

Undergraduate Response to The Committee on Course Registration:

Seeking A Real Compromise that Protects our Liberal Arts Education

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Summary

Shopping Week Strengthens Harvard's Mission of Education

In a Fall 2021 referendum, undergraduate students overwhelmingly favored preserving shopping week, with 96.46% of participants voting to restore Shopping Week, the system of registration that was in place in Fall 2019 and earlier, as soon as safely possible instead of moving to an early registration system.

Shopping Week is foundational to the Harvard experience. It alters lives, shapes worldviews and changes trajectories. It is central to a culture of curiosity by allowing for students to choose courses not based on what sounds good or fills requirements, but based on what feels interesting, meaningful and worthwhile. Students are able to tailor their learning in unexpected ways and make the most of a liberal arts education.

Restoring Shopping Week not only preserves a storied and valuable tradition that helps sustain Harvard's community; more crucially, shopping week upholds and **strengthens our liberal arts education**.

Shopping week taught me that college is not a series of trials to survive or resume lines to rack up, but rather a unique opportunity to reimagine who you are and who you want to be.

Michael Cheng, '22

The Committee on Course Registration (CCR) [proposes](#) eliminating shopping week and requiring students to enroll in courses during the preceding semester. We, as representatives of the undergraduate community, strongly disagree with the premises of the CCR's studies and the serious policy changes that the CCR has proposed.

We have collaborated, bringing in feedback from the entire student body¹, to propose a compromise. We recognize that certain logistics of shopping week have always caused and may continue to cause challenges for faculty and admins (and students and grad students), but we are confident that these issues can be mitigated, and that the benefits of entirely eliminating certain administrative hurdles are not best or even adequately

¹ Using Crimson OpenGov, a virtual town hall platform launched this semester, we heard from more than 100 voices in the preparation of this report.

overcome by the substantial intellectual, environmental, and equity costs of eliminating shopping week and rigidifying Harvard's course enrollment system.

Rebutting the CCR's claims about shopping week and proposing real compromises

The CCR argues that shopping week undermines teaching by creating enrollment uncertainty, complicating hiring of course assistants/teaching fellows, reducing instructional time, creating stress for students, making advising more difficult, and complicating room reservations.

Many of these concerns are legitimate. The goal of our report is to interrogate whether these concerns outweigh the benefits of shopping week, and whether there are other ways to address these concerns that do not involve eliminating shopping week. We found that, more often than not, the CCR's proposal either did not adequately address the concern that it brought up, or worse, **introduced the opportunity for new and worse problems that undermine Harvard's educational mission.**

Faculty members would face far greater difficulties and far tighter timelines when they want to offer a new course. Varsity athletes would become further isolated from the broader College community (undermining Harvard's institutional goal of "strengthening bonds between DHA, the College, and FAS"). Students from underrepresented backgrounds would face new barriers to exploring fields that they might have never encountered during high school or from their families. Many first-year students would become even more influenced by helicopter parents and pre-professionalism. Course evaluations would become even more stressful for faculty and graduate students, as students would rely increasingly on course evaluations for guidance in selecting their courses (indeed, this may cause course evaluations to move outside of the direct oversight of the College to platforms like [RateMyProfessors](#), a phenomenon common at other universities and already [potentially taking place](#) at Harvard without professors' or administrators' awareness).

Amidst a [national mental health crisis](#) on college campuses exemplified by multiple first-year suicides at [Yale](#), [Dartmouth](#), and other peer institutions, and a Harvard task force trying to [improve](#) mental health, **pre-registration would create a new source of systemic stress** as students would pre-register for classes during the most stressful periods of exams and papers. 89% of students surveyed this semester voted that overall, shopping week is less stressful than pre-registration.² These are not addressed in the CCR's proposal. Relatedly – and very surprisingly – the CCR report also leaves

² [See data in Appendix: Data From Students](#)

entirely unaddressed the question of disproportionate burdens or challenges caused by the elimination of shopping week on many minority, undocumented, low family income, and first generation college students. The CCR report also has neglected to study the potentially substantial consequences of eliminating shopping week for undergraduate enrollments in humanities courses (where surveyed interest among incoming students has been declining), in newly-offered courses or courses by new professors, and in niche or more strenuous courses as opposed to “gem” courses or popular large-lecture courses.

Because shopping week provides innumerable educational benefits³ that cannot be replicated by pre-registration, we are advocating for solutions that avoid eliminating these benefits while resolving or mitigating or eliminating existing enrollment problems. We believe that it is essential that Harvard first study these areas prior to making a substantial change away from over a century of curricular practice.

Harvard can make reasonable and balanced improvements to shopping week to address concerns

The CCR’s concerns can be addressed, not through an overhaul of enrollment, but through a series of improvements to shopping week; proposals like mandatory pre-indication, investing more into staffing classes with TFs, less rigidity in Harvard’s approach to TF hiring, reframing what the first week of class can be, using technology to streamline processes like room reservations and classroom switching, and more clarity ahead of time from departments about what courses they’re going to teach, will all create a more effective and enjoyable course registration process for all those involved.

We appreciate the time and effort invested in the CCR’s investigation. Both the CCR and undergraduates share common goals: we agree that it is important to create the best possible college experience, that course registration is a complex issue, and that problems raised in the report deserve consideration. However, we strongly disagree with the CCR’s final conclusion. We strongly reject remodeling course registration for narrowly-defined efficiency rather than for education, and we will continue to advocate for undergraduate and graduate students and faculty who believe that the enormous benefits of shopping week must be preserved and strengthened rather than replaced.

³ [See data collected in Appendix: Data From Students.](#)

Our Response

Introduction

The concerns about shopping week are not unique to Harvard. Similar institutions, such as Yale, have eliminated shopping week and flexible enrollment in the first week of class, immediately sparking backlash. Yale alumna Minsun Cha, quoted in an article from the [Yale Daily News](#), states: “The shopping period is part and parcel with the liberal arts experience that Yale has to offer. And what makes Yale so different even among similar institutions is the flexibility that comes with that, and the diversity of opportunities that students have to go out of their comfort zone, and really look for what interests them in ways that are unexpected.”

We urge Harvard to avoid making the same mistake as Yale by significantly constraining the quality of education in the name of administrative efficiency. We will respond to points of contention brought up in the CCR proposal as well as concerns raised by faculty and students in our independent investigation.

It was always Harvard's glory that nobody expected you to stay the same—that if you acknowledged not knowing where you were going, that was a positive, an indicator that you understood you were incomplete as a human being and came to Harvard, in part, to grow. You were taking control of yourself. I fear that administrative convenience (supported by some unconvincing arguments about the impossibility of predictive enrollment models) is pushing Harvard toward becoming a place for preprofessional training, where students will arrive expected to know what they plan to become and what they are going to study, and will then spend four years executing their plan. Many will successfully do exactly that, until they wake up in a cold sweat senior year—or a decade or two later—wondering how they wound up so dissatisfied with their perfectly executed and utterly unexamined lives.

Harry Lewis, Gordon McKay Professor of Computer Science
Dean of Harvard College (1995-2003)

Analyzing the Committee on Course Registration's Concerns

The Committee on Course Registration (CCR) has recommended that Harvard require students to enroll in their courses during the preceding term. While many of the concerns raised by the CCR are valid and important to consider, rather than trying to address them by disposing of shopping week, we want to consider them within the proper framework: Are there other solutions unrelated to course registration that could be implemented to mitigate the burdens identified by the CCR? Following such steps, do the problems caused by shopping week outweigh the benefits that come with shopping week? Without this framework, we believe that the CCR pre-registration proposal does not adequately address the concerns it raises.

We recognize that these burdens fall on the shoulders of faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate students alike. Below we present our thoughts on the burdens for these parties.

Predicting Enrollment Numbers

The CCR's primary justification for pre-registration is that "we take the problem of enrollment uncertainty to be the most pressing, and we therefore focus the most on that."⁴

We object to this claim on two grounds. First, the CCR did not consider ways to gather additional information from students. As part of our proposal, we suggest a non-binding pre-term course planning form to be completed as a requirement to access final grades. We discuss this more in our proposal for a "Pre-Indication" form rather than a "Pre-Registration" form (see "Our Proposals: Uncertainty").

Second, the CCR's contention that "it is impossible to make meaningful progress without implementing a new system of course registration" appears to be based on remarkably little data or analysis of alternative scenarios.⁵

The CCR made this claim by citing a senior thesis by Dianne Lee '20, which applied several predictive models (i.e., Random Forest, Markov) to predict course enrollment numbers during the 2018-19 academic year, during which shopping week was in effect.

⁴ "Report of the Committee on Course Registration," 19.

⁵ Dianne Lee, "A Classy Affair: Modeling Course Enrollment Prediction", Harvard College senior thesis, 2020, https://courseregistration.fas.harvard.edu/files/courseregistration/files/diannelee_thesis_final.pdf.

Apparently on the basis of one senior thesis, the CCR declared that “it is almost impossible to predict enrollments for new courses.”⁶

However, the thesis itself concluded (in the abstract on the second page of the thesis) that:

The findings from this thesis support the inclusion of predictive learning models in Harvard’s course enrollment prediction and section allocation process.⁷

More specifically, the thesis recommended:

Based on our results, we believe that the adoption of a Random Forest model in course enrollment predictions specifically for existing courses would significantly improve accuracy and provide a helpful guideline for departments and the Office of Undergraduate Education when determining sectioning.⁸

There is no section of the thesis contending that predicting course enrollment numbers would be impossible or infeasible. In fact, the thesis argues that further study – incorporating NLP models and using a more complete feature set – will substantially improve course enrollment prediction and improve TF parity.⁹

As machine learning and artificial intelligence rapidly advance, it seems inconceivable that predicting course enrollment numbers is impossible. **If Amazon can predict what you will buy with a reasonable degree of confidence and micro-target ads, how is it impossible for Harvard to predict what courses students will choose?** The senior thesis cited by the CCR’s report itself contradicts that claim. A serious attempt to predict course enrollment numbers would involve far more research, and it seems highly likely from the research already undertaken within Harvard’s Computer Science Department that such research would generate “meaningful progress” in enrollment predictions.

Furthermore, a pre-registration system would not in fact fully resolve administrators’ concerns over enrollment uncertainty. The CCR admits in [their own public documents](#) that “whether FAS retains a ‘Shopping’ period is separate from managing the variability of enrollment numbers.”¹⁰ This is because of a continued add/drop period and Harvard’s

⁶ “Final Report of the Committee on Course Registration,” 21, https://courseregistration.fas.harvard.edu/files/courseregistration/files/final_report_of_the_committee_on_course_registration.pdf.

⁷ Lee, 2.

⁸ Lee, 53.

⁹ Lee, 54.

¹⁰ “Report of the Committee on Course Registration,” 2, https://courseregistration.fas.harvard.edu/files/courseregistration/files/report_of_the_committee_on_course_registration.pdf.

institutional commitments. In the CCR's own words, "the uncertainty of course enrollments derives from FAS's commitment to accommodate student demand as much as possible, ***not the presence of shopping period.***"¹¹

Not only members of the Undergraduate Council, but also scholars in Harvard's Computer Science Department, are confident that the university can gain tremendously from further research in course enrollment prediction at Harvard or even from using the services of an outside artificial intelligence company to develop an algorithm to aid course enrollment prediction. There appears to be few grounds – and no grounds within the machine learning study cited in the CCR report – for concluding that artificial intelligence cannot improve course enrollment prediction at all, and cannot provide any "meaningful progress" desired by the CCR.

Undermining Teaching

The CCR argues that with advanced knowledge on the size of their class, professors could more effectively plan their courses. Much of the concerns revolve around classes facing a dramatic change in class size. These dramatic changes could also be taken into consideration through our aforementioned "Pre-Indication" rather than "Pre-Registration" form (see "Our Proposals: Uncertainty").

But this overshadows another very important pedagogical variable: student engagement. A week of shopping pairs students with classes in which they feel excited and confident that they will be able to engage in the material and class environment. It lets students experience different teaching styles which can motivate or meet the specific needs of different students. It lets students devote time to exploring classes and to discovering what kind of academic material they should focus on for the rest of the semester. These aspects add enormously to the learning environment, as after shopping week professors and TFs are more likely to be faced with a classroom of students who truly want to be there, learn the material, and engage with their teachers.

It is difficult to quantify the benefits of slightly greater certainty in enrollments. However, we do not think that the marginal benefit of more enrollment certainty offsets the losses in educational vigor, exploration, and serendipity that the CCR's proposed policy would cause. This is especially true given that the benefit of shopping extends to every class on campus. The teaching benefit of pre-registration extends to a smaller subset of classes that get surprised by enrollment, not the many smaller courses of less than 16 students (not included in the CCR's data when analyzing course variability). Most classes, when these additional courses are taken into consideration, do not face serious surprises about enrollment. Teaching may improve in the subset of courses that would

¹¹ "Report of the Committee on Course Registration," 2.

have faced significant changes in enrollment; but this may be offset by worse pairings in every other course on campus.

Loss of Instructional Time

The CCR claims that shopping week shortens the effective teaching time of a 13-week semester to 12, arguing that productive instruction does not occur during shopping week. We argue that shopping week provides a greater advantage than a 13th week. The number of weeks spent learning is not as important as the quality of learning. As all students and education scholars intuitively know, one gains little if anything from spending extra hours on an assignment or in a class if one dislikes the class or cannot appreciate the material in the first place. Yet, one can learn tremendously if one loves the material, appreciates the instructor, feels a sense of belonging in the class, and makes a personal commitment to being in the course. Shopping week provides the opportunity to compare different professors' teaching styles. Reading a PDF of a syllabus—or since many faculty prefer waiting to create their syllabus, [“detailed class information”](#)—does not provide nearly enough information for students to choose classes that are best for them. Reading about course topics, grading basis, etc., does not capture the professor’s rhetorical and pedagogical style. The rapport between students, teaching staff, and professors can also be difficult to discern from an online course preview. When students have a chance to experience what the class is like, they can make better choices about classes which benefits instructors, who are left with courses full of students more fit for the course and engagement style.

Shopping week is not necessarily lost time for teaching. We detail a plan to allow for teaching to occur during shopping week (see Our Proposals: Teaching Through Shopping Week).

For our response to more concerns brought up by Faculty, Graduate Students, and the CCR please see Appendix: Existing Concerns

Unaddressed and New Concerns Caused by Pre-Registration

The CCR's pre-registration proposal leaves numerous serious concerns unaddressed. Though some of them were mentioned, little elaboration was provided on how these problems would actually be handled under a pre-registration system. Additionally, the proposed system seems to create substantial new problems for students and faculty alike, which have been little discussed or fully neglected in the CCR report. While much of our support for shopping week is rooted in what it has provided us, our cause to defend it is also grounded in the concerns for these future problems that the CCR does not seem to have considered as seriously.

The Add/Drop Period is Insufficient

A central claim to the CCR proposal is that the Add/Drop period will provide students with the same flexibility they currently have. Their proposal, then, amounts to having students indicate 4 courses they plan on taking one semester in advance and then having the freedom to move around freely during the first week. If this is the case, then how could it possibly address the problems that the CCR has outlined in the report? The add/drop period, even if it is significantly lengthened, is not enough to address many of the concerns brought up, and we have used this as a starting point for several of our proposals.

Additionally, the CCR report's odd claim that Add/Drop is effectively a substitute for shopping week is a difficult case for the CCR. The CCR report claims that students "will be just as free, and just as welcome, to attend as many courses' initial class meetings as they were during the pre-pandemic system of In-Term Registration." This semester, however, even without pre-registration in place, we have seen that students are shopping and changing classes less. We surveyed the student body this year and found that **86% of respondents reported less flexibility from Add/Drop compared to shopping week**¹². This is because the normalcy of shopping week has been eliminated. Nominally, students were free to add and drop classes like a shopping week, but psychologically, culturally, and structurally they were meant not to. Indeed, this is precisely and explicitly the purpose of the pre-registration change: to ensure predictability by effectively eliminating flexibility and making sure that students are not "just as free, and just as welcome."

This would also limit the flexibility around General Education courses, since they have a lottery process that has to be navigated in order to enroll. When students are free to move between courses during the add/drop period as the CCR suggests, how will slots from students wanting to leave be divided up among other students wanting to enter a

¹² [See data collected in Appendix: Data From Students](#)

General Education course? Will there be another lottery? Will students be expected to keep a certain number of courses in their crimson cart or remain on “waiting lists” for these courses indefinitely? This is just one example of an issue with this system that the CCR should address before the faculty decides whether or not its system is truly the better solution.

Time Management Struggles Lead to Poor Decisions

Another benefit that shopping week provides is time focused on course selection. Under the new pre-registration proposal, students will need to choose their classes in April or November of the preceding semester. This means students will select future classes during a week where they are attending other classes, doing homework, preparing for final papers and exams, having club commitments, and so forth, without the time of a winter or summer break to reflect on the past semester and consider their future classes or intellectual paths. These factors would lead many students to put off choosing classes, or to choose hastily without carefully researching the course materials provided.

Furthermore, students would choose their courses before getting the results from prior courses. This would be especially bad for those who need to take a make-up exam (meaning they don't have a final grade by the time the new semester starts) and those who wished to look at feedback on their final exams (since there are set time periods we are allowed to look at our actual answers and those set time periods are late in the decision making process). This means that it will be harder to decide between classes that build off each other, such as Chem 27 from Chem 17, PS3 from PS2, and any above introductory level language class, along with many other courses.

Choosing courses very early already makes it harder to choose classes appropriately, and choosing during a fully busy late-in-semester week would make it increasingly difficult for students to choose carefully or to sacrifice some focus on their upcoming exams— in any case, adding another stressful task to their plate. This is likely to result in poor decisions made by students, worse pairings between students and classes, and more adding and dropping that needs to take place in the first week, distorting a key perceived benefit of pre-registration and making the system more complex rather than more efficient. The task of choosing classes effectively can take hours depending on the student and intellectual area, and it's worth it for all of us to have time set aside for that. Shopping week allows students to give time to thoughtfully consider and choose courses, and thus promotes healthy schedules (See more on this in several of Our Proposals)

In addition to leaving unaddressed concerns, **pre-registration also causes many new concerns that must be considered when deciding whether to institute it.**

Specific Harms to Languages, Music, Arts, and Concurrent Master's Students

Page 26 in the CCR's pre-registration proposal indicates that "during course registration, students will be limited to enrolling in four courses, the equivalent of a full rate of work for a term. Students who wish to take more than the regular load of courses during a term can add the additional courses during the first week of classes as part of the add/drop process."

While pre-registration involves good intentions, limiting students to pre-registering for 4 classes would create unhelpful new barriers for many students' academic pursuits. Students pursuing languages, music, and independent projects frequently enroll in courses such as Music 16b: Radcliffe Choral Society to get credit as a fifth course. This would no longer be as easily possible, as students who wanted to enroll in the extra course would hit the four course limit, creating a new registration barrier.

Furthermore, students pursuing a [Concurrent Master's degree](#) are required to take 36 courses in total across 8 semesters. They most often have to overload by taking 5 classes in four semesters and 4 classes in the other four semesters, and many of these courses are seminars or graduate courses with stricter enrollment conditions. Under pre-registration, before the Fall these students would have to register for four classes in April and then wait until September to add a fifth course. However, many graduate-level courses required for the Concurrent Master's program have applications or are capped, and with vastly less certainty over what their course schedules will ultimately look like, it will become substantially harder for students taking fifth courses to effectively balance their course loads. Under pre-registration, students would have to stress about waiting six months to find out whether they can get into the course they need to take to fulfill their academic plan of study, or to find out if they need to adjust their other four courses because they suddenly cannot take their intended fifth course.

Rather than unnecessarily restrict students' course choices and create needlessly bureaucratic rules, Harvard should preserve their ability to genuinely explore a liberal arts education by improving and restoring in-term registration.

Increased Pressure on Faculty/TFs to Maximize Course Reviews

Under a pre-registration system, students would be more likely to choose courses based on course reviews, not the actual quality of teaching, increasing the pressures

that faculty and graduate students feel to maximize their reviews. Ironically enough, this would likely create a more negative culture of consumerism that some faculty wish to minimize by eliminating shopping week.

One key benefit in Shopping Week is that students get to understand their courses holistically: the teaching fellows, the professor(s), the potential classmates, the potential changes to a syllabus, the structure of the course within the classroom, and so on. Without that holistic process of exploration, students must rely on numbers from their peers: particularly how many course hours they estimate they spent per week on the material and a numerical grade that is meant to encompass the fullness of the professor's abilities. This one-dimensional information is amplified by the fact that student comments have been removed from the Q guide, leaving out room for variance and creating even more pressure for faculty and TFs to do whatever they can to get the grade.

Ultimately, students may have to rely on sources of information about courses far removed from the view or oversight of faculty and administrators. With shopping week and a comprehensive Q guide, professors can broadly understand how students respond to their courses and why students might choose or not choose to enroll. With these tools removed, students may rely on information posted on [RateMyProfessors](#), [Reddit](#), [Facebook groups](#), and [Instagram](#) to guide their course selection— leaving professors with less insight into what information students see about their courses, and little to no ability to counter gossip before students decide on enrollments.

Some faculty have concerns that course registration pressures also contribute to rampant grade inflation at Harvard College. It would make sense that in a system where students are going into a course largely blind as to what they will encounter, that giving higher grades to more students will increase the likelihood of a good Q-guide score and of having more students in the future. Pre-registration would only heighten these trends since students would no longer be able to try out classes for themselves and see what they are like. Instead, students would focus even more on course evaluations as they have no other way of really seeing what a class is like, and pressure on faculty and graduate students to give higher grades would increase.

It should be feasible to study the impact of different course registration practices on the nature, location, and effects of students' reviews of their courses, by looking at trends at other schools around the US. However, it appears that the CCR has not yet conducted such research into these trends.

More Pre-Professional Pressure for First-Year Students

While Harvard remains committed to a liberal arts education of broad knowledge and exploratory curiosity, many parents, who have themselves struggled in an unforgiving job market and difficult economy, are less aligned or understanding of these educational values. There is already tremendous pressure from parents to pursue the “smart” paths: economics to become an investment banker, pre-med to become a doctor, pre-law to become a lawyer, and most recently computer science to become a programmer or “the next Bill Gates.” These pressures vary in severity between households, and under the watch of helicopter parents, first-years would choose courses under an extreme amount of pre-professional pressure.

*She called me after meeting her first advisee for the first time. “OK, you got me into this,” she said. “What do I do now?” A young man had come into her office and announced that he actually did **not** want to study CS, even though that is what he had said on his Harvard application and that had been his special talent in high school. “I want to become a studio artist,” he said. “I had to wait until my mother dropped me off before I could tell anyone that.”*

Harry Lewis, Gordon McKay Professor of Computer Science
Dean of Harvard College (1995-2003)

Shopping Week allows students to explore their academic possibilities away from the warnings and back-seat-driving advice of their parents. It protects Harvard from becoming a place where students merely stack as many useful, resume-building classes as possible, always asking themselves “what would my parents think about this?” or “what will my future employer think about this?” It’s an institutional reminder at the beginning of every semester that curiosity without calculation is still valuable—that there’s still room to think outside of what’s practical and into what’s merely interesting. That “merely” doesn’t always have to describe it.

More Academic Barriers to Historically Underrepresented Students

Students from underrepresented backgrounds would face even more academic barriers than usual under a pre-registration system.

Many women in the math department have struggled to find their place in the department, and cite shopping week as a distinct help in reinforcing their self-confidence in their ability to take a course, or even ensuring that the professor or TF they studied under would give them the respect that they deserved as one of the few women in the department.

The math department has a real problem getting qualified women to take advanced classes. The ability to see that you can handle a class without the pressure to commit to it, make sure the professor doesn't make demeaning comments, and see that you have classmates like yourself is incredibly valuable and cannot possibly be accounted for by an early registration system.

Concerned Graduate Student

This pattern is similar for women in other STEM fields, for many students who identify as first-generation or low-income, as well as students of color or students with disabilities. Students of color often talk amongst themselves about whether or not they felt comfortable in a class based on how the professor taught certain topics within their subject, whether they were cognizant of certain racial and class implications in their work. For students with disabilities, this looks like ensuring that the professor is someone who cares about the success of *all* their students. If a professor is not as aware of the needs of their students or has more difficulty engaging with students of color or students of different sexual and gender identities, then a semester in that professor's course as a historically disadvantaged or underrepresented student can be difficult. However, with shopping week, these are situations that can sometimes be identified and averted, making the ability for students to explore and match themselves with classes appropriately even more important.

For more discussion about new concerns created or amplified by pre-registration, please see Appendix: New Concerns.

Conclusion

The Committee on Course Registration's proposal trades exploration for marginal logistical refinements and damages the spirit of education that we seek to foster at Harvard College.

Quoting directly from [Harvard College](#),

The mission of Harvard College is to educate the citizens and citizen-leaders for our society. We do this through our commitment to the transformative power of a liberal arts and sciences education.

Beginning in the classroom with exposure to new ideas, new ways of understanding, and new ways of knowing, students embark on a journey of intellectual transformation.

Shopping week is in the spirit of this mission, providing students with a chance to experiment and explore. The difficulty of the system is expected; if it was trivial to implement, it would not be unique. Harvard, as an institution with countless resources and advantages that can be dedicated to fostering students' education, that were advertised to us and many previous classes of Harvard students before we chose to enroll, has a responsibility to take measures to preserve shopping week, not eliminate it.

We have taken the CCR's report seriously, and used it as a starting point for our own proposals. We have outlined our proposals and documented how they address the most significant shortcomings with the status quo and the CCR proposal. Faculty are well aware of the overwhelming undergraduate support of shopping week for what it adds to our educational experience. We are willing to acknowledge that the current system is not working perfectly, but believe we should make an earnest attempt to improve it, not eliminate it. The following are only a sample of the solutions that we have developed in collaboration with faculty, undergraduates, and graduate students. We are sure that there are even more ways that Harvard can create positive change and maintain its mission if we only seek them out. **Perhaps Harvard should convene a new registration improvements committee focused on generating community consensus for improvements to in-term and pre-term registration, rather than following in the footsteps of other universities to adopt a completely new and less beneficial previous term registration system.**

Our Proposals: A New System that Preserves Exploration and Addresses Concerns

We acknowledge that giving students flexibility is in tension with the ability of faculty, graduate students and the registrar to anticipate enrollments. Our proposals center on reducing this uncertainty through other means as much as possible, and eliminating the burdens that the inevitable uncertainty leftover will cause. In both areas we are focused on **creating value for all stakeholders** in a way that the CCR's proposal's overreliance on the add/drop prevents it from accomplishing.

The Piece-By-Piece Approach

As the Committee on Course Registration has pointed out, there are many groups, individuals, technologies, and institutional structures that make shopping week challenging. We have sought to address each of the individual concerns with new and exciting ways to enhance curricular exploration and course registration.

A Shift in the Culture: "Exploration Week"

To address faculty concerns regarding the consumer culture present in shopping week as it currently exists and to emphasize our willingness to seek compromise, we propose that shopping week could be renamed to exploration week. By changing the name of this new system, similar to how what we experienced during the pandemic was labeled course preview period, we are committing to creating a new and better system based on the problems and benefits of the previous systems. It will be a refreshing change, and allow students and faculty to together shape the culture and meaning of this period of time.

Graduate Student Work: New Models for Assignment and Reassignment

Based on conversations with graduate students, we believe that eliminating shopping week will not meaningfully improve job security for graduate students. Any form of extended add/drop period can alter student enrollment, so hiring issues would still exist in the CCR proposal both due to add/drop as well as the gap between upperclassmen and first-year enrollment (April to July). We propose rethinking the relationship between student enrollment and the number of teaching fellows in a classroom, as well as the way that teaching fellows (TFs) are re-assigned.

Paradigm Shift: Smaller Sections and More Student Attention

The graduate students that we have spoken to claim that departments often ask ahead of time what students would like positions teaching. Additionally, Harvard's Graduate

Student Union has secured 70% payment security for jobs that are lost as a result of course registration changes. At the start of the semester, when teaching positions are assigned, the college likely has the budget to pay all of the anticipated teaching fellows. It is therefore unclear why a decrease in course enrollment numbers **automatically** change the number of employed course staff.

According to the Committee on Course Registration, in a typical year, enrollment changes cause 720 sections to be added and 530 to be dropped (based on 2018-19 data in their proposal to end Shopping Week). Harvard's endowment [increased](#) by \$11.3 billion in 2021; President Bacow, in a January 3, 2022 interview, stated that the increase in the endowment has led to a \$110 million budget [increase](#) in the current fiscal year and under Harvard's [normal distribution formula](#) will eventually lead to a \$565 million annual budget increase if the value of the endowment remains completely flat. If the average section costs Harvard \$8,000 and Harvard completely stopped canceling all 530 sections (which is unlikely), Harvard could institute this policy at a maximum cost of \$4.24 million a year.

It is possible for Harvard to revise its policies to minimize section cancellations, providing much more predictability for teaching fellows and improving undergraduate education by reducing class sizes. A motion passed by the [GSC in 2014](#) called for strict 12-person caps on section sizes, stating that smaller groups improve discussion and feedback. A [Crimson article](#) published later that year makes similar claims, stating "As fundamentally and foremost an academic institution, Harvard should prioritize classroom learning. Cost should not be an issue."

Overhiring TFs

As mentioned previously, the average section costs Harvard \$8,000. If Harvard stopped canceling all 530 sections, Harvard could institute this policy at a maximum cost of \$4.24 million a year. Harvard has the money to preserve a beloved tradition **and** pay its graduate student workers. Although this is already a small portion of the \$110 million budget increase, it is a substantial overestimate. First, under the current union contract, TFs get 70% pay if their section is dropped. Second, by reducing uncertainty in advance of the semester (see [Uncertainty: Reducing Uncertainty with an Anticipated Schedule Form \(Pre-Indication\)](#)), 530 is an upper bound. Third, in the old system, many of those dropped TFs and sections moved into other sections. For these reasons, \$4.24 million marginal cost is likely a significant overestimate. We estimate \$1-2 million per year to be more likely.

Re-Assignment of TFs: Course Ranking System

In some departments, like astronomy, keeping all the original sections would not be feasible because of a limited pool of TFs. In these cases, when course enrollment changes, TFs must be re-arranged between courses and keeping excess TFs in courses is not an option. This problem also arises when more sections/graduate students are needed overall. In these situations, the problem is not cost (all students who want to teach are given work), but the problem is logistics and graduate student subject preferences.

We propose a course ranking system that graduate students can use to indicate their time availability, which subjects they have a specialty/special interest in teaching, and any other factors that go into the TF allocation process.

This system does not need to be reserved for departments with teaching fellow shortages. If some courses undergo enrollment decreases and TFs no longer feel that they are no longer placed optimally, they could use this system to switch to courses that require additional staff. Additionally, if faculty find themselves in need of additional teaching staff, this system could provide an effective way to recruit additional qualified and willing graduate students.

The Bottom Line

This problem can't be solved by making one declaration across the whole university. Instead, structural changes should be made that allow each department to have more flexibility with how they facilitate the adjustments to their sections numbers, and the resources for each faculty member to obtain TFs and graduate students to obtain teaching experiences that are as good of a match as possible, regardless of the course registration model.

Uncertainty

Reducing Uncertainty with an Anticipated Schedule Form (Pre-Indication)

A portion of the uncertainty for the registrar comes directly from expected student uncertainty about courses. This is not uncertainty that we want to tamp down because of how critical exploration is during shopping week is to the academic experience at Harvard.

A portion of that uncertainty, however, comes from the lack of a communication channel between students and the registrar prior to shopping week. This is an opportunity to improve the current system without taking away from what makes shopping week important.

Students have a range of flexibility going into the semester. A freshman might be – and should be – almost completely clueless about what to take. Sophomores and juniors will have clearer roadmaps for concentration and GenEd requirements that they must knock off. Seniors might have classes that they absolutely must take to graduate.

Since students already must submit Q scores to get their grades early, we propose adding a course planning form into this process, with completion of the course evaluation necessary to see grades early, and the completion of the pre-indication form being necessary to see final grades at all. The same way that students are incentivized to fill out Course Evaluations to receive their grades, they can be incentivized to indicate what courses they plan to enroll in for the next semester.

This form can be creatively structured and iterated a few times for maximal predictive power. For example, a naive form might just ask students to list the 4 courses they plan on taking. An expansion to this might ask students to provide propensity scores alongside these 4 intended courses. An even better version might look directly at student activity on my.harvard, with one of the above intended course forms. We'd like to consider many manifestations of this form, but here is one. First, students share their rough plan: "I'm going to take two math classes for my concentration, one will probably be Math 122 or Math 121, the other I'm not sure. I'm probably going to take an intro language course, either Spanish, French or Korean. My fourth class is a wildcard – perhaps something related to my current interests in democracy, history, or environmentalism, and I want it to be a discussion course." Second, students peruse the course catalog and identify 3-10 courses of interest – "This course on internet memes caught my eye, also these 3 Geneds look really cool, and Psychology of Close Relationships is definitely of interest to me."

Additionally, we propose hiring a professional machine learning firm to try and predict course registration numbers. The committee has stated that prediction is impossible, but they've come to this conclusion based on a student's senior thesis. While we have no doubt that this student's work was a valuable start, the college would likely be able to get much better predictions if they hired a firm outside of the college. More importantly, this effort would happen in tandem with new data from the student's intended schedule forms.

For example, FOLKMYTH150 this semester faced surprising demand and had to cap the course at 100 students. This likely would have appeared in the course pre-indication form data, since all of this interest came just from posted course materials. Then, the professor would know well in advance to prepare the course for a larger group. We

don't claim that this system would be able to catch every one of these examples. However, we think that the benefit of closing this gap would be enough to justify maintaining a shopping week.

Course Preparation Assistance

This will require faculty to plan courses well enough in advance for students to be able to navigate things like complete syllabi during the Reading Period. We have heard that some faculty wish that they were given more clear instructions on what makes a good syllabus (How much information needs to be included? What do students want to see? etc.) We would be glad to assist further in making resources like these available so that faculty understand what is needed in order for students to make these predictions. With the help of professionals in big data, this data set of pre-indicators should be a much more accurate and useful predictor of where students will end up at the end of Shopping Week in the following semester.

The Systems Approach

We understand that some things that might work separately, don't work when put all together. If the faculty doubts that any of the following ideas listed above may not be able to work to preserve student exploration, we have outlined additional proposals below that look at new systems of Course Registration, combining elements of Shopping Week, Add/Drop Period, Course Preview Period, and Pre-Indication.

Pre-Indication + Course Freedom

Another system works to create a hybrid shopping experience from what we've learned and experienced during the pandemic.

From the start of this year's Spring semester, we've learned that allowing each class to make certain decisions about what's best for its professors, TFs, and graduate students is not only possible, but sometimes necessary in order to make the learning and teaching experience a valuable one for everyone. We can take this same approach when it comes to Shopping Week:

In-Person Shopping

Courses that would like to and are able to offer in-person shopping experiences can make students aware online. There, students can make "reservations" or "lottery" to be able to attend the session in person. These are meant to be introductory lessons with some material covered, so that students can experience within the classroom how the instructor works and whether they could be successful in that course. By keeping it simple, faculty could have 1 or 2 of these sections that students are selected to

participate in to avoid overcrowding and breaking fire codes within buildings, and for those students who are not selected, there can be online recordings of the lecture posted or versions of the section that can be held online.

In the system for choosing which students are offered placement, preference can and should be given to students who made early indication (pre-indication rather than pre-registration) that they would likely be enrolling in the class. This incentivizes students who are pre-indicating their course choices to think deeply and answer honestly, but also allows room for students who maybe realize that they need to get out of a course that they were previously interested in and take a different one.

Online Shopping

Not everything has to be in-person. There are some rare circumstances where a lecture hall simply cannot be sourced, or other extenuating circumstances present an issue. In the past, this could cause great stress and waste of time. We suggest utilizing Zoom meetings in these circumstances as an emergency solution.

Reduced Shopping

One problem brought up by the CCR is that some classes that meet several times a week don't know what to do with all of the time they have with students during shopping week. One solution to this is to increase the freedom of courses to engage with or not engage with shopping week. For example, a math class that meets three times a week could offer 3 different in-person shopping course experiences for students as outlined in the In-Person Shopping section above, one in-person shopping experience and online office hours/lessons for the rest of the week, or not participate in anything for the first two days that are normally met and engage with shopping week on Friday of the course, beginning normal class on the following Monday. This freedom will allow faculty to think more creatively and freely about what their students actually need to determine whether they should enroll in the class or not, and adjust their schedules accordingly.

Saving Faculty Time

Faculty have raised concerns that shopping week removes a week of teaching from the semester, preventing them from including relevant course material. We propose several strategies to allow faculty to teach through shopping week while allowing students to sample classes.

Centralized System

Currently, faculty must waste time sourcing TFs, finding rooms, facilitating sectioning. All these processes create delays that eat into lecture and section time. We propose packaging these processes into one system.

Consider how this would look for a particular department. The department has a loose sense of how many TFs they will need and for what classes from the pre-indication form. They have more wiggle room, because they can hire more TFs. In advance of shopping week, they assemble a stable of TFs. The TFs rank the courses they can teach.

Shopping week happens. Students are asked to register by Saturday night. TFs are asked to offer section times that work for them. On Sunday at 5pm at the end of shopping week, faculty, TFs, and students receive TF assignments, room assignments, and section assignments.

We propose achieving this through a scheduling software. The algorithm takes as input enrollment numbers, TF rankings, TF section availability, room requests, and room availability, and it outputs TF assignments, room assignments and section assignments. It could be modularized by department.

Packaging these processes together will save vital instructional time. It addresses the numerous frictions of TF hiring, room blocking and sectioning that are a headache for everyone. It won't be perfect. But even if it achieves clarity for 90% of situations, it will be a significant improvement over both the status quo and the CCR's proposal.

Sectioning

Our sectioning system institutionalizes and simplifies a process that is currently scattered and hodge podge. This past term, as in the past, many sections did not start until the second or third week of the semester. Under our systems, sections will start by the second week of class, representing a net gain in instructional time in sections.

Even if some special accommodations have to be made at the margins, we think instructional time would overall increase relative to the status quo.

Booking Rooms

Additionally, room reservations will be streamlined through this online system, which will also allow for more transparency about what rooms are available, what resources each room has (e.g., computer systems, movable chalkboards, and disability accommodations), and what resources each class requires. A more efficient online system for booking and switching rooms would also be beneficial outside of the shopping week discussion, and further discussions with the Registrar's Office and HUIT will need to be had on how this system would work in real time.

Faculty and Student Expectations

We suggest that faculty teach shopping week very closely to a regular week, i.e., covering material under the assumption that all the attending students are enrolled. For example, a course that meets twice a week would not review the syllabus on both shopping days. However, professors should avoid including material that cannot be reviewed, such as sectioning surveys, group selection, in-class quizzes, or problem sets. Although this may cause some delays in reviewing material, the above examples can usually be easily modified to fit lecture pacing (e.g., problem sets after shopping week are slightly longer, or the first one or two sections cover slightly more material).

Additionally, it should be emphasized that students have a responsibility to review material they miss during shopping week. Teaching faculty can facilitate this by providing thorough asynchronous resources (discussion notes, lecture slides, recordings, etc.) during the first week. This is already standard practice for many courses. They may also provide one week of asynchronous section material to account for delayed sectioning due to shopping. This may not apply for certain courses, such as small seminars or discussion-based courses; however, these courses usually meet once per week, so it is unlikely that a student who plans to enroll would miss them while shopping.

In addition to affording professors more teaching time, the above considerations also improve the student experience of shopping week. More material can be covered, improving class quality. Additionally, students will have a more accurate picture of a professor's teaching style.

Pre-Indication + Course Preview

If the faculty cannot see any way for us to revise and heal shopping week in any of the ways that we've listed above, then we understand that a new system is needed. The question should then be how we can balance 1) the time that the University needs to feel comfortable allocating class resources, 2) when in the year both students and faculty will be in a mindset to consider future course options, and 3) what information students need to make informed course decisions based on content, instructor, and course format.

We believe that all three of these can be done with a revised model of the Course Preview Period that we have experienced for the past two years and a revised pre-registration calendar (sample below).

Example Timeline (2021-2022 School Year Dates used for example)

Fall

Start of Reading Period: Deadline for departments to finalize their Spring course offerings, students can begin to have advising holds lifted.

December 15th - 21st: Course Preview Period - staggered deadlines for different class years to have their advising holds lifted.

December 22nd: Course Indication Deadline

Spring

Start of Reading Period: Course Catalog is published, students can begin to have advising conversations to have their advising holds lifted.

Mid-late July: Course Preview Period - staggered deadlines for returning students to have their advising hold lifted.

End of July: Course Indication Deadline (all years)

The stress of an ongoing semester makes the timeline proposed by the Committee on Course Registration highly unfavorable, as it is at what many students would consider the height of their semester, and for many PSET classes the middle of “midterm season.” By holding off on thinking about the next semester’s courses until the previous semester’s reading period, students are able to more fully and freely think about the future opportunities once they have dealt with the present challenges, and have more temporal flexibility to do so. Speaking with faculty about this revised timeline, many found these date changes acceptable, some saying that about a month of time between semesters and having course numbers before August for the following year would be enough to be sufficiently prepared.

With particular attention to the Spring dates, there is the possibility to move the course preview period to late May and the course indication deadline to the last day of May, to flow more similarly to the Fall semester’s dates. We have proposed that these dates take place later in the Summer rather than earlier, however, in order that the first-years might also be given an opportunity to be a part of the process with their fellow upperclassmen and feel that they are not disadvantaged in course selection.

Conclusion: Next Steps

We recommend that the following steps be undertaken by the faculty:

1. **The faculty vote down both standing resolutions proposed by the CCR.**
 - a. While these resolutions may end up being necessary, it doesn't make sense to ask faculty to vote on them until we have a clear idea of the implications.
2. **The faculty refrain from any final changes to course registration until including students and alumni in the decision-making process.** As faculty members, you are well aware of how shopping week impacts you. You personally experience it. You can speak to its pros, cons and possible solutions. Your voice will be heard because you are on the faculty council, but we think that equally, there are student experiences that must be heard. If there is one underlying criticism we have with the CCR report, it is the near complete lack of presentation of student experiences. The report excludes one of the most important voices in this decision. What does shopping week mean to students? How does it affect them? How has it affected them? What stories do they have to offer that might help others empathize with their experiences? 96% of us voted to keep in-term course registration: this statistic is not a bargaining tool but a call for understanding. 96% of us agree on something – why? What makes this week so important to us? Has the CCR report – or our report for that matter – given us confidence that we are making this decision having opened our ears and minds to the perspectives of the *entire* community? We urge the faculty council to not act unilaterally on this decision and move forward with the CCR report before we as leaders of our respective communities have made our best attempt at bringing all our community's voices together in pursuit of compromise.

We recommend that the following steps, which we think everyone can agree on, be undertaken by other administrative bodies for now,:

1. **Create an effective online system for TF hiring, classroom space navigation and sectioning.**
 - a. TFs: Allow faculty to be able to list their teaching fellow needs in this online system, making it so that graduate students can rank their preferences, and more easily facilitating the hiring process between graduate students and faculty.
 - b. Rooms: This can be done in partnership with the Registrar's Office and HUIT. Having an online database of available spaces, the number of students that can fit, their locations, what amenities/accommodations they have, and other useful information will make it easier for faculty to book

and switch rooms, something that will need to happen smoothly regardless of the course registration system in place.

- c. **Sections:** This can also be done in partnership with the Registrar's Office and HUIT. This will make it easier for faculty, TFs and students to handle sectioning, and reduce delays early in courses that reduce instructional time.
2. **Add course comments back to the Q guide.** Their removal makes it more difficult for students to choose classes because there are many factors that go into a single numerical score. This measure has 100% approval (n=111) on Crimson OpenGov, our student virtual town hall. It is the #1 most supported opinion on the app, out of 400 opinions.
3. **Focus on improving advising.** This problem is not directly related to course registration as students have been dissatisfied with advising under both shopping week and course preview period, but could stand to be improved. More information should be collected from the student body as to how advising structures could be improved, and then implement those changes to the system.

There is always more that we can do to improve, but it requires that all parties—administrators, faculty, undergraduates, and graduates—work together creatively to ask how we can make one another's lives better during the time at the college we're privileged enough to have. That is what we have started in this report: a collaborative effort to compromise and seek exciting and groundbreaking change, seeking better alternatives to merely following in the footsteps of what's been done before.

We ask in return for a similar commitment to understanding, ideating, compromising, and including our whole community in this important decision.

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Brandon Mancilla, Outgoing HGSU President

Zeke Benshirim, Harvard Graduate Student

HGSU Ad Hoc Shopping Week Committee

Richard Yarrow, Fellow at Harvard Kennedy School

Appendices

Existing Concerns

Strain on Graduate Students

Enrollment uncertainty impacts graduate students. We know that this uncertainty can have implications on where graduate students work and live. We were pleased to see that Harvard's administration and the union agreed to a policy of providing graduate students with 70 percent compensation for canceled teaching appointments. This achievement has certainly relieved a large degree of uncertainty for graduate students, and we believe that with this improved financial security, we can start to explore new and creative ways to implement a shopping week that addresses more problems and makes teaching conditions for graduate students even more secure and fulfilling (see "Our Proposals: Graduate Student Work").

Our solutions are also able to address some of the problems that the CCR's pre-registration proposal does not mention. For example, graduate students we have spoken to are unsure that an extended add/drop period to replace shopping week where exploration is still encouraged and students have the same amount of flexibility would significantly change their job security. Additionally, in departments that are very tight on graduate students available and willing to teach courses, there are still issues with transferring between courses when course enrollment changes. In departments with the opposite problem, where there are not enough teaching opportunities for students who want to teach, there is also untapped potential. Our solutions seek to address all of these aspects of the Graduate Student situation rather than just eliminating shopping week.

Stress and Advising

The point of stress brought up by the CCR is interesting, but does not fully explore where student stress comes from or how to alleviate it. With nearly 97 percent of undergraduate students in favor of keeping Shopping Week as is, it seems that students do not identify particular stress from shopping week, do not mind the stress, or are at least willing to make the tradeoff in exchange for a more rich academic life. In fact, it seems to us that the CCR's proposed changes would cause more stress rather than less.

There are many aspects that could cause a student to feel stressed during course registration like course lotteries, navigating an immense course catalog, not seeming to find any options that they like that meet their requirements, noticing that all of the courses they like will create a schedule for themselves each week that is difficult or unpleasant, and so forth. None of these reasons, and many others, actually stem from shopping week.

In the CCR's proposal, which seeks to have undergraduate students enroll in classes during a time of the year when many students are in the thick of work relating to their present classes, students would face a new source of **systemic stress**. Students would register for classes in the middle of exams and papers at one of the most stressful times of year, while balancing extracurriculars and athletic commitments. If Harvard students need more time with their advisors, as pointed out by the CCR, which indicates that those meetings occurring during Summer and Winter breaks when nothing else at the college is going on are not currently effective, then we find it extremely implausible that moving these conversations to the busiest points in the semester would make advising any better.

I can speak from personal experience about the stress that comes from handling course registration and other involvements simultaneously. This semester I planned to take two GenEd classes and was denied from all of the GenEds that I lotteried. I was in the middle of finalizing a big project that I was working on over the summer, and needing to handle classes while also dealing with that project deadline, not Course Preview Period, was what created the stress. I can only imagine how much worse it will be with project and paper deadlines, as well as exams during the semester if we're asked to figure out our class schedule at the same time.

LyLena Estabine, Harvard '24

Consumer Culture

Some faculty we have spoken with are concerned that shopping week creates a culture of consumerism that is unbecoming of Harvard College and its students. Faculty are pressured to “perform” in their classrooms to an audience wandering in and out of a lecture hall, hoping that some students will find them entertaining enough to take their course.

While we think that the culture of consumerism is one that would be present in any kind of course registration form and stems more from American culture than shopping week, this concern is important and we hope to help alleviate the underlying problem.

When Harvard students pay tuition to enroll in Harvard College, we engage with the University as a consumer of knowledge. When we register for and take a class under any registration system, we are again consumers of knowledge, and face substantial choices over how, when, and where we will consume it. It's true that when people shop to consume things like movies or amusement parks, we are looking for entertainment value. But this is not the case when we select or "shop" for courses. We are all here at Harvard because we have serious passions and goals that we want to pursue at the highest level possible.

Despite its current name, Shopping Week presents an opportunity for deepening students' choices beyond sheer consumption. Shopping Week encourages students to explore widely and figure out what knowledge they need as part of their liberal arts education; it enables students to see their courses not simply for their "label"-- a syllabus, exciting title, or dramatic review on RateMyProfessors-- but for the knowledge and the relation between student and teacher that a course might bring. Each student has different needs and preferences. Some prefer instructors who keep the mood light, while others prefer those who use a lot of diagrams or pictures, while others prefer those who turn to the students for answers, while others prefer a classic lecture by one of Harvard's many great thinkers. When we shop, we are wading through a dense course catalog to find instructors who align with our preferred teaching style and who we believe will be able to propel us forward in our academic journey—teachers who we can build relationships with and who can help us grow over the course of the semester.

It is true that students are consumers in a sense, but we don't want empty performances or inauthentic gestures. We don't attend Harvard to be entertained: we are here to learn and grow. We want your brilliance and engagement. We want your authenticity. We want you, our teachers and potential mentors.

There are other additional parts of shopping week culture at Harvard that carry importance for students. There is the social culture of shopping week that students engage in, chatting at dining halls and in dorm rooms with one another about classes that looked interesting or different courses aspects that made them a good/bad fit for different students. New friendships are facilitated when people join the same class, even if only for that hour. This, while often not seen, is also important to students, and part of the reason so many are determined to keep shopping week.

New Concerns

Further Dividing Athletes and Non-Athletes Academically

The recent "[Study of Harvard Athletics' Organizational Culture & Structure](#)," released in May 2020, identified several major problems that Harvard Athletics vowed to act on. One of the major strategic concerns was that **student athletes faced structural barriers to accessing the College's academic community.**

60 percent of student athletes did not agree that "I feel like I get to take advantage of all the community experiences that Harvard has to offer" and only 41 percent felt that they could "balance my athletic interests and my academic responsibilities." Among coaches, 78 percent did not agree that "there is a high level of collaboration and partnership between Harvard College's faculty and staff and Harvard Athletics' coaches and staff."

A recent Harvard Confessions [post](#) receiving 222 likes, more than 90 percent of Confessions posts, declared that "no disrespect to athletes, but if I was taking Math Ma, 2 gen Eds, and Ec 10, I'd have time to get better than them at their sport, get drunk every night," and pursue sexual activity every night.

Clearly, there is a divide between varsity athletes and non-athletes at Harvard College. Unfortunately, **pre-registration would widen this divide by further separating athletes and non-athletes academically.**

The "athlete stereotype" would only seem more true when athletes would register for courses ahead of time specifically with the goal of working around their athletic practice schedules, which would have to be determined up to 6 months in advance so that athletes would know what courses conflict with their practice schedule. Athletes would also have to choose their courses with an eye to upcoming competition schedules, which often are not even published 6 months in advance.

Pre-registration would also reduce flexibility and create new bureaucracy for athletic coaches, since they would have to set exact practice schedules up to 6 months in advance.

Instead of getting the message that the first week of classes is the chance to explore as part of a wide-ranging liberal arts education, athletes would inevitably have to pre-register for classes even more explicitly with an eye to their athletic schedules and commitments. Inevitably, pre-registration would make it far harder for athletes to effectively balance between the commitments of their classes and the changing commitments of their sport and team. This would further force athletes, unlike in the

past at Harvard but similar to the case at many other schools, to choose between their intellectual versus their athletic pursuits.

The Harvard Athletics Mission Statement states:

*Athletics at Harvard builds community through the engagement of students, faculty, staff, and alumni, and creates a portal through which neighboring communities can enjoy the Harvard experience. **We all take pride in knowing that our coaches are educators and our athletes are true representatives of Harvard's student body** – Harvard athletes are admitted through the same process, receive the same academic support, and are held to the same standards as every other Harvard student.*

Eliminating shopping week, and further dividing varsity athletes from non-athletes, undermines this mission and Harvard's strategic goals.

Student Voices: Student Quotes On Shopping Week

Data From Students

We surveyed students on Crimson OpenGov to get data on how shopping week affects students. We only asked for responses from students who had experienced shopping week (Superseniors, seniors and super juniors), less than half of campus. The sample size thus represents about 2% of this eligible population, making for a reasonably representative sample of the survey population.

Results (As of Thursday, February 3)

Question	Green (% agree), white (% pass/unsure), red (% disagree)
I tried harder in classes I was able to shop for than in classes I had to preregister for	 <p data-bbox="873 1682 1219 1730">68% 9% 24%</p>

<p>I learn more in classes I shop than in classes I pre-register for.</p>	 <p>67% 15% 18%</p>
<p>Shopping week made me less pre-professional, and more interested in the liberal arts</p>	 <p>72% 8% 19%</p>
<p>Overall, shopping week is less stressful than pre-registration.</p>	 <p>89% 5% 7%</p>
<p>Add/Drop did not give me the same flexibility as shopping week</p>	 <p>86% 0% 14%</p>
<p>A class I took only as a result of shopping week significantly changed my worldview</p>	 <p>80% 3% 18%</p>
<p>Shopping week helped me make new friends</p>	 <p>68% 8% 24%</p>

My major would not be the same if not for shopping week	 <p>76% 7% 18%</p>
I discovered a new passion through shopping week	 <p>84% 6% 10%</p>
Shopping week was foundational to my Harvard experience	 <p>83% 9% 9%</p>

As a voluntary poll, this data was subject to selection bias. There are 3 selective processes. First, it selects for people using Crimson OpenGov. Second, it selects for people who choose to open the poll. Third, it selects for people who choose to answer a given question.

We think the first selection bias would be fairly orthogonal to this particular survey. We used a wide range of advertising measures to encourage people to use the app, only a handful of which referenced the particular issue of shopping week.

We think the second selection bias would favor students with strong positive or negative attitudes towards this question. Students with more neutral attitudes may not open the poll at all.

We think the third selection bias would also favor students with strong positive or negative attitudes towards the question.

A fourth bias is that students know that this data will be used to advocate for shopping week, which might bias the data towards choosing positive responses in order to strengthen the student case. Variance between the agree/disagree numbers by

question suggests that this phenomenon did not dominate, and that students generally did answer candidly.

Collectively, these biases amplified the positive response rate to these questions. We leave it to each council member to determine if the existence of these biases invalidates the students' responses to the questions. For our part, we think these results should be taken with a grain or two of salt, but we would be surprised if a more formal survey design differed substantially from the results presented above – although we would also welcome such an effort.

Student Voices

We collected a handful of student accounts, 420 characters or less, of the impact of shopping week on them:

“Without shopping week, I would not have majored in math. As I am a woman, and Harvard's math department has been historically unfriendly to women, I think this is significant.”

“The absence of [a] formal shopping week just created a more chaotic, informal shopping week where faculty seemed even less prepared and class registration caused much undue stress and burdens for students. It is the second official week and I know many friends and peers who still don't know their schedule.”

“As a first year, I had no idea what a college class was like. I didn't know what sort of format I liked, that I could look at syllabi on Canvas, anything. Shopping week let me get my feet under me. I shopped eight classes, which let me get a feel for all the cool options available to me here, and ended up in two great classes I never would have taken otherwise. Also ending add without permission early was BAD.”

“Like Michael, I've been in situations many times over my years at Harvard (I'm a super senior) when I walked into a class on a whim and it ended up changing the shape of my college experience. I definitely could not have done that without shopping week; for example, this semester has been a complete mess because I didn't have enough time to figure out which classes made sense while also doing homework/following whims.”

“Shopping week enabled me to try out professors to get a sense of how welcome I would feel in a space. This enabled me to take classes I would not otherwise have considered, for example in male-dominated fields.”

“Shopping week gave me the opportunity to talk to my friends about their schedules and add classes based on their descriptions. With add/drop, I would have to catch up on too much work to make that feasible. Being able to learn from different people helps me explore unfamiliar interests and gain context for other fields.”

“This is very specific, but: I receive subsidized music lessons through the OFA. Because of add/drop (instead of shopping), I still have no [redacted] clue what my schedule is. As a result, I [haven't had] a single lesson yet because I still don't have a consistent schedule, and I won't for a while (I'm taking seminars, which meet once a week, so it's a LONG process with add/drop). It's a losing situation for everyone.”

Some of these comments had a chance to be voted on, so below we include these with the vote tallies after in parentheses (% agree, % pass/unsure, % disagree)

“They say add/drop preserves students' ability to shop. But we've already seen this semester how this is not what will actually happen -- they're killing the culture of shopping.” (95% Agree, 2% Pass/Unsure, 3% Disagree)

“Instead of pre-registration, we should just have a form where we indicate what we're thinking of taking. It needs to not feel formal, and shopping week should still be called shopping week.” (82, 11, 7)

“Shopping week is the best part of this school.” (75, 7, 15)

“A lot of academic advisors dissuade students from signing up for more classes and then drop. But, this can be really stressful, and it can also hurt teacher relationships in classes you'd like to take later.” (83, 13, 5)

“The current add-drop-as-shopping approach feels like a worst of both worlds - students and faculty don't seem sure whether to approach week one as a full class or as shopping, and that inconsistency has made for a weird on-ramp to the semester.” (96, 3, 1)

“I'm sympathetic to the call to offer more predictable employment stability for grad students and undergraduate course staff, but hope this can be achieved without destroying this cornerstone of undergrad exploration and flexibility. Could departments have a certain list of TFs/CAs who are flexible to work one of a few

different courses based on need, or is that not an arrangement any course staff would willingly take?” (88, 10, 2)

“ACTUALLY INCLUDE ALL STUDENT COMMENTS FROM ALL SEMESTERS IN THE Q GUIDE, not just the numerical survey results.” (100, 0, 0)

“No compromises, the start of this semester was terrible and I am deeply disappointed with my classes for my final semester.” (87, 0, 13)

“No compromises. Bring shopping week back. Pre-registration is a stressful disaster and registering the semester before will be a worse one.” (90, 1, 9)

“The reason we come here instead of X State University is because it offers a better educational experience. Shopping week is part of that. It lets us maximize our time here by having the opportunity to avoid classes we like on paper but hate [in real life], or vice versa. It also encourages professors to be good pedagogues so that they can ‘sell’ people on taking their class. Embrace what makes Harvard great, don’t erase it.” (93, 7, 0)

These comments, and the poll results, capture some of the key campus currents. Shopping week has touched many people on campus in many important academic and personal ways.