

In Support of Previous Term Registration **Anya Bassett and Caroline Light**

As Directors of Undergraduate Studies, we write in support of instituting Previous Term Registration. Our responsibilities include organizing the curriculum and advising programs in our respective concentrations, and we also teach and advise undergraduates. We know our students well, and we believe that our experiences give us a unique perspective with which to reflect on the merits of Previous Term Registration.

We believe that Previous Term Registration would have compelling administrative and educational advantages. Further, we believe that implementing it could significantly change Harvard culture by encouraging students to [slow down](#), be more thoughtful about their choices, and [embrace commitment](#) rather than constantly trying to keep their options [open](#). We dare to think that by transforming the first week of each semester from a hectic, stressful scramble into a time of serious educational engagement, Harvard undergraduates might in turn become more focused on the deep learning and genuine interpersonal connections that facilitate the intellectual, social, and personal growth at the heart of our mission.

Administrative Advantages of Previous Term Registration

The administrative advantages of Previous Term Registration are many and have been carefully catalogued in the [report](#) of the Committee on Course Registration. Put most simply, if faculty know how many students to expect in their courses, they know what size room to reserve, how many teaching fellows they should hire and train, and how to design their lesson plans. The administrative costs of the previous system are perhaps most devastating for graduate teaching fellows who cannot depend on reliable employment when enrollment numbers are unknown or unpredictable.

Educational Disadvantages of Shopping Week

Shopping Week cheats students and faculty of a week of instructional time. Students drop in and out of classes all week, often arriving well after a lecture has started and leaving while it is still going on. This is not to say that nothing of lasting value takes place during Shopping Week, but we can report that it is exceptionally difficult to concentrate on one's lecture while students filter in and out. Many faculty don't try to teach anything of substance, focusing on performance and entertainment instead. Further, recognizing that Shopping Week doesn't "count," many students don't pay attention (or even attend classes they plan to enroll in) during the first week of classes. We wonder whether this experience contributes to a [culture of performativity](#) at Harvard College.

Cultural Disadvantages of Shopping Week

The very idea and accompanying practices of Shopping Week cultivate a consumerist educational culture. Indeed, the unfortunately named "Crimson Cart" in my.harvard

contributes to the consumerist logic. The traditional practice of “shopping” for classes -in the absence of Previous Term Registration- encourages students to dart from class to class seeking the elusive “gem” (an easy *and* entertaining class) and we wonder whether, subtly or unsubtly, shopping encourages students to see themselves as consumers or “purchasers” of education rather than as active classroom participants, and to perceive faculty as “sellers” of a commodity or experience.

What Previous Term Registration Would Offer

Previous Term Registration would allow instructors to plan for the semester with a clearer sense of how many students they will be teaching while providing graduate students with more reliable information about their employment and enough notice to appropriately prepare for the course they are teaching. Larger courses, which depend on larger teaching staffs, would especially benefit from Previous Term Registration. More time to appoint and train teaching fellows would translate into higher-quality instruction.

We hope that Harvard will institute a system in which students will meet with their academic advisors in the middle of each semester to reflect on their experience, discuss possibilities for the future, and thoughtfully consider course options for the next term. We believe that such a process would prompt students to slow down and step back during this time, and we think mid-term advising conversations would not only help students plan for the future but would also help them to make the most of the current term. Under our old system, advising is often focused on the beginning of each semester; we believe that a Previous Term Registration system necessitating a mid-term meeting would lead to more vibrant advising relationships. And we think that pausing to engage in conversation might lead students to be more mindful of their academic experiences and, perhaps, about their extracurricular commitments as well.

We recognize that the success of this venture will rest on faculty, academic advisors, and departmental administrators collaborating to provide students with the support and information they need to make thoughtful and informed decisions about course selection. This in turn will require a significant shift in course planning chronology, so that fall course plans must be solidified in the early spring and Canvas sites populated with draft syllabi and other materials to provide students with the information they need to conduct their course explorations in a timely fashion. Faculty will need to solidify their teaching plans and provide early, detailed information on their course websites. We believe that these adaptations will improve the quality of undergraduate education.

Previous Term Registration would not inhibit student choice, nor would it prevent students from changing courses early in the semester. The experience of students who attend peer institutions with Previous Term Registration is telling: there is a set time each semester when students meet with their advisors and choose courses for the next semester. When students change their minds early in the semester, they drop one course and add another. But generally, once students enroll in their courses, they start with a commitment mindset, being fully present

from the beginning of each semester. There is little of the existential angst we have witnessed on our campus during Shopping Week.

Finally, we recall that in 1995, when administrators announced that house assignments would be randomized, 82% of undergraduates [opposed](#) the measure, and the editors of the Harvard *Crimson* [opined](#) that “randomization will not lead to a substantial integration in Harvard’s social life, and it will destroy any sense of community.” Just five years later, an [editorial](#) in support of open swipe access across the houses stated, “we’re all Harvard undergraduates; our friends – thanks to randomization – are just as likely to be in one House as another; and all of us would like for our friends to be able to visit without arbitrary barriers.” If Previous Term Registration is approved, we wonder whether, in five years, it too will be considered a natural and positive part of the Harvard experience.

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