or practices that are academically based in the liberal arts mission of the college but may also be taught in an innovative fashion and/or will provide an opportunity for students to take such an intensive, meaningful course without the pressure of being worried about their final grade, in particular if the course is outside their comfort zone. In this regard, it may also be worth considering if such courses should be explicitly taught as P/F courses (rather than as P/F optional).

**The CEP** should consider if broad-ranging policies concerning the use of J-Term for independent study courses and for thesis credit should be in place, including a possible ban on any such credit. During the trial period it will probably be best to begin with a blanket policy that says only courses specifically listed in the J-Term catalog may be taken during J-Term. Many departments expressed concerns that options for J-Term independent study or other courses (honors work) were rife for abuse and could exacerbate the very problems that J-Term should partly be intended to resolve: students could use J-Term to take extra courses or, alternatively, do less thesis work than an advisor might like while getting credit for it; faculty might feel compelled to offer thesis or independent study work, in particular untenured faculty might feel pressure to give in to the requests of students for such options when students have overloaded course schedules (especially for students in STEM fields and/or double or triple majors). The

committee recommends that initially only J-Term specific offerings be possible for credit during the pilot phase.

Clear policies need to be in place concerning students who are seeking readmission to college after a leave of absence. The Committee on Academic Standing reviews such cases and it simply may not be feasible to hold additional meetings of that committee between terms without unduly burdening faculty and staff (who may themselves be conducting or supporting a J-Term course). The committee recommends that students not be allowed to take a J-Term course if they have taken a leave of absence in the fall or will take one in the spring. This should be reviewed by the **Committee on Academic Standing, Class Deans, and Dean of Students**.

### **The Presence of Students on Campus, Housing, Residential Life**

The presence (and sometimes untraceable and changing presence and absence) of students, as well as the irregularity of arrival times, places a significant burden on Residential Life staff (as discussed in Section Six).

Clear policies about who can be on campus and when they should arrive should be considered. How to track students who are on campus should be examined. Such policies may include advance notice and registration by students of their presence and a commitment by students to remain on campus for the duration of J-Term. Would it, for example, be feasible to institute a system in which students pay a nominal fee/deposit to be on campus (with waivers or a sliding scale for those who cannot afford to do so)? Students should be on campus for a specific purpose directly related to the curriculum or co-curriculum that takes place during J-Term (lab work, honors thesis, a winter sport [but not other seasons], or for compelling personal reasons and with due application for waiver to Residential Life).

Should there be a policy of requiring students to leave campus if they do not remain enrolled in a course of some kind (or have an authorized co-curricular commitment)? Residential Life and/or the CEP will also need to consider the possible consequences of cases in which students may use J-Term to attempt to stay on campus and subvert such restrictions: a student could, conceivably, sign up for a J-Term course and then drop it at the final add/drop deadline in order to remain on campus during J-Term.

### **Institutional Infrastructure and Services**

J-Term placed a great burden on the registrar's office. With the institution of Workday there are considerable concerns about how J-Term registration may affect enterprise-wide operations. The concerns are not as apparent as one might initially think. The Registrar can in fact process registrations and Workday can eventually be implemented



for J-Term, but there are serious concerns about the knock-on effects. Many campus offices rely on the data provided by the registrar for other campus-wide systems and many of these systems may not yet be able correctly to handle the results of a J-Term registration. For example, their spring registration status may determine students' access to on-campus services. And so a scenario could develop in which a J-Term course basically counts a student as a spring-enrolled student, but they in fact graduate after their J-Term course or take leave in the spring, they might still have access to campus resources or facilities, when they should not. Precisely such complexities and others like it need to be addressed with an eye to the broader management of campus operations.

Another concern is the need to create Workday registration for J-Term. This is feasible on the technical side, but all governing academic policies must be in place before the software can be functional, since the implementation is necessarily tailored to policy regulations and constraints.

Enterprise-level systems will need to be examined by Information Technology (and in all likelihood other offices) to assess the effects of a J-Term on such systems. Information Technology will need to devise a means for course evaluations to be handled during J-Term as they are for the fall and spring semesters. This task in 2022 fell on the ADCs at the last minute and was a significant source of confusion and disruption. If it were to fall on ADCs in 2023 and beyond, then significant advance notice would need to be provided to the ADCs and/or staffing specific to J-Term evaluations should be put into place.

### **Course Offerings**

J-Term's offerings will need to be structured to have enough instructors while also not detracting from the overall offerings available to students. While there are reasonable expectations for some additional instructors and funding (J-Term had budgeted staffing in the past alongside volunteer labor), there is little interest among faculty to teach without remuneration. The most straightforward form involves having a J-Term course count towards the regular 2-2 teaching load of faculty. Some staff have expressed interest in teaching courses, but staff have also expressed considerable concerns about being overworked and needing time off. It may be reasonable to offer some incentives for teaching (such as faculty overload at the regular single-course rate). The Provost's office will need to coordinate these issues.

**The CEP (perhaps in conjunction with the CTL)** will need to devise a set of guidelines and stipulations to help determine which courses should be offered in a given year. Again, these constraints should give priority to courses that offer curricular innovation, address the interconnection of student well-being and learning, take advantage of a

diversity of instructional modes, and thoroughly consider the broader effects of a course on staff resources.

### **Financial Aid**

The Office of Financial Aid will need to consider how J-Term affects financial aid and if any restrictions will need to be in place for the purposes of compliance with internal and external policy. There will also be complications with billing and financial aid. These will need to be addressed initially through a conversation with the divisions of Finance and Admissions and Financial Aid.

## **SECTION 11: CONCLUSION**

**The Committee was impressed by the enthusiasm some faculty and students expressed for J-Term courses. We believe that the college would need to address the staff and infrastructural issues we have identified before any possible implementation. Our reluctance to propose a concrete motion at this time should not prevent us from recognizing the exciting possibilities that J-Term can afford the College as a whole.** Further commitments concerning staffing and the protection of staff resources will have to be worked out in the coming year between the administration and the staff, and similar measures guiding faculty involvement in the January term will be necessary. An additional reason to postpone a vote on J-Term at this time is that we do not want this decision to be rushed. The end of the semester is a busy and stressful time during which to consider a major policy change, particularly this year, in the wake of the pandemic. Since we do not believe that it is feasible to offer J-Term courses in January 2023, our report can guide the CEP, Committee of Six, and the administration in considering what mechanisms to put in place before bringing any motion about a J-term to the floor of the faculty. We suggest at this stage that an initial conversation be held in the Committee of the Whole in the coming weeks (or in another format if that proves more suitable).

## **SECTION 12: APPENDIXES**

## **Appendix 1A: Letter Requesting Faculty Discussion of the January Term**

Dear President Martin, Dean and Provost Epstein, and Colleagues of the Committee of Six,

We write in reference to the discussion of January Term (“J-Term”) courses during the [Thursday, November 11, 2021](#) meeting of the Committee of Six. We ask that the Committee of Six discuss the matter of the January term more deeply and that this matter be brought to the faculty for discussion at the next feasible Faculty Meeting. This is not per se a request that the J-Term be continued, let alone adopted permanently. Rather, it is a call for this matter (like all major questions related to teaching) to be treated as something subject to faculty governance. Whether or not this results in a vote on policy, we believe that such discussion will inspire careful, thoughtful reflection on the diverse possibilities for teaching Amherst students in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The past two years have been an ever-present reminder that we are not the sole masters of our fates, and that some of the most difficult, rigorous, and also innovative teaching may also be the most urgently needed in unusual times. It has also become much clearer what kind of teaching institution we do not want to be. Undoubtedly there are several complex issues to consider, and some of these extend beyond the pedagogical domain to logistical matters as well. As a preliminary to discussion, it will prove useful to outline some of the arguments as to why the faculty of Amherst College should consider the feasibility and value of formal J-Term instruction in various modes (online, hybrid, in person). The reasons are outlined alongside their relevance for matters of pedagogy, inclusivity, community, and logistics.

J-Term teaching creates possibilities for:

- Flexibility in scheduling: students participating in study abroad, students who have had to take fewer courses due to personal or medical crises, students who have experienced difficulties adjusting to Amherst, or student-athletes who might have especially busy seasons (pedagogy, inclusivity).
- Diversity in course selection: students wishing to take courses that might not fit into a busy schedule, especially, for example, STEM students exploring options in the humanities/social science curriculum but whose major requirements (e.g. labs) conflict with courses outside the major (pedagogy, inclusivity).
- Emphasis on different student skills: which skills or knowledge might be better explored in intensive formats (and which might not)? It has been observed that the J-Term format is probably less suited for scaffolded writing instruction, but instructors

have also noted, for example, that the development of public speaking skills may be better served in this venue (pedagogy).

- Experiential learning and class travel: Without the conflicts of term-time, these courses could better incorporate study/travel excursions into the regular curriculum, thereby providing flexibility and greater return on the course travel for faculty and students (pedagogy).
- Continuity in language instruction and other intensive learning environments: Providing bridges between semesters for (some) languages (or language levels), including the possibility of intensive language before study abroad (pedagogy) or formal grammatically-oriented courses for non-native speakers of a linguistic tradition.
- Community building: on account of the intensity and focus that such courses offer, other relationships are possible within these courses. We often speak of developing community as an aspiration of Amherst College, but during the semester it is often quite difficult to find the time or means to pursue this goal in our courses (community).
- Diversity in learning styles: an intense, focused approach to a single subject may serve students who find that the traditional curriculum only partially meets their needs or suits their learning style (inclusivity).
- A sense of educational community for students who must stay on campus: Students stay on campus during J-Term for many reasons. Perhaps they are international students, or student-athletes, or working part-time in faculty labs, or lack feasible housing alternatives (inclusivity).
- Flexibility in faculty scheduling: By offering more ways to arrange our teaching load, the J-term allows faculty to balance their work and life obligations. People already using the J-term this way include department chairs, colleagues with onerous committee assignments, colleagues teaching difficult or oversubscribed courses, and colleagues handling complex family demands on their time and attention (logistics).
- Innovation in Teaching: This new format inspires new approaches to teaching, including new uses of technology in teaching hybrid or online courses (pedagogy).
- Disaster Preparedness: Keeping abreast of technological innovations and pedagogical advancements related to hybrid/online teaching may prove essential should another pandemic or other major crisis strike (e.g., extreme weather). A corps of professors, however small, who continue teaching in these modes would amount to a living repository of best practices. (emergency/contingency planning).
- Resource Allocation (esp. classroom space): A continuing J-term would provide some relief to scheduling conflicts, including competing demands for classroom space during the semester. Even if we only continue the J-term on a temporary basis, it would help alleviate the problem until classroom space is built and/or changes in class scheduling are approved (logistical).

These reasons are the basis for discussion, not the final word. We recognize the several potential complexities or limitations of courses taught in J-Term: the headlong pace, the compressed timing, the potential unsuitability of certain topics or skills, coordination of the calendar and of Five College registration, availability of staffing, or the seeming paradox of close colloquy at a distance (in the case of online teaching). In addition certain pressing questions will need to be addressed: should such courses be taught only on a voluntary basis, should students be limited in how many J-Term courses they can take for credit, is it essential that other Five College students be able to enroll in these courses?

Many faculty who taught during J-Term have commented on the often-unexpected value and rewards of such teaching, despite the challenges and demands (See the [CTL video](#) on the discussion of J-Term teaching by several faculty members). While fewer faculty signed up to teach in J-Term 2022 than in 2021, this need not be interpreted as a lack of faculty interest. Because the J-term is not approved to continue past this year, and because these courses require so much pedagogical innovation and course development work, new faculty were always unlikely to invent new courses in this second year of the initiative, not knowing whether they would ever be allowed to teach them again. So, any natural attrition from our original J-term teaching corps was bound to result in an overall decrease in J-term offerings.

The timing and formats of J-Term may not be for everyone, nor should they need to be. Yet faculty who teach in J-Term—or those who might wish to do so—deserve to have their voices heard and their hard work recognized. This work has served the larger community, foremost the community of our students—and might continue to do so in innovative ways.

Respectfully Submitted,

Anston Bosman	Associate Professor	English
Ashley Carter	Associate Professor	Physics and Astronomy
Thomas Dumm	William H Hastie '25 Professor of Political Ethics	Political Science
Jeffers Engelhardt	Professor	Music
Christopher Grobe	Associate Professor & Chair	English
David Jones	Associate Professor	Geology
Laure Katsaros	Professor & Chair	French
Julia McQuade	Associate Professor	Psychology
Carrie Palmquist	Associate Professor	Psychology
Jessica W. Reyes	Professor	Economics
Yael Rice	Assistant Professor	ARHA/ASLC/ARCH
Catherine Sanderson	Poler Family Professor & Chair	Psychology
Joseph Trapani	Associate Professor & Chair of Biology	Biology / Neuroscience

Chris van den Berg	Professor and Chair	Classics
Kiara Vigil	Associate Professor	American Studies
Amelia Worsley	Assistant Professor	English
Tom Zanker	Assistant Professor	Classics
Anonymous	Untenured Faculty	---

## **Appendix 1B: Charge to the Ad Hoc Committee to Evaluate the January Term**

The Committee of Six charges the Ad Hoc Committee to Evaluate the January Term with conducting a comprehensive review and assessment of January term and considering the question of whether January term—in the current or an alternative form—should be adopted as a feature of Amherst’s academic calendar going forward.

The ad hoc committee is asked to evaluate the opportunities that January term affords in such realms as teaching and learning; the curriculum and co-curriculum; student life; community engagement; and faculty and staff workload, as well as any disadvantages associated with January term in these and other areas, including whether the college has the infrastructure in place to support students, faculty, and staff during January term, in its current form. The experiences of students, faculty, and staff during the January terms offered in 2021 and 2022 should be used as an important measure of the benefits and limitations of January term. Questions that the ad hoc committee will address include January term’s impact on the availability of courses in the fall and spring semester because of shifts in faculty teaching loads; the format of January term (hybrid, in-person, fully remote), issues surrounding academic credit and other academic policies; and the possible compression of the academic calendar. The Committee of Six requests that the ad hoc committee consider the feasibility of offering January term in the current form in the future from an administrative and resource perspective. The committee also asks the ad hoc committee to consider other options for offering an intellectually vibrant experience for students and faculty during some or all of the period between the fall and spring semesters, including offering courses that are shorter in duration and less intensive that would not be credit-bearing.

In undertaking its work, the ad committee is tasked with consulting broadly with faculty, students, and staff members across the college—including but not limited to students who took courses, engaged in research on campus, and/or were employed and/or remained on campus to meet other purposes or needs during January term; faculty who taught and/or supervised honors students during January term; and staff in the Office of Student Affairs, the Office of the Registrar, the Office of Institutional Research, the Center for Teaching and Learning, academic departments, the science

center, the Office of Admission; the Finance Office, and Campus Operations, among other areas. The ad hoc committee is asked to gather the views of the community via surveys and feedback gleaned from interviews with individuals and groups and to seek information from peer institutions that offer January terms.

The membership of the committee will comprise three faculty members; one member of the instructional staff who supported faculty during January term; the chief student affairs officer, or her designee(s); the interim chief financial officer; the director of institutional research and registrar services; and two students, each of whom took a January-term course. The ad hoc committee will meet weekly during the spring 2022 semester and is asked to share its report, which will include its recommendations, with the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP) by May 1, 2022. The CEP is asked to forward its views on the ad hoc committee's proposals to the Committee of Six by May 15, 2022. The Committee of Six will bring a motion regarding January term to the faculty by the conclusion of the 2021–2022 academic year.

February 7, 2022

## **Appendix 2A: CCE 2019 Report on Interterm**

To: Catherine Epstein and Austin Sarat

From: Zoë Jacobs

Date: February 22, 2019

Re: Interterm 2019

### **Background**

For the last three years, the Center for Community Engagement has influenced and helped shape the [content of Interterm](#), which is formally managed by the Office of Student Affairs. Interterm programming consists of workshops, research support through Greg Call and the Writing Center, and treks offered through the Loeb Center. Additionally, a number of athletes and international students are on campus so much of the current programming is designed to serve the students who are in Amherst rather than as high impact programs that would bring students back to campus early.

### **CCE's Role**

Using funding from a pair of three-year grants, the CCE launched the Design Thinking Challenge in 2017 and analyzed the structure of interterm to see if there were ways to make it more student-friendly. In 2018, we implemented a new structure for interterm programming and funded skill-building workshops. This year, the CCE continued to support skill-building workshops and worked with faculty members to identify technical skills we could offer that would help students succeed in Spring courses. As a result we piloted software training, in Photoshop and Vector Works, at the request of faculty in Architectural Studies and Theater and Dance. In partnership with Student Activities, we also piloted a new interterm course on ESports that invited students to explore this growing industry from historical, ethical, and business perspectives through in-class presentations and gaming.

### **Program Patterns and Takeaways**

Under the current Interterm model, any tracking of participation is done either very generally - students sign up for courses they are interested in online via Student Activities - or by individual course instructors/facilitators taking attendance during the run of their program(s). The CCE has asked anyone receiving funding support for their programming to share participation information directly with the department. We have also designed a simple assessment tool, with the help of the Center for Teaching and Learning, for students to fill out at the end of the experience.

In 2018 and 2019 the CCE supported roughly the same number of classes (see tables at the end of this report for CCE supported programs). Two of the courses the department had committed to funding this year (both of which were offered last year as well) had to be canceled because of low student sign up.

There were similar patterns seen in both 2018 and 2019:

- student interest seems to fluctuate - courses that were relatively well attended last year, had low/no enrollment this year;
- student energy/commitment is sporadic - a number of the courses saw students sign up, but not show up at all or only come for part of the course.



Anecdotally it appears that students are often more tired than they expected after the fall semester. The shortening of Interterm in recent years may have exacerbated this feeling. By the time students have gotten through the holidays, there are only a few weeks for them to regroup in preparation for the spring. While they are interested in engaging and learning over Interterm, when the time comes they find that they need more downtime than they had expected and so they bow out of the courses.

### Next Steps

As planning for upcoming Interterm programming continues, the college may want to take a deeper look at the purpose of the programming being offered during January:

- Can we look at data concerning who is actually staying on campus and why? Athletes, senior thesis writers, and international students are often here during January, but are there others?
- What are the concerns from an operational perspective? How does programming impact Residential Life, Dining Services, etc.? What is the effect for students studying abroad?
- Should programming be designed to entice students back to campus?
- Should programming be designed more specifically for students who are going to be on campus already?
- Who is best equipped to offer these experiences? Given the demands on faculty over this timeframe, is it better to have staff and/or outside facilitators design and implement programs?

Division(s)	Department(s)	Contact Person/People	Title of Course	CCE Funding Awarded	Participation
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Dean of Faculty	Architecture & ATS	Gabriel Arboleda & Asha Kinney	Intro to Adobe Illustrator	no cost	10
Dean of Faculty	Architecture & ATS	Gabriel Arboleda & Asha Kinney	Intro to Adobe InDesign	no cost	6
Dean of Faculty	Architecture & ATS	Gabriel Arboleda & Asha Kinney	Intro to Adobe Photoshop	no cost	9
Dean of Faculty	Art & the History of Art	Josh Baum	Analog Film Photography	\$250.00	7
Dean of Faculty	Library	Tim Pinault	DIY Photo Book	\$400.00	cancelled
Dean of Faculty	Mead Art Museum	Emily Potter-Ndiaye	Collecting 101	\$9,515.00	12
Dean of Faculty	Theater & Dance	Jeff Bird	Introduction to Vector Works	\$1,000.00	7

Dean of Faculty	Writing Center	Emily Merriman	Building a Multilingual Children's Book Collection	\$500.00	cancelled
Facilities & Student Affairs	Book & Plow Farm & Students Activities	Maida Ives & Paul Gallegos	Cooking from Memory-- Finding Home Through Food	\$2,500.00	4 sessions w/9-10 students attending each one
Student Affairs	Student Activities	Paul Gallegos	Bicycle Maintenance 101: the Mechanical Basics of your Bike!	\$400.00	8
Student Affairs & DoF	Student Activities & CCE	Paul Gallegos	Critical Topics in Esports	\$1,250.00	6

Division(s)	Department(s)	Contact Person/People	Title of Course	CCE Funding Awarded	Participation
Dean of Faculty	Art & the History of Art	Josh Baum	Adventures in Photography	\$220.00	11
Advancement	Alumni & Parent Programs	Sebastian Merrill	Finding Home: How to Find Your First Apartment	\$284.75	no final #s received
Advancement	Alumni & Parent Programs	Sebastian Merrill	Budgeting Workshop	\$2,000.00	no final #s received
Dean of Faculty	Library	Timothy Pinault	IPhone photo to Cyanotype, Digital to Analog Photography	\$300.00	4
Dean of Faculty	Mead Art Museum	Mila Waldman	Collection 101: Acquiring Art for the Mead	\$7,210.00	10

Dean of Faculty	Mead Art Museum	Jocelyn Edens	Hall Walls: Constructing Worlds with Tatjana Potts	\$1,100.00	5
OD&I and DoF	OD&I and Loeb Center	Tenzin Kunor & Casey Jo Dufresne	Budgeting Workshop - 1st Gen students	\$3,482.55	13
Dean of Faculty	Political Science	Chipo Dendere	Thinking Social Entrepreneurship	\$6,997.87	no final #s received
Dean of Faculty	Writing Center	Emily Merriman	Building a Multilingual Children's Book Collection	\$1,000.00	no final #s received

Student Affairs	Student Activities	Paul Gallegos	Bicycle Maintenance 101: the Mechanical Basics of your Bike!	\$400.00	8
Student Affairs & DoF	Student Activities & CCE	Paul Gallegos	Critical Topics in Esports	\$1,250.00	6

### Appendix 7A: J-Term at Other Institutions

Williams College - [WINTER STUDY](#)

Wellesley College - [WINTERSESSION](#) - *suspended 2021 and 2022 due to COVID-19*

Wesleyan University - [WINTER SESSION](#)

Bard College - [INTERSESSION turned WINTERFEST](#)

Smith College - [INTERTERM](#)

Swarthmore College - [J-TERM](#) - *only in January 2021*

Colby College - [JAN PLAN](#)

Bates College - [SHORT TERM](#) (in May) - *suspended 2020 and 2021 due to COVID-19*

Middlebury College - [WINTER TERM](#)

Bard College - [INTERSESSION turned WINTERFEST](#)

St. Olaf College - [J-TERM](#)

Oberlin College - [WINTER TERM](#)

Cornell University - [WINTER SESSION](#)

Colorado College - [WINTER START](#)