

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

Esteemed colleagues,

Thank you for providing space for the GSAS Student Council (GSC) to advise you on our understanding of graduate students' experience of the current course registration system, based on our conversations with and survey responses provided to us from our constituents.

Graduate students serving as Teaching Fellows (TFs), Teaching Assistants (TAs), and Course Assistants (CAs) consistently express how important it is that their time in the classroom helps them improve their most important responsibilities while at Harvard. They want to provide their students their very best as teachers. They want their teaching time to help them in their role as students – both in terms of gaining greater mastery of pedagogy but also in applying that knowledge to become better learners themselves. And they want their teaching to inform their own research. We routinely hear frustration that Shopping Week makes all of these goals significantly more difficult than necessary. Specifically, our constituents report that the current system results in a **lack of TF preparation in the classroom, serious precarity, negative mental health outcomes, and lost productivity**, all of which negatively impact both undergraduate and graduate students' experiences in the classroom.

Lack of TF Preparation in the classroom

Lack of TF preparation is a consistent, pervasive issue. While this varies from department to department, some of our students report failing to receive TF assignments until as few as 2 days before the semester begins *as a standard departmental practice*. Students in all departments, meanwhile, are subject to changes in their assignments as late as two to three weeks into the semester. This makes it difficult to prepare for material in advance, plan together with their head instructor, and (given that we are in many cases speaking of relatively inexperienced teachers) it can make it difficult to form a good working relationship with students who have already developed a classroom dynamic with someone else. TFs who are expected to reserve classes by their departments report difficulty securing classroom space with the correct technology needs if they do not know what their assignment is until the last moment, when classrooms may already be booked. Students in departments that require highly technical knowledge for their TF duties also report difficulty finding suitable TFs on short notice from outside the department if their courses over-enroll. None of these issues serve graduate students' in their goal of teaching well, and they most certainly do not serve undergraduates.

All of this is to say: from the perspective of graduate students who teach, and in their interest to be at their best in teaching, a model of fixed pre-term registration would be best. It would allow TFs to work on the material well in advance and to perhaps even tailor their sections or classes to their research and vice versa, thus beginning to become a colleague during the studies. It would allow them to gauge the size and number of sections or classes and to prepare befitting teaching strategies and techniques; and so on.

Serious precarity

We understand that precarity has been foregrounded in discussions of graduate students' complaints about Shopping Week, but it is hard to overstate how serious the problem is and how tightly it is linked to the other three problems we describe here. While it is true that the graduate students' union (HGSU) has won the right for students who lose a promised assignment to still receive 70% of their pay, it may be useful to put numbers on what that means. Because this applies to students outside of the guaranteed teaching period, they are no longer receiving top-up salaries and their pay may be less than their originally funded stipends. We have heard of students earning \$30,000 or less during this period. A typical graduate student room in the greater Boston area costs \$1200 a month, or \$14,400 a year. On 70% of a \$30,000 salary, that leaves \$550 a month remaining for all other expenses, including groceries, transportation, books, utilities, and childcare. This is a *decent*-case scenario. At least one student reported seeing their credit scores go from the mid 700 range to the lower 500 range over the course of two years because of missed payments under the current system. We have also heard of student parents having to make decisions between paying for formula or paying for bills. In a tight budget, the difference between 100% and 70% of expected pay is the difference between a decent standard of living and poverty with long term detrimental effects.

The lack of guaranteed teaching hits international students (35% of the GSAS population) especially hard, because their right to remain in the country is contingent on maintaining employment and a minimum income level, but they are prohibited from working outside of the university. In cases where students have to pay tuition and health care (i.e. upper G-year students), they take home less than that required minimum. Unsurprisingly, international students persistently report anxiety about being deported.

Negative mental health outcomes

Financial precarity, fears over employment and immigration status, anxiety over classroom performance and teaching ability, concerns about the roles that Q scores have on long-term employability, and persistent uncertainty directly contribute to negative mental health for graduate students. The scope of the problem is beyond a document as short as this, but the Provost's Report of the Task Force on Managing Student Mental Health makes clear that it is pervasive and that each of these specific factors are significant contributors.

Lost productivity

Each of the above issues directly contributes to lost productivity. When students are assigned, reassigned, or unassigned from sections, the work they put into preparing for assignments is wasted. Mental health struggles affect students' ability to show up consistently and put in their best work, and it is clear to us that students' morale, beyond merely being a problem of "bad attitude," has serious implications for the amount and quality of work they can produce.

It is also the case that time is finite, and the financial precarity the current system creates pushes students to spend it elsewhere. Domestic students who have lost teaching assignments report taking side jobs to cover the difference, including ushering, teaching more hours elsewhere for less pay, and, in at least one case we are aware of, as a performer at a strip club. Students are also choosing to undergo increasingly long commutes, some as long as two hours each direction, in an effort to find more affordable housing. This takes time away from the work they do at Harvard, and they express frustration that it extends their time to degree (TTD), something GSAS urges departments to put added pressure on students over, increasing their stress. Given that GSAS operates at a net loss with respect to graduate students and that strong TTD is directly tied to the ability to attract talent, lost productivity has far-reaching consequences for the fiscal health of FAS more broadly.

The GSC believes all four of these problems – lack of TF preparation, precarity, poor mental health, and lost productivity – are sufficiently damaging to *all* of our students' educational experiences and the financial health of FAS that they illustrate the need for an adjusted model. While we understand changing the registration process cannot address all the difficulties graduate students face, we would not expect it to. The present proposal falls short of that, as an incremental one that cannot guarantee appointment certainty in all cases. We therefore support it as a *minimum* set of changes that would be necessary to *begin* providing graduate students with a degree of stability that would allow us to plan ahead, spend less time dealing with issues arising from financial precarity, and permit us to prepare for courses in ways that are pedagogically sound. This will improve the classroom experience for all.

We are impressed by many of the recommendations put forward by the Committee, particularly the emphasis on close advising for students in taking agency over their course choices. The emphasis on gentle but still individualized guidance during this period seems like it would be especially valuable for non-traditional students who may not be able to navigate the free-for-all atmosphere of the current model as savvily as some of their more knowledgeable peers. There is appetite amongst graduate students to be included as members of this advising network, particularly amongst those who have worked with thesis students in the past and found the work to be especially meaningful to their own development as teachers. Many have voiced their support for the idea of making early materials available to students in deciding their courses as part of that – even in cases where a syllabus for *this* course may not yet be ready, access to materials like previous syllabi, recorded lectures, and teaching statements are seen as valuable. Indeed, graduate students themselves would find access to materials like this useful in thinking about how to develop their own pedagogical skills. Graduate students also support an early

registration system that would make numbers more settled earlier in the year, while acknowledging that buyers remorse is real. In fact, they have expressed shock that there is even debate over offering a short Add/Drop period at the beginning of each semester, which they consider necessary.

The GSC believes that the proposed model benefits both undergraduate and graduate students. By emphasizing *informed exploratory decision-making, agency, learning, and stability*, the proposed system serves *both* graduate and undergraduate students better than the current model. We certainly hope you agree, and would be happy to have a representative come speak with you further if it would aid in your deliberations.

Respectfully,
GSAS Student Council