“Let’s Reschedule Thanksgiving!”
Paul V.M. Flesher

With more than five feet of snow in Buffalo, N.Y., and temperatures having fallen into negative territory across most of the northern states, winter has arrived, no matter what date the calendar labels as the season’s official start. Forgotten are August’s grain harvest and September’s apple picking. We are bundled up against the winter wind, shoveling our walks and winterizing our vehicles.

So, why are we only now celebrating Thanksgiving? Thanksgiving is supposed to be a harvest festival. If it commemorates the first harvest of the Pilgrims after they landed in Massachusetts Bay in 1622, then the last Thursday in November is the wrong date. While the exact date of the Pilgrims’ feast is unknown, the two contemporary records of the event make clear it took place in thanks for the harvest gathering just completed.

Since Massachusetts is quite far north in the United States, then the harvest would have been completed by early September. If we include the pumpkin harvest, which ripens latest, the date could have been late September, perhaps the first week of October. None of these possibilities gets close to the start of November, let alone the end.

The real problem with Thanksgiving is that the date was set before our modern, school-based calendar and it really ruins the fall schedule. Coming three months into the four-month fall semester, it places a three-day holiday just one month before an even larger Christmas break. And because it is so long, it prevents a decent fall break halfway through the fall semester, when it would do the students some good.

At the time the date for Thanksgiving was established, school was the last thing on anyone’s mind. There was no national requirement for universal education, even at the primary level. By 1900, only two-thirds of the states required or funded public education. Now that the school calendar shapes the year’s rhythm, we should align Thanksgiving with it.

As a teacher, I find that Thanksgiving prevents a strong push with a solid final unit. If I start before Thanksgiving, then the big break occurs and students forget half of what they learned. If I start afterward, then there is not enough time.

And pity the poor music teachers trying to get the kids ready for the Christmas concerts. Just a week or two from the big event, they disappear from rehearsals for half a week.

And there is no real reason Thanksgiving has to take place in late November. It does not commemorate any specific religious event, like Christmas or Easter. One can “give thanks” anytime. To the extent that one gives thanks for a harvest (the Pilgrims’ or our own), it is appropriate any time from late August to October.

Why is Thanksgiving celebrated when it is? For the early decades of our nation’s history, Thanksgiving was a state celebration, with different states celebrating at different times. In the 1820s, Sarah Josepha Hale, the editor of the influential “Godey’s Lady’s Book,” began an annual campaign to establish a national holiday.

Her promotion gradually gained a following until, in 1863, Abraham Lincoln decreed a national day of Thanksgiving on the last Thursday of November. Lincoln saw this as a way of celebrating the importance of national unity during the Civil War.

Yet, Lincoln established the holiday for only one year. He and his presidential successors inaugurated a tradition of proclaiming the holiday each year afterward. It was not until Congress voted during 1941 to establish a permanent holiday, at the instigation of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, that we have Thanksgiving as we now celebrate it.

So, the presidential link to Thanksgiving lies in the emphasis on national unity during war. Thanksgiving is important, but their emphasis is not thanksgiving for the harvest, but for the nation and for the sacrifice soldiers were making for it. Again, this is an important reason to be thankful, but not one that requires any specific date.

So, let’s move Thanksgiving to the middle of October. That way, harvest will be over and the crops stored away. It will be late enough to eat pumpkin pie, but not so late that winter will be upon us. The festival will take place in the middle of the fall, so it will fit nicely into the school calendar and provide students with a much needed break, helping them concentrate better the rest of the semester.

Flesher is a professor in UW’s Religious Studies Program. Past columns and more information about the program can be found on the Web at www.uwyo.edu/relstds. To comment on this column, visit http://religion-today.blogspot.com.