



To:

Dean Claudine Gay, *Faculty Council Chair*

Prof. Edward Hall, Caroline Light, Kenneth Rogoff, and Jocelyn Viterna, *Faculty Council members of the Committee on Undergraduate Education*

Dear colleagues,

The following is the sense of the Harvard Graduate Students Union, prepared based on survey responses and conversations among our working members, and ratified by unanimous consent (with each specific recommendation receiving majority support) at our General Membership Meeting of February 1st, 2022.

A teaching assignment is an important responsibility, and those of us who perform this work typically structure much of our semesterly research and study around it. Accordingly, being reassigned to a different course on short notice is a source of significant duress for our members. The traditional current-term registration system results in unpredictable enrollment numbers for the first few weeks into the term and the reassignment of hundreds of TFs and CAs in response, which adversely affects us both as students and as workers.

Respondents are clear that, by affecting job security and our ability to plan ahead, “shopping week” has had a very important influence on our pedagogical training, professional development, and mental health. Our experiences with shopping week include:

**Reductions in pedagogical opportunity:** Teaching staff reassigned to new courses after the term has already started cannot participate in course planning for their newly assigned course. They may need to devote undue effort to logistical arrangements, instead of course preparation and building relationships with students. Graduate students in this position lose research time for several weeks as they rearrange their schedules and catch up in their new course. Finally, several respondents indicated that the courses to which they were reassigned were on topics outside their area of expertise, exacerbating pedagogical challenges.

**Unpaid labor:** When teaching staff are reassigned, the preparatory work they had put into their original course is lost. Some TFs are originally assigned to teach multiple sections of a course but then reassigned from one, having to develop lesson plans for an additional course without a corresponding increase in pay.

**Partial compensation:** If administrators are unable to find a TF a replacement for their canceled teaching appointment, the student worker is guaranteed 70% of the lost pay under our new contract. This alleviates some of our financial stress, but can still be a painful shock for our tight budgets—and it does not compensate for the lost chance to



prepare, succeed and grow as effective teachers in our chosen fields.

**Mental health costs:** The volatility inherent in shopping week has adverse mental health impacts for student workers, causing what one respondent described as “weeks of wasted time, depression and anxiety, economic uncertainty, and academic underperformance”. The July 2020 [Report of the university’s Task Force on Managing Student Mental Health](#) found that approximately 1 in 4 graduate students exhibit symptoms of moderate to severe clinical depression and anxiety, and cited financial hardship and professional uncertainty as major contributors to these problems.

We recognize that undergraduate students cherish the opportunity to experience courses before committing to a schedule, and that this opportunity has special value for first-generation and low-income students who may face greater obstacles to the exploration of different academic paths, such as lack of prior familiarity with a field or family pressure to pursue a specific career. We hope these features can be retained or compensated for in a redesigned system. We also believe equity is served by supporting high-quality pedagogy across the catalog, not merely giving the savviest “shoppers” a chance to distinguish good courses from bad. Undergraduate education as a whole stands to benefit from reforms that will allow TFs and faculty to be well-matched to each subject area, and well-prepared with curricula and lesson plans.

**We support efforts to reform course registration that provide graduate students the security we need in our work arrangements, and undergraduate students the information they need to choose courses with confidence.** Regardless of the final course registration policy chosen, we hope this will be an opportunity to improve education across Harvard’s Faculty of Arts and Sciences by ensuring that student workers are supported in preparing to teach to the best of our ability, unhampered by financial or professional insecurity.

Specifically, the Harvard Graduate Students Union endorses the following points of the Undergraduate Council’s proposal for Shopping Week reform:

**Retaining smaller sections:** Establishing an enforceable presumption that, once planned and assigned to a Teaching Fellow, sections will not be dropped for lower-than-expected enrollment, and will instead be made smaller, within reasonable bounds.

**Preference ranking:** Centralized department- or FAS-wide course ranking systems allowing student workers to indicate their interest in working for multiple courses in order of preference, to improve outcomes and ease logistical problems when it does become necessary for teaching staff to be reassigned.

**Mandatory pre-indication form:** At the end of each semester, require non-graduating undergraduates to complete a nonbinding form expressing their interest in four courses for the next semester before viewing their final grades.



**Earlier course information publication:** Recognizing that the traditional system sometimes results in Canvas sites and syllabi going unpublished until instruction begins, leading to fears among undergraduates that in-person attendance is an indispensable source of direct information, we support initiatives as suggested by the UC and Committee on Course Registration to gather and share information about what makes syllabi most useful as tools for course selection, and to make detailed course information available well in advance of each term.

We also endorse the following other proposals suggested by Harvard Graduate Student Union members:

**Students should be required to register for classes in the previous semester.** We support this recommendation of the Report of the Committee on Course Registration because we believe undergraduate education will be best served by providing courses with well-matched teaching staff who have the preparation time and security we need to teach to the best of our ability. Other interventions to mitigate remaining teacher reassignment due to add/drop activity may further improve the FAS educational and pedagogical experience.

**Register for sections at the same time as courses.** Section leaders as well as course heads need to plan in advance, and specifying section times prior to the beginning of the course would reduce hardship due to uncertainty in section allocation within a course.

We thank you for your attention and consideration.

Sincerely,

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