# UFC Motion: ad hoc committee on alternative semester options

# Rationale:

The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted instructional and other practices for the 2020-21 academic year, upending “business” as usual. Balancing a need to mitigate health risks and uphold our commitment to serving students’ academic and logistical needs, UMW met the many challenges creatively and carefully. Among other things, adjustments to the academic calendar reduced student travel to and from campus. For example, all instruction moved on-line after Thanksgiving; in addition, spring semester began late and instruction continued through what would have been spring break. All difficult decisions, these changes represented the University’s best options. However, one consequence was a very long winter break and time away from classes, so we took this hopefully one-off situation to schedule additional “J-term” courses as a voluntary instructional opportunity for faculty and in order to provide community and curricular options over that long break for students.

Faculty and students who participated in the 2021 J-term reported enthusiasm and a positive experience. In addition, J-term revenue provided a much-needed boost for the University’s strained budget. Recognizing *the potential* for an additional revenue source as budget restrictions continue, this fall UMW administrators began discussing with faculty the possibility of adding a J-term to the regular academic calendar. Some faculty have also argued that the nature of higher education is changing such that more flexible (or varied) options are being adopted broadly and that—if we do not follow suit with expanded options--we will lose student loyalty and tuition dollars to other commonwealth universities.

UMW’s 2021 experience with J-term—as positive as it was—occurred within a unique moment; no matter the measure of “success,” it is impossible to draw conclusions about whether or not a change in policy would be good for the University moving forward. In addition, faculty have expressed mixed responses to the possibility of offering a J-term or other alternative in future years (such as 5-, 8-, and/or 10-week terms for some courses). The University Academic Affairs Committee (UAAC) took up the question of a J-term during the 2020-21 academic year, conducting research on the variety of models existing at other universities and analyzing the impact that various options would have on the academic calendar. During fall 2021, UAAC followed up this research with a faculty survey on questions regarding the length of a J-term, willingness to move spring semester back a week, and support for adjustments to the contract period. The clearest conclusion from survey results (besides resistance to the latter two options) was that simply surveying the faculty does not resolve the multiple questions. Any changes should be on the table for serious consideration only after broader faculty participation in researching the question. Any policy changes need to be informed by faculty-driven analyses, and research by faculty across governance units should determine whether (or not) a pedagogical or curricular argument can be made in support of alternative terms.

# Resolution:

The UFC resolves to form an *ad hoc* committee to explore and investigate options regarding the timing and structure of courses, to report findings to the UFC, and to make a recommendation for the UFC to consider.

Committee Charge:

1. Identify whether or not there are compelling pedagogical and curricular reasons to implement either a January-term or other options for alternative term structures;
2. Identify the various costs and benefits to adopting alternative course models;
3. Identify potential equity issues for both faculty and students, including financial aid and scholarship concerns, etc.;
4. Informed by the research already compiled by the UAAC, the committee should determine whether additional research is needed to understand the range of existing models throughout higher education, particularly in public liberal arts universities and particularly in the region and Commonwealth, and including information about the experiences of those universities and their faculty (and, if so, should complete this research);
5. Report findings and make one or more recommendations to the UFC. First, does the committee recommend the University move forward with implementing alternative terms (or not at this time);
6. Any recommendation(s) for changes should include implications for staffing. Does the recommended change mean added burden on student support services (WI/SI center, help desk and other technology support, counseling, tutoring, academic services, library services) and are there other support requirements?;
7. Any recommendation(s) for changes should include implications for the contract period as provided to the UAAC in spring 2021; any recommendations should specify necessary contract period adjustments;
8. Any recommendation(s) for changes should include implications for changes to the timing of graduation in relation to the end of finals and grading due dates and as provided to the UAAC in spring 2021;
9. Any recommendation(s) for changes should take into consideration the current UMW context, including the President’s announcement of a project to revisit our University mission at this, the five-year anniversary of our current mission’s implementation. Does the timing of the President’s examination of the future of UMW affect the committee’s recommendations at this time?

Committee Membership will include faculty from relevant faculty governance committees, as well as staff representation, for a total of six committee members:

* University Curriculum Committee, nominated by UCC;
* University Faculty Affairs Committee, nominated by UFAC;
* University Academic Affairs Committee, nominated by UAAC;
* University Staff Council (nominated by Justin Wilkes, USC Chair)
* Two at-large faculty representatives, selected by UFOC

In addition, the Committee will seek input from the Budget Advisory Committee, the Student Government Association, the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, the Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Research, the Registrar’s Office, the Provost, the Director of the Teaching Center, the Director of Digital Technologies, and other offices and units as would be helpful.