

Graduate Student Views on Early Enrollment

Prepared by the Graduate Student Council

November 12, 2018

Purpose:

The Graduate Student Council prepared a survey administered to gauge GSAS graduate student views on early registration and shopping week for the purpose of sharing with the FAS and GSAS Administration and Faculty Council.

Participation:

The survey was administered to the graduate student population of GSAS (~4300 students) via the Graduate Student Council Newsletter on November 5th. Additional participation emails were sent to GSC Departmental Representatives (>100 students). The survey and topic of early registration was further discussed at the GSC Open Meeting on November 7th. In total, 56 students participated, with 37 students sharing individual responses in the comments sections.

Student Demographics

Respondents included students that span all G-years and program divisions and included a majority of students who attended an undergraduate institution that utilized an early enrollment policy.

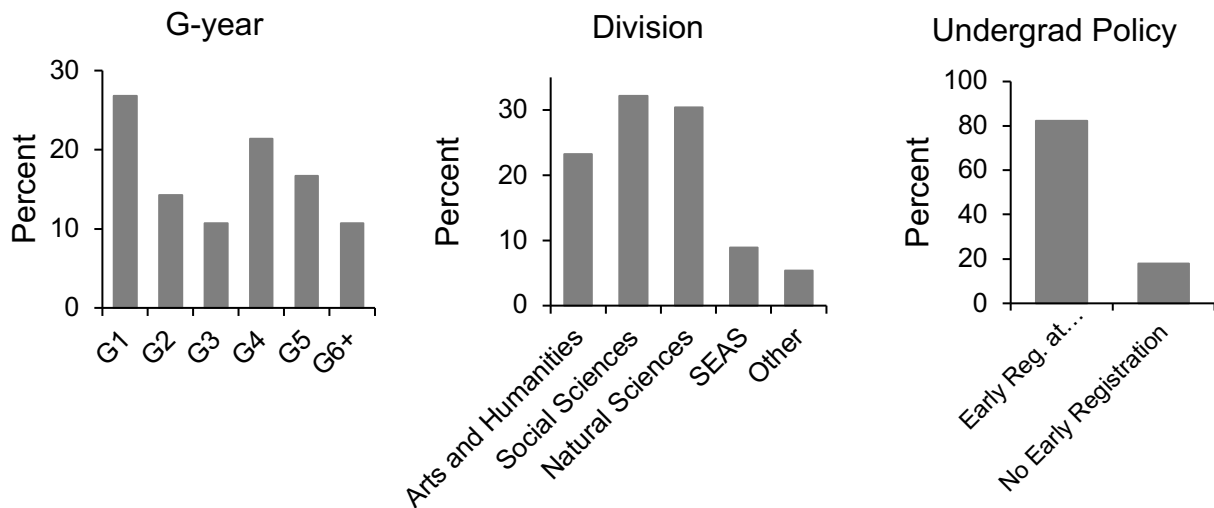
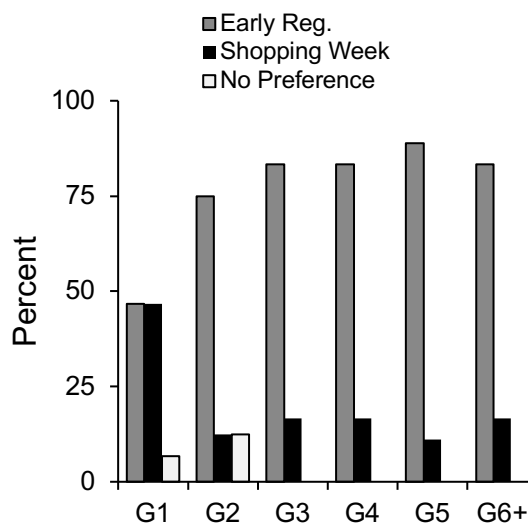
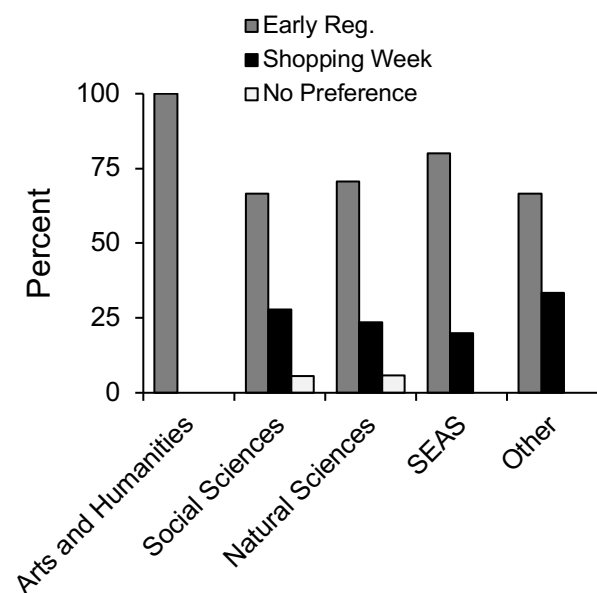
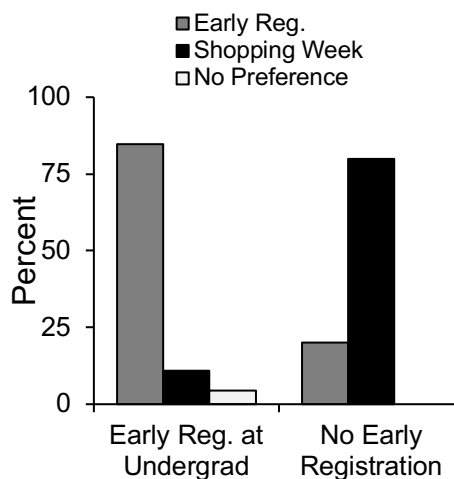
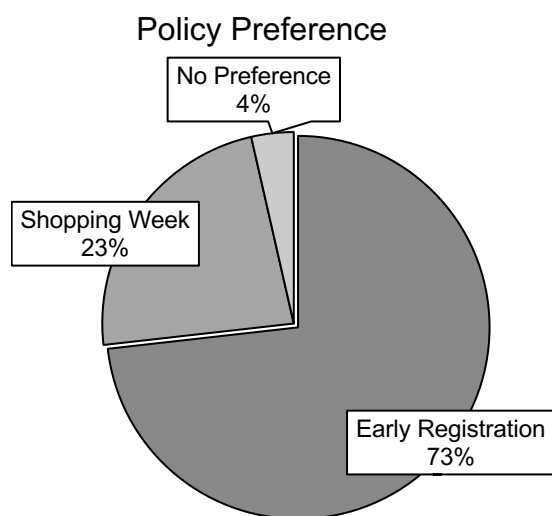


Figure 1. Student demographics of survey respondents, including G-year, Program Division, and status of undergraduate institution registration policy.

Results Summary:

Based on 56 responses, a majority of students (73%) were in favor of implementing an early registration policy. 23% of students were in favor of maintaining shopping week, and 4% of students had no preference for either policy. The majority (80%) of students who were in favor of shopping week previously attended an undergraduate university that did not have an early registration policy. Responses varied some by division, with the Arts and Humanities entirely in favor of an early registration policy. Increasing G-year also correlated with increase support for early registration.



Question: Have you had a positive or negative experience as a student or TF because of shopping week? Any other thoughts on this that you would like to share with the faculty committee, administration, and undergraduates? Tell us about it below.

Negative Statements

“As a master's student without funding who must work to support herself, it is extremely difficult to plan ahead and make sure that I'll be able to work enough hours each week without early registration.”

“At my previous institutions I appreciated the structure of combined pre-registration and a shopping week period, during which time classes could be attended prior to finalizing one's chosen courses for the semester. While TFing at Princeton, I was particularly appreciative of pre-registration, as I was able to prepare my lesson plans and accompanying materials depending on a more accurate appraisal of expected class size. I strongly support the move to early registration.”

“My experience [with shopping week] has been negative-- it has been very difficult to plan courses, teaching, and sectioning without any sense of who is committed to a course in advance. I was tentatively assigned to TF a seminar, but the course was so popular in the first class (over 100 students) that there was a need to bring on two additional TFs and make the course a lecture. This was great for finding teaching, but very challenging to manage the scheduling of sections, as students were not prepared to dedicate additional time in their schedules for sections (and it was a slow process to find extra TFs, further delaying sectioning). With early registration, students shouldn't be afraid to sign up for something, go, and then drop it if it doesn't interest them. This will give students the chance to "shop" in some way, while also pushing them to commit to a general schedule in advance that will help TFs and faculty plan their courses more effectively.

“I have ended up TFing for a course that I knew absolutely nothing about, two weeks into the semester, because the course I planned to TF for had unexpectedly low enrollment, and the course that I ended up TFing for had unexpectedly high enrollment. Every single TF I know has had this exact experience. A discussion section being led by a graduate student who knows nothing about the subject matter and didn't have any time to prepare--this is obviously despicable for everyone, not least for the undergraduate students who supposedly like shopping week! Harvard is supposed to be a world-class institution. This state of affairs is really shameful. At least give us a summer or winter break to prepare for new classes!”

“I've had multiple negative experiences [with shopping week] in which I've either been moved or have threatened to have been moved multiple times two weeks into the semester due to enrollment numbers. Others in my department have experienced greater concerns as their funding has been at risk or manipulated due to difficulties with shopping week.”

“This is my second year as a TF, and this semester I found Shopping Week very stressful. Even though I have guaranteed teaching this semester, I wasn't sure what class I would be teaching until 2-3 weeks into the semester. We opened multiple sections for a class based on previous enrollment. Unfortunately, even though the class I taught had enough students in each section, the overall enrollment was not high enough to justify multiple sections. This also made life difficult for students; they didn't know how long they could stay in the course because we weren't sure it would stay open. Ultimately, we had to drop one of the sections and combine the two classes. College students therefore had to change their schedule to accommodate the new section time or drop the class completely. Having an idea of how many students would enroll in the class (before the semester started) would have alleviated this stress and inconvenience for TFs and students alike!”

“In my department, TF positions are fairly secure. But I think Harvard's "shopping week" is absurd and disrespectful to teachers. I do not understand why it exists aside from giving one extra privilege to Harvard's already over-privileged undergrads. Harvard should give a privilege to its TFs instead.”

“Very negative: I have had to agree to rent contracts for rooms within a reasonable distance from the campus - which are very costly even with less than pleasant conditions - before knowing what my salary would be, being dependent upon enrollment. As for teaching, it is an ineffective week.”

“I have had many negative experiences with shopping week, mostly coming from an unpredictability in having TF appointment(s) or not. A vast majority of undergraduate universities have early registration with no ill effects to the undergraduates. Also, there is still the add/drop period, so students can still enroll or withdraw from a course if they don't want to take it.”

“Negative: uncertainty about courses, so I have picked courses I know I can teach for financial stability. I cannot count on getting picked for possible courses that may not get enrollment, or that I may not get hired for.”

“As a student, I think preregistration can eliminate some of the chaos of the start of the semester, which I find mentally reassuring.”

“Shopping week is ridiculous. Nowhere else would waste as much time and resources.”

“Adopting an early registration policy would alleviate many of the logistical challenges that professors and graduate students face when juggling last minute changes in course size and offerings. Instructors will be more prepared to teach their courses and sections, resulting in a better educational experience for all involved.”

“Shopping week makes course planning extremely difficult in lab-based classes. Not knowing how many students are in the course, as well as who is in each lab makes it hard to allocate TFs, as well as plan for team-based activities.”

"Negative; our class doubled in size from last year and it was a huge logistical headache to deal with that. Also I think it's very misleading to say early registration cancels shopping week. Students could still shop even with early registration (an add/drop period)... they just need to register their initial preferences, which is still very useful to professors and TFs for course planning."

“It's confusing not to be able to register and plan ahead also this does not get rid of shopping at all. This just adds early registration to the process and makes it better for TFs. People can still shop, undergrads still will shop and find the best courses for them before the end of the add/drop period.”

“I have not had a teaching experience as a graduate student yet, but I have had no problems with early registration during my time as an undergraduate. As an undergraduate, I would enroll early in my core science classes and a few classes I was interested in. I still went to all the classes I was interested in, and professors did not take roll, so even if I was not registered in the class I was still allowed to attend and observe the class. As a result, I believe that early registration gives a better count of the number of students interested in a class without eliminating the shopping of classes.”

“While I understand the benefits to students in offering the shopping week, the cost to the teaching staff outweigh the benefits. Not only is your appointment as a TF in limbo, but so are many other things. It's extremely difficult to plan your semester when there is so much uncertainty, will you need RA funding? How much? Will you be asked to take on another section in the case of over-enrollment? On top of this nearly a week of serious lecturing can be interrupted due to overcrowded classes.”

“My very first semester teaching, I was switched to TF a class after shopping week; this meant the students knew more about the subject area than I did.”

“My undergraduate institution had early registration; in fact, we would register 2 months in advance before a term would start. That gave the students enough flexibility to decide what course they would want to take and also help professors get an estimate of how big the class will be. We of course had until the first two weeks to add or drop courses so we still had a "shopping week". However, the number of students who registered early on would give a good indication as to how many students would remain in the class after the end of the two week shopping period.”

“As a TF this fall, I had the experience of having my TF appointment in jeopardy because of lower than expected enrollment. (A class that normally enrolls about 25 students only had 14 enroll.) Luckily, my department was flexible enough to let me keep the appointment rather than scramble for another one last minute, but it was very anxiety-provoking. In a previous year, I took a TF appointment that was outside my field because the spot was guaranteed, rather than waiting to try to TF for a professor who couldn't guarantee the spot without knowing what the enrollment would be until the end of shopping week. Shopping week is fun for students but is really hard on grad students who rely on TF-ing to pay the bills.”

“Shopping week only adds stress to the beginning of each semester. During my first year, there was always at least one class that I wasn't sure I would be admitted to and needed one (or more) back-ups, which meant I spent time in classes I knew I would never take (likely adding to the stress of others who wanted to enroll in the class I was *not* interested in). My undergraduate institution (UC Berkeley) had pre-registration with 2 phases of priority registration and then an open period through the first week or so of the semester. It worked much better than shopping works here!”

"Early registration doesn't have to be completely incompatible with flexibility during the first week of classes. I went to MIT where we had ""pre-registration"" plus super flexible add and drop requirements, so students were encouraged to limit themselves to a small number of classes but were able to switch easily, especially at the beginning of the semester. This sort of system seems to walk a middle path between a strict form of early registration and the mess that is shopping week. I have had a horrible experience as a TF with shopping week. The course I was originally assigned to teach was half the size they guessed, so I had to scramble to find another course. As a consequence, I was incredibly stressed for 2 weeks and got almost nothing done."

“Had lots of work while we waited for another TF to be hired for the class, which ended up being larger than expected.”

“At my undergrad institution, we still shopped classes with early registration -- we signed up for classes, and then went to many others during the first week of term. So I think this change wouldn't impact the undergrad experience too much, and would significantly lower the logistical costs of appointing and shuffling teaching fellows.”

“Negative. Course was unexpectedly under-enrolled, and I was the 2nd TF, so the registrar denied me sections in the course that I thought I would be a TF for four months. I could have sought better alternatives further in advance had I known it would be under-enrolled, rather than scramble to pick up a section here and there within three days. Pre-registration does not mean students would be bound or can't alter their schedule after they've tried out classes the first week. This is normal at every other university; Harvard students are just as capable of figuring their lives out with a bit of foresight and planning.”

"Negative experience as a TF; I've heard horror stories of classes not hiring enough TFs because they vastly underestimated how many students would enroll, so each TF ended up teaching far more than 2 sections worth of students. I've heard of TFs getting fewer students and having to pick up an extra section at the last moment. As a head TF myself who schedules for CAs, I've had to push off on scheduling sections because CAs didn't have *any* idea what their schedules would be - making it harder for students to figure out their own schedule, as sections take a while to plan. I don't understand why you can't have both pre-registration and a semi-shopping week. I went to MIT as an undergrad, and we had a very similar system: pre-registration was non-binding and *solely* used for class organization, making sure that each class had a large enough room and enough TAs. However, add date wasn't until a month into the semester, so students had enough time to try out classes during the first week or so of class - much like shopping week. I never felt as a MIT undergrad that I'd get pushed out of a class or couldn't try out classes I was interested in; rather, having pre-registration meant I could plan my schedule ahead of time and know that the class times wouldn't fluctuate based on enrollment."

“I have had very negative experiences because of shopping week from a teaching stand point. First of all, many times we have had a staffing issue for the course because the number of enrollees is unsure. Second of all, we are not able to book section times until the course starts for the same reason, and booking rooms becomes a nightmare. Third, it seems that shopping week isn't really useful at all because there is a large time period where students can drop the course without consequence.”

Positive/Neutral Statements:

“Positive experience as a student, no negative experiences so far as a TF.

"I like shopping week as a chance for students to choose classes that are a good fit. As a TF I don't want to have students who are not interested or properly prepared for a course and I think shopping helps prevent that.”

“As an undergraduate student, shopping week changed my major and my career. On the last day of shopping period I had lunch with a friend and she suggested I go with her after lunch to try out the course she was taking. I figured it was worth an hour of my time even though I wasn't that interested in the topic. By the end of that hour I loved the subject, changed my whole course schedule, and now I'm getting a PhD in that subject.”

“I really valued having shopping week as an undergrad, and it doesn't impact my life as a graduate student enough to lobby for that to be taken away.”

“My undergraduate institution had a shopping week that I found indispensable as an undergraduate. Even as a graduate student, I appreciate the flexibility in forming my schedule.”

“As I TF, I understand and have felt the frustrations of not knowing whether and how many sections I'll be assigned. However, I greatly appreciated the ability to shop courses during shopping week as an undergraduate, and I believe it is still a valuable experience despite the frustrations it can cause TFs.”

“I think shopping period is important to allow students to take risks in the types of courses they take. Videos or other types of comprehensive information about the courses would need to be provided beforehand.”

“I have not yet become a TF, which may be influencing my current position. However, I have so far enjoyed shopping week. Perhaps there is a compromise where shopping week could stay, but early registration would also be used (with online material made available early, esp syllabi) and this would lessen the likelihood of big changes after shopping week?”

"As a former harvard undergraduate, I can definitively say shopping week has literally changed the course of my career. As a freshman in physics I was planning on taking the easier introductory class in the spring semester, because I (as someone who deals with imposter syndrome) didn't think I was qualified to take the harder version. It was only because of shopping week and the ability to try out the harder course free of pressure to continue that I ended up in the course that ultimately convinced me I was good enough and wanted to pursue a career as a physicist. This higher level course was also essential in setting me up for the more advanced courses that would later be determining factors in getting me into graduate school (and in particular, graduate school at Harvard). Furthermore, the ability to shop this class with two other women and guarantee I would not be the only woman in the room was a deciding factor in convincing me to choose this course, and there is no online registration system harvard could enact that could ensure this type of safety in numbers. I literally would not be a graduate student here if Harvard did not have shopping week when I was a freshman, and I know of others with similar stories switching majors or careers because of something they saw during shopping week.

I understand that it is inconvenient not to have job security or know how many students there are in a course. I taught three semesters as a course assistant in the math department and had to wait for my final job offer. I will have to do that again as a TF. None the less, the inconvenience is minor compared to the major role shopping week can play in shaping concentration and career choice. Furthermore, good teachers can usually predict how many students enroll in their classes, and massively fluctuating enrollment during add drop period with a fixed schedule will hardly fix this problem. And considering many (if not most) of my math professors did not even bother to prepare a syllabus or talk to their TF or CA before the first day of classes, more time to prepare courses is a hollow excuse for many.

Additionally, there are multiple classes outside of my discipline that I would not have bothered to take had shopping week not existed. I followed friends to lectures on Latin American Politics (Professor Levitsky's class) and constitutional law (Professor Fallon's class) and ended up loving the introductory lectures enough to take the courses. If Harvard truly cares about having a liberal arts education, getting rid of one of the biggest opportunities for students to see material outside of their discipline is a huge mistake. Except for my freshman fall (during which I failed to take advantage of shopping week), every other semester I ended up taking a class I did not expect to after shopping it. There were multiple semesters that I shopped almost 10 classes outside of my discipline, some of them so far from what I usually studied that even a couple of lectures made me a more well rounded and better educated person. And considering how broken my.harvard gets every time students even try to search for courses during shopping week, an online system with video seems completely infeasible.

Additionally, harvard math and science professors are UNIQUELY bad at understanding what material is necessary to be considered a prerequisite and planning courses, and courses in math in particular are incredibly inconsistent from year to year. I've shopped over a dozen courses where math professors didn't even have syllabi by the first day, and the first and second classes were essential in figuring out what prerequisites professors actually required because much of what they consider "common knowledge" and don't bother to list is actually content from advanced

undergraduate and even graduate courses. Additionally, courses vary tremendously from year to year. For example, I shopped math 113 three years in a row. The first year I shopped it the professor who taught it wrote a midterm where half of the questions were from past graduate qualifying exams; the year I actually took it two years later it was accessible for those who had only taken math 21. None of the professors disclosed a difference in difficulty on their websites, but showing up to class the first week was enough to see what was reasonable to expect from the class (this was especially important as a women in a very male dominated department; most of my male friends had enough connections in the department to know who taught a reasonable class but I did not). Furthermore, considering that missing a class or two can make it impossible to catch up in math and science classes, an early registration system where students could switch classes would not be nearly sufficient to avert this problem.

Finally, more difficulty switching courses would drastically worsen problems of structural inequality in the math department, particularly freshman year. It is impossible to predict the difficulty of freshman math classes as an entering student because they are so different from anything students have been exposed to before. The math department has a real problem getting qualified women to take advanced classes (more years than not there is not a single woman in math 55, and math 25 has very few women despite more than half the top students in 23 being women), and the ability to shop advanced courses without committing to them makes a dramatic difference to students dealing with imposter syndrome. 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. "