Discussions in Academic Governance about possible modifications to the academic calendar began in 2008 with a Task Force exploring a number of suggested changes. The task force reviewed calendars nationwide, and gathered community input through a survey of faculty and students, and a questionnaire sent to colleges and MSU administrative offices. After much deliberation, the Task Force found, in most cases, no compelling argument to make significant changes to the calendar. While advantages were identified to creating a fall break, beginning the academic year after Labor Day, creating a spring sub-term, and aligning the spring break with public school breaks, each change also had negative repercussions.

- Fall semester is currently four days shorter than spring semester; a fall break would create another interruption in instruction (of particular concern in laboratory courses), decrease the number of instructional days, and create additional disparity between fall and spring.
- Ten year calendar projections with a post-Labor Day start date resulted, in some years, in an exam week that concluded on December 21-23. Strong opinions were expressed about the end date’s proximity to winter holidays and the “grades due” date for faculty members.
- Changes in the spring semester and the timing of spring break were linked, in discussions, with the scheduling of the spring sub-term.
- Additional information was requested around the creation of the sub-term.

In March, 2010, I sent a memorandum to the University Committee on Faculty Affairs, specifically seeking advice on three options. The first was the addition of the “Spartan Session” (working title), a sub-term of spring semester that would begin the first working day after the January 1 holiday, and end the last working day before Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Second, was the scheduling of fall commencement at the end of final exam week, instead of the weekend preceding final exams. Finally, was the alignment of calendars with the spring break of the public schools in Ingham County.
Subsequent investigation during the 2010-11 academic year discouraged movement on two of the three outstanding items.

- MSU’s spring break currently occurs at the mid-point in the semester, which is deemed desirable by many. Some investigation indicated that the school vacation schedules of public school districts is a negotiated occurrence within school districts, for a particular contract period, and that there would be some difficulty in using that information as a basis for long-term planning within the University.

- The creation of a spring sub-term has significant implications for the disbursal of student financial aid. Federal regulations determine the timing of disbursal based on the first day of spring semester. A later start of the spring semester to accommodate the sub-term inadvertently delays the disbursal of financial aid for many thousands of students. Numerous options were considered, from short-term loans to other administrative configurations for the sub-term, with no satisfactory solution. While there were many other challenges and opportunities identified in the administrative review of the creation of the sub-term, the problem of financial aid disbursement well into January as the disadvantage it creates for students dependent on aid for their living expenses is not easily overcome, unless there is a modification in the federal financial aid regulations.

The final option for which I asked advice received strong formal and informal support. Administrative review of the option indicated no substantial barriers, and so the scheduling of fall commencement at the end of final exam week, instead of the weekend preceding final exams is being implemented. In fall semester, 2012, commencement is scheduled for Saturday, December 15, the Saturday following final exam week.

There is a long tradition in universities of asking ourselves why we do what we do, so I have no doubt that the conversations about the academic calendar will be repeated, perhaps with different outcomes. This reflects our current status.