



Education Committee

Shopping Week Research Report

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to provide the committee with a students' look at the discussions regarding shopping period, as well as provide a) target areas which forthcoming proposals should address and b) recommendations for specific policies which could assuage student concerns for student enrollment.

When crafting proposals to reform and change the course enrollment process at Harvard, we recognize that the Harvard administration has been forthright in including students in the decision-making process, at least significantly more so than other changes in student life made in the past few years. The website released to garner input, the consistent meeting with students on the Undergraduate Council, and the listening sessions hosted by Dean Claybaugh and Bernhard Nickel are all things that we, as students, appreciate. We also recognize that, to an extent, the animosity that students hold towards the abstract amalgam of "the administration" can be extreme, and in shopping week discussions, a small bit misplaced. But in the eyes of the student, these changes that have occurred without regard for students, concerning vital parts of student life -- sanctions on single-gender organizations, changes to the schedule, shift of the location of The Game, evictions of student organizations from the SOCH -- have all been seemingly executed by an administration that hasn't been willing to listen. And because the workings of Harvard College policy aren't properly communicated to students, those independent decisions all become a single collective injustice.

But changes to enrollment procedures would significantly influence many facets of life on campus -- yes, it would influence faculty and staff, and graduate student enrollment, but the enrollment procedure changes themselves will principally alter the nature by which students at Harvard approach academic exploration. And for that reason, we have just as much of a stake in that decision as faculty and graduate students.

Students' frustration does not exist in spite of the efforts that the Shopping Period committee has taken to include students in the discussion process; it exists because of the efforts that haven't been taken, and the speed with which those efforts that have occurred have been taken in the present time. Other than those who deliberately volunteer to commit emotional labor to create change in college policy (those like myself, who run for Undergraduate Council), there's a strong feeling that the burden on proving why shopping period matters should not exist in tandem with all the other academic and extracurricular commitments we have to deal with on a daily basis. Students are not angry in spite of the listening sessions and website that was released; they're frustrated that the committee recruited to craft a proposal doesn't have any student representation at all, that the listening sessions only occurred in backlash to student organizing, and that it required

multiple discussions in order to get any sort of open communication regarding how the proposal creation process works.

This is not to say, once again, that the efforts of Bernhard Nickel, of Dean Amanda Claybaugh, and of all other members of the committee and administration in listening to students have gone unnoticed. With this specific project, students have definitely noticed an (albeit novel) effort to recruit and garner student input on the many proposals being crafted by the community. In the discussions I've had with Bernhard and Amanda, I've recognized an honest effort to preserve the positive aspects of shopping period as it stands, and I've been grateful for that.

Dean Amanda Claybaugh advised me not to fetishize the idea of the "committee"; as former director of Student Faculty Committees, as Amanda can attest from our discussions, we understand fully the consequences of such obsession with titles and positions. As, such I've written this report on shopping period from the students' perspective, something faculty members of the committee might find hard to come by in other research. And while we understand the danger of obsessing over positions, of fetishizing the committee, we would urge the readers to consider recruiting students onto the creation and deliberation processes for shopping period. As undergraduates and as Harvard students, we want to be able to respect that you folks will make discussions taking into account the things that we value in a liberal arts education. But we also expect the understanding that some of those values are best expressed in person, in a discussion -- not through a report, or through a listening session. And we expect the respect that when given the chance, we won't spend it reiterating points that you've collectively heard a thousand times -- that those representatives who are chosen will serve as conduits for the student voice, and that our contributions will be productive, thoughtful, and considerate of the many other parties that this decision concerns.

Regardless, we hope this report is helpful in the ongoing deliberation over the few proposals the Enrollment Committee has been working diligently to create. Please feel free to reach out if there are any questions or concerns.

All my best,

The UC Education Committee

Why students care about shopping week

Last semester, in October, the Undergraduate Council held an organizing meeting for students to discuss shopping period as it stands -- why we liked it, what should change about it, and what we might lose if certain aspects of it were eliminated. From those discussions, we were able to create three lists. Although I'm sure many of these are obvious benefits to shopping period as it stands, and most of these have come up in the various opportunities the committee has had to interface with students, I feel it's important to provide these benefits, for the sake of being as representative of the student population as possible. All of these were points raised by students in the general student population, not members of the Undergraduate Council.

Shopping period is good because...

- It helps underclassmen to decide their concentration. During the first few semesters of our Harvard careers, shopping allows us to shop multiple classes between a few departments that we're interested in.
- It allows comfortable, hands-on exploration of interests.
 - Additionally, it also helps students to find hidden classes.
- It allows students to choose classes within the semester they will be taking them. Since Harvard students tend to be as extracurricularly involved as they are academically, they can plan their course schedules to adequately fit their non-academic lives on campus.
- It produces greater mental health for students. The stress of having to accomplish a full schedule of work while also testing out classes is void during shopping period, when students are allowed to test out their classes in the right frame of mind. It also keeps students from having to pick classes during the stress of the previous semester, and allows for students to change and reflect during break before making academic decisions.
- Shopping period is better for first-gen/low-income (FGLI) students. It provides an extent of freedom in choosing courses and lessens the risk of taking a chance on certain courses which FGLI students may not readily take in other course enrollment systems. In other course enrollment systems, there are greater risks involved with course selection and dropping courses, and it is a less advantageous system for students who have a lot at stake.
- Shopping period is also better for POC and children from immigrant families. The culture of students from immigrant families and POC usually skews toward STEM fields, in hopes that students pursue a stable future instead of pursue an intellectually rigorous and transformative education. Shopping period gives students the opportunity to test out courses that they might not normally be willing to probe, and creates more of an incentive to branch out in disciplines.
- It provides optionality and freedom.
- It's more egalitarian in execution and environment.

- It helps students gather how much background information is needed for the class. Some classes might be intro classes on paper, but might have a more significant barrier to entry than expected. Since syllabi don't possess everything, shopping gives students a much better impression of the preconceived norms of information in the classroom.
- Lotteried classes show demonstrated interest in the class
- It allows students to get accustomed to being back on campus at the beginning of the semester.
- It helps first-years to understand what a college classroom feels like.
- It's better for incoming first-years so that they have the opportunity to test out all classes, not just those that weren't capped during enrollment for older members of the undergraduate student body
- It allows students to see the student-to-student dynamic of a course, as well as the classroom format and composition.
- It allows students to see the faculty-to-student dynamic -- how the professor speaks, how she interacts with students, how she engages with the class material.
- It allows students to gauge the professor's treatment of course content.
- It allows students to gauge personal qualities of professor (negative + positive)
- It provides a unique social aspect to course enrollment and selection unique to Harvard's academic experience.
- It provides an admissions pull -- shopping week is heavily advertised by admissions and draws people to Harvard, which is one of very few universities which possesses such an enrollment program.
- It fosters diversity (intellectual and otherwise) in the classroom.
- It leaves students happier with classes because of specificity and agency in choosing them.
- It keeps students always thinking forwards in terms of course selection instead of anticipating the consequences of prior choices, which students find important for reflection.
- It prevents summer homework.
- It grants a certain flexibility that helps Harvard to keep graduation rate high when issues come up in students' lives.
- It allows students to consider more electives instead of sticking with a few electives that all students take.
- It allows for strategic class organization.

Removing certain aspects of shopping period would be **bad** because...

- Another system might cause more scheduling conflicts.
- Its removal would be contradictory to mission of college, which is to educate students "through our commitment to the transformative power of a liberal arts and sciences education." Most students at Harvard would say that shopping period is essential to the liberal arts education at Harvard.
- Any form of pre-registration is at least somewhat binding, which eliminates the joy of exploration and optionality that shopping period possesses.

- Students would be less likely to risk taking classes with new faculty
- The mental calculus of switching classes versus "dropping" classes is different.
- Pre-registration could possibly lead to caps on registration for certain classes further down the road, instead determining the enrollment method on a semesterly basis.

Removing certain aspects of shopping period might be **good** because...

- A new registration system might provide far greater income security for graduate student workers.
- Removing shopping period may reduce the problem of volatile enrollment for intro classes and Gen-Ed courses.
- Faculty might be able to hire and train more specialized TFs ahead of time under a more stable registration system.
- Lotteries could become streamlined in other course enrollment systems.
- Professors could design better courses.

Peer Institutions

The pre-registration system is common among colleges; the shopping period system is not. This section is meant to provide a holistic review of popular institutions which possess shopping period-type systems, as well as to discuss concerns pertaining to course enrollment of students from other institutions.

Yale

Yale has a one-and-a-half-week shopping period at the beginning of each term, during which students have an opportunity to test classes without registering for those classes.

Yale has distributional requirements instead of General Education. There are no distributional requirement-specific departments like with the Gen-Ed system; instead, there are classes within departments that are specifically designated as classes that could be taken for said credit. These distributional requirements are split into two categories: skills and areas. Students are required to take 2 courses in each of the 3 “skills”: Foreign Language (L), Writing (WR), and Quantitative Reasoning (QR). Foreign Language (L) is the exception to this, and may vary. Students are also required to take 2 courses in each of the 3 “areas”: Humanities and the Arts (Hu), Science (Sc), and Social Science (So). Some courses qualify for more than one type of credit. In those instances, students can choose which skill or area they would like the course to apply towards.

Yale possesses pre-registration systems for certain courses, with each department possessing their own registration mechanism. Similar to Harvard, freshman seminars require pre-registration. Registration for said courses occurs immediately before the beginning of the semester, during either summer or winter break. If a student is not pre-registered for a seminar, they have the opportunity to still shop the seminar and join the waitlist (not all slots are filled during pre-registration) or shop other seminars.¹

Yale graduate students have not been given the opportunity to unionize². Yale has a different graduate student payment system during the year. Instead of paying graduate students on a monthly basis, based on appointment, the system is as follows:

“At Yale, students are required to teach in nearly all programs. We think of this teaching as the minimum essential for their professional preparation. Those students are paid whether or

¹ <https://yalecollege.yale.edu/academics/preregistration-applications-and-preference-selection>

² <https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2018/02/15/will-grad-students-ever-get-their-union/>

not they teach, as long as they haven't declined to teach. Their payments are therefore processed irrespective of their assignment status and as part of their regular stipend. They are not paid in a lump sum, but on a bi-monthly basis, so the first payment is for the first two weeks of the term. Students not doing required teaching are paid if they are appointed, but very few appointments are made after the first two weeks of the term. If they miss a payment, it comes in the second pay period, two weeks after the start of the term."³

We think that one possible explanation for why Yale is able to execute this payment mechanism is because of their one-and-a-half-week shopping period. At Harvard, because shopping period only exists for one week, students are still making enrollment decisions and calculating course load following shopping week, which is why enrollment prediction becomes such a variable thing. When shopping period is two weeks long, students are mostly settled in by the end of the second week, and there is little to no reason for why professors would have to hire new TFs following shopping period, since enrollment would not drop or rise dramatically following the end of those first two weeks. This also allows Yale to have a long add/drop period following shopping week, since the decision to drop or add courses only becomes necessary in cases where that decision is a necessity of circumstance instead of a preference. However, the two-week shopping period is not an incredible system either; it comes with its cons. For one, the two weeks exacerbate issues of stress that we've seen occur with Harvard students in the case of lotteried and capped courses.

Coincidentally, Yale is currently executing its own reforms to shopping period, to improve it and reduce stress on students. Certain ideas include: having professors list limited enrollment classes on their syllabi (as well as the priority-order for students they will accept), creating a standardized system through which waitlists can be managed, and having students demonstrate interest in courses prior to the semester to gauge need for rooms and TAs (while maintaining their ability to shop). Dean Marvin Chun is currently leading a task force composed of students and faculty to change certain aspects of shopping week as per [the recommendations of a report on shopping period produced by the Yale College Council \(YCC\)](#). We would recommend you read the report to gauge the situation at Yale, and why those students are pushing for a change in their course enrollment system -- as well as the proposed changes.

³ Received information from Pamela Schirmeister, [Sr. Associate Dean and Dean of Strategic Initiatives, Graduate School of Yale](#).

This should not be taken as a sign that shopping period is outdated at Harvard -- it would seem that student attitudes toward shopping period are quite different between Yale and Harvard. At Yale, over 70% of students find shopping period as a stressful time for students⁴; at Harvard, when the student body was asked whether shopping week caused stress or anxiety, students answered with a mean score of 2.6 and a median score of 2.0⁵. While students at Harvard have concerns surrounding lotteries and uncertainty of classes, the general consensus is that the benefits of shopping period far outweigh the concerns. At Yale, students consider the challenges they face during course enrollment to be central in how they view shopping period overall. The Yale administration's response to this has been re-evaluating how to make shopping period less stressful, as many students still want to maintain it. While students agree that lotteries can induce stress, it would seem that students at Yale have far more complaints with shopping period as it stands at their institution than students at Harvard have for shopping period at our institution. This example is uniquely important because of all our peer institutions, Yale's course enrollment system is the most similar to Harvard's.

McGill

McGill has a two-week "add/drop" period that basically functions as a shopping period, since students do not have to register for all the courses they're shopping. They do have to register for a certain number of courses, but they are able to drop those courses and change their registration freely during this period of time.⁶

McGill has a Core requirement similar to Yale's distributional requirement, in which students must take a certain number of courses from various overarching subject areas (humanities, social sciences, mathematics and sciences, languages)⁷. Unlike at Yale, McGill students must take these various courses during their freshman year.

Along with their shopping period, McGill students must pre-register the previous semester for their courses. Registration opens during a three-day period the previous semester. Returning students are given priority according to year (3rd and 4th-year students may register the first day onwards, 2nd year students may register the second day onwards, 1st

⁴ <https://ycc.yale.edu/s/shopping-period-report.pdf>, pg. 4 (Data Analysis section)

⁵ <https://tinyurl.com/shoppingweeksurveyreport>, pg. 4 (Question 4)

⁶ <https://www.mcgill.ca/oasis/academic/registration/adddrop-period>

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<https://www.mcgill.ca/study/2018-2019/faculties/arts/undergraduate/programs/bachelor-arts-ba-freshman-program-general>

year students may register the third day onwards).⁸ Incoming first-year students may begin registering for courses in late June the summer before school starts.⁹

McGill graduate student payments occur on a bi-weekly payment schedule. Teaching fellows paid on an hourly basis are compensated every second Thursday; salaried employees are paid every second Friday. The collective agreement between McGill's AGSEM (Association of Graduate Students Employed at McGill) and McGill university details specifics about graduate student appointment procedure and guidelines.¹⁰

Because registration occurs during the previous semester, positions are posted during the previous term for the following term as well (Spring for Fall and Winter, Fall for Spring). However, posting for TA positions seems to occur after registration for students has been open for a little under a month. For example, in 2018, students were required to register for courses during the April 4-6th weekend. That same year, the deadline for posting graduate student position vacancies for teaching assistantships was April 30th. This gap allows professors to assess and predict enrollment according to pre-registration numbers.

Tentative lists of appointments to positions must be produced by course directors within 30 days of the deadline of the job posting, and notification to graduate and postdoctoral students must occur within 35 days of the deadline of the job posting.¹¹

Due to McGill's shopping week, the collective agreement includes a provision on indemnity for withdrawal or offer. In the case that a position is withdrawn, the primary option for graduate students is placement into a position of similar remuneration, if such a position is available and the employee meets certain basic qualifications for that position. If the employee refuses hire to an alternate position, the refusal is considered as resignation, and the employee is not entitled to compensation. If the withdrawal occurs due to insufficient enrollment or cancellation of the course and no alternate positions are available, the graduate student receives 2/15ths of the appointment's salary. If withdrawal occurs for any other reasons, the graduate student receives 2/5ths of the appointment's salary.¹²

I'd like to note that we understand that the committee creating proposals for replacing Harvard's current course enrollment system has no bearing on the ongoing discussions of the union, or with how graduate students get paid. It would seem that there are a number of schools, such as Yale and McGill, which have very similar systems to Harvard, which have

⁸ <https://www.mcgill.ca/students/courses/add/when>

⁹ <https://mcgill.ca/accepted/nextsteps/register/dates>

¹⁰ https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/601854_5d33ee8104fb4652906f5f239913f654.pdf

¹¹ https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/601854_5d33ee8104fb4652906f5f239913f654.pdf, Sections 13.03 and 13.04.01

¹² https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/601854_5d33ee8104fb4652906f5f239913f654.pdf, Section 13.04.04

found ways to better guarantee income security while still preserving a form of shopping period. Additionally, if the graduate student union discussions go fittingly for the graduate students, it could dramatically influence the pay structure for TFs, and therefore influence the course enrollment process. We are sure these are things that the committee is already considering, but we would caution moving forward with any proposals, therefore, without considering these factors.

Stanford

Stanford has a liberal add/drop period labelled as a “shopping period”, coupled with a pre-registration period whose deadline is the first day of the term. During this period, students may add and/or drop courses without consequence for three weeks into the term.¹³

Stanford runs on a quarter system instead of a semesterly system, meaning that the year is chopped into four sections instead of two: an autumn quarter (Late September-December), a winter quarter (January-March), a spring quarter (April-June), and a summer quarter (June-August).¹⁴ Because of this, students enroll in coursework at least three times (assuming most students spend the summer off) instead of twice per year.

Undergraduate students must pre-register for courses before the three-week add/drop period at the beginning of each quarter. The deadline for pre-registration during every respective quarter is the first day of classes for that quarter.¹⁵ Students are fined \$200 if they do not register for the minimum 12 credits before the term begins.

Stanford graduate students have not been given the opportunity to unionize¹⁶. Graduate students hired for teaching appointments receive remuneration from two different channels: salaried pay and tuition allowance. Salary is determined by the university budget allocation for certain departments¹⁷. Tuition allowance “represents a commitment to support a student's educational program through the payment of a portion of the student's tuition bill.”

¹⁸ In this case, an assistantship can sub for units of course enrollment during a term; for example, a 50% assistantship can occupy 8-10 units. TAL can **only** be used against tuition

¹³ <https://registrar.stanford.edu/students/final-study-list-deadline>

¹⁴ <https://exploreddegrees.stanford.edu/academiccalendar/>

¹⁵ <https://registrar.stanford.edu/students/enrolling-courses/preliminary-study-list-deadline-courses-or-units>

¹⁶

<https://www.stanforddaily.com/2016/03/01/stanford-files-amicus-brief-against-graduate-student-unionization/>

¹⁷ <https://adminguide.stanford.edu/chapter-10/subchapter-2/policy-10-2-1#anchor-23521>, Section 6b.

¹⁸ <https://adminguide.stanford.edu/chapter-10/subchapter-2/policy-10-2-1#anchor-23525>

credits, and is not convertible to cash¹⁹. Calculation of TAL takes into account 1) percent of time dedicated to the assistantship, 2) length of assistantship, 3) # of assistantships, 4) summer or non-summer appointment²⁰. You can [read more about TAL policies in general here](#). [Read more about TAL policies for specific departments here](#).

Regarding the cancellation of appointments: If graduate student appointments are cancelled prior to or on the day of appointment, graduate students will receive no compensation (no salary and no TAL), and will be responsible for paying for tuition. The university will also not be responsible for reappointment of graduate students into new positions in this kind of cancellation²¹. If graduate student appointments are cancelled during the quarter of appointment, salaried payment will end but the student will receive the full quarter TAL. This includes cancellation due to changes in enrollment or cancellation of courses²².

Brown University

Brown University has a two-week shopping period, during which students can access all course materials for a class and attend any class without consequences²³.

In order to shop courses, students must insert courses into their primary cart; only then can they access course materials. This way, professors can also see that students are considering enrolling in certain courses and plan accordingly²⁴. Unlike its academic counterparts, Brown has *no* core curriculum; instead, they advocate a policy of Open Curriculum, which basically just means students can any courses, as long as they fulfill the graduation requirement of at least 30 courses in 8 semesters²⁵.

Brown possesses a mandatory pre-registration system for undergraduates, in which students must register for classes during the previous term (the preceding April for the Fall, the preceding November for the Spring)²⁶. If students do not register for classes by the given deadline, a late fee of \$15 is applied on the students' accounts. Students may freely change registration during the first two weeks of add/drop period at the beginning of every term.

¹⁹ <https://adminguide.stanford.edu/chapter-10/subchapter-2/policy-10-2-1#anchor-23521>, Section 7e.

²⁰ <https://adminguide.stanford.edu/chapter-10/subchapter-2/policy-10-2-1#anchor-23525>, Section 7d.

²¹ <https://adminguide.stanford.edu/chapter-10/subchapter-2/policy-10-2-1#anchor-23529>, Section 9a.

²² <https://adminguide.stanford.edu/chapter-10/subchapter-2/policy-10-2-1#anchor-23529>, Section 9b.

²³ <https://ithelp.brown.edu/kb/articles/first-two-weeks-of-classes-shopping-period-and-canvas-course-access>

²⁴ <https://ithelp.brown.edu/kb/articles/first-two-weeks-of-classes-shopping-period-and-canvas-course-access>

²⁵ <https://www.brown.edu/admission/undergraduate/content/what-open-curriculum>

²⁶ <https://www.brown.edu/about/administration/registrar/course-enrollment/registration>

Brown University just voted to unionize this past November²⁷. Comprehensive details on Brown University graduate student payment schedules are unavailable online. Teaching assistants are hired on a semesterly or yearly basis²⁸.

Other considerations

The Yale College Council created a report on shopping period at Yale, [which once again can be found here](#). Some things to take away from this report are that most other peer institutions, such as UPenn and Columbia, possess systems similar to Brown and Stanford on paper, with a mandatory pre-registration system attached to an add/drop period during the beginning of classes.

A significant facet of the shopping period experience is the intellectual experience offered to students; an argument posited by many is that this experience would not be lost in a pre-registration system, given a liberal add/drop period was added to supplement said system. However, I reached out to a few students who currently attend the University of Pennsylvania and Columbia University to understand the system from students' perspectives.

Something to note is that most, if not all, pre-registration systems possess an add/drop period at the beginning of the semester, in which students may change their course schedule without consequences from the registrar. However, the difference between shopping period at schools like Yale and Harvard is that and pre-registration at other schools is that students are required to deliver a full course-load of work outside of class during the add/drop period at schools which have pre-registration, whereas Yale and Harvard provide more flexibility of choice without creating a consequence for taking academic risks during shopping period.

As the YCC described, UPenn has an add/drop period at the beginning of every term, during which students can add and drop courses before finalizing their schedules on their online portal. However, according to student testimony, this period does not function similarly to shopping period. One student stated that "professors don't really expect students to shop, and so they don't really care about how they schedule their assignments"²⁹ -- typically, engineering students and certain disciplines in the College of Arts and

²⁷ <https://news.brown.edu/articles/2018/11/unionization>

²⁸ <https://www.brown.edu/academics/gradschool/teaching-assistants>

²⁹ Quoted from a messenger conversation with Rakesh Ravi, UPenn SEAS '21

Sciences³⁰ will have assignments from the very first day of class. Another student pointed out that since “most classes fill up due to [pre-registration]”, most students “stick with at least 75% of their original schedule.”³¹ Given that students at Harvard tend to shop at least 7 courses per semester (as per survey data), it seems clear that the add/drop period would not adequately provide students with the same method of intellectual exploration. That student also admitted a large portion of the problem was that many students felt dropping classes could “feel like failing”³² in said classes, indicating a significant difference from the attitude of academic freedom that students take during shopping period.

Additionally, students that have transferred from colleges that have pre-registration systems to Harvard and Yale have reported more positive experiences from shopping period. For example, a transfer student from UVA in 2013 claimed the following about his course registration experiences:

“UVA was a challenge because you have to pick your classes months ahead of time, and there’s very little feedback or a good way to evaluate the classes you choose,” Horton said. “Plus, most people change their minds in the months before classes start. Class shopping is way more flexible and helps you make better decisions. It’s perfect for indecisive people like me.”³³

A friend of mine who currently attends Harvard, named Cara Kupferman, also reported similar sentiments. She transferred from Columbia during her sophomore year. Columbia possesses an add/drop period at the beginning of every term, which is supplemented by a course registration period the term prior. Cara has asserted repeatedly in conversation that the pre-registration is far more detrimental to student mental health, since during that add/drop period of three weeks, students must still fulfill all the coursework of the 5-7 courses they may be considering, which means “shopping” during a liberal add/drop period becomes a burden instead of an option that grants flexibility.

All-in-all, Different registration systems have different pros and different cons. Yale, which has a more liberal shopping period than Harvard, also has a student body which has had a negative reaction to certain aspects of that shopping period, as evidenced by the previously referenced YCC report. At the same time, the add/drop period at schools like Columbia and University of Pennsylvania create a culture significantly different from that of shopping,

³⁰ Heard similar sentiments from Justin Greenman, UPenn CAS ‘21

³¹ Quoted from a messenger conversation with Amit Lohe, UPenn M&T ‘21

³² Quoted from a messenger conversation with Amit Lohe, UPenn M&T ‘21

³³ <https://www.thecrimson.com/admissions/article/2013/9/10/course-selection-shopping-week/>

where students enter the academic term not concerned with choosing courses or concerned with the options in front of them, but instead use the time to make decisions on a single course slot.

However, systems with pre-registration, such as Columbia and the University of Pennsylvania, have less concerns with income security. Because those schools have students who tend to stick with the classes in which they enroll the previous semester, enrollment numbers for courses and the number of TFs required to accommodate those numbers remains relatively the same. At the same time, as evidenced by the case studies above, colleges with shopping period have found ways to accommodate graduate students whose income may be at risk due to volatile course enrollment numbers. Yale's payment system allows income security regardless of enrollment, while McGill's guarantees a certain fraction of pay regardless of enrollment.

In determining a new system for course registration and enrollment, it is important to consider the solutions that others have implemented already for the problems Harvard faces, as well as whether those solutions (or at least aspects of them) can be transferred to Harvard college policy.

Discussions

Course registration affects a wide variety of facets of student life at Harvard. Therefore, any changes to course registration should also keep these factors in mind, among others.

Intellectual Exploration

One factor that achieves strong attention from advocates of shopping period, particularly students, is the extent to which shopping period offers a unique element of intellectual exploration to students. While this is usually proven by student testimony, we thought it might be fruitful to try to quantify that in some way, in order to reach a more objective metric.

In order to determine what that objective metric might be, it is important to ask: what is intellectual exploration? While there are no traditional definitions of the term, it seems self-explanatory: students use it to refer to the ability to have freedom in academic opportunity. More so than not, “exploration” is also meant to carry a connotation of the unknown (the academic subjects and disciplines that students have never had the opportunity to test), as well as the opportunity engage with disciplines that may not be traditional.

From these definitions, we arrive at certain traits that might indicate potential for intellectual exploration in colleges. Firstly, a college could demonstrate commitment to intellectual exploration by the number of programs of study that a college offers. More options means students have a greater ability to delve into different, less traditional fields. This information can be found online, on college websites; for example, the Harvard College Handbook details all concentrations on a single page. Secondly, a greater spread across disciplines in the student population might indicate that students feel more enabled to study non-traditional or unpopular academic disciplines. One way to quantify the spread of the student population would be to find the standard deviation of degrees conferred to students upon graduation. If the standard deviation is lower, it would signify that there are more students enrolled in nontraditional disciplines, since the distribution would be more evenly spread. A higher standard deviation would indicate less intellectual exploration, since more students would be conferred degrees in one or a few disciplines instead of evenly spread across disciplines.

Of the two metrics identified, only one would be potentially influenced by enrollment procedure: the spread of students across disciplines. While programs of study is a valid metric, establishment of new programs of study/majors is an issue that pertains to allocation of funds by the administration and faculty, not of student scheduling and

student experience. Therefore, the most reliable metric for this purpose is standard deviation. We hypothesize that students from institutions that offer shopping period will have greater spread of students among disciplines (and therefore lower standard deviations) than institutions which have different course enrollment policies.

Data on degrees conferred to students (for both metrics) was gathered via the websites for the Offices of Institutional Research for institutions. Programs of study for which no degrees were conferred were omitted from the data. Below is an example of data used.

Table 1: Raw Data on Degrees Conferred in 2018 or 2017 in Select Institutions

Harvard Programs of Study	H18	Columbia Programs of Study	C18	Yale Programs of Study	Y17	Stanford Programs of Study	S18
Economics	219	Computer Science	223	Economics	157.0	Computer Science	320
Computer Science	131	Political Science	214	Political Science	123.0	Human Biology	132
Government	105	Economics	181	History	106.0	Engineering	110
Applied Mathematics	81	Psychology	121	Psychology	79.0	Mech. Engineering	75
Psychology	77	English	88	Computer Science	67.0	Economics	69
History & Theory of Architecture	72	Social Studies	74	English	66	Management Science and Engineering	67
Operations Research	70	History	55	MCDB ³⁴	62	Symbolic Systems	65
Biology	61	Neurobiology	54	Global Affairs	48	Science, Technology, and Society	63
Neuroscience & Behavior	58	Molecular and Cellular Biology	53	American Studies	43	Biology	62

³⁴ Molecular, Cellular, and Developmental Biology

French	57	Statistics	52	Ethics, Politics & Economics	36	Political Science	57
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[A Google Sheet is linked here with all the data used for analysis.](#) Since different colleges have different data readily accessible online, it was determined that only data from degrees conferred from the most recent year accessible would be used for data analysis. A better study for the future would be to find the average standard deviation over time for many years over time -- this would provide a better assessment of whether there is consistent spread within the distribution of disciplines pursued by students at these colleges.

Table 2: Analysis of Data on Degrees Conferred in 2018

Institution	Harvard	Columbia	Yale	Stanford
# of Programs of Study Offered	50	83	81	98
Total Degrees Conferred in 2018	1611	2132	1327	1746
Standard Deviation	39.27399978	43.79855569	31.26742466	47.55539143

Columbia and Stanford, as included in the peer institution research, were used as examples of schools that do not have course enrollment procedures similar to Harvard and Yale. Data on degrees conferred for McGill and Brown were more difficult to access, and therefore were not used for the data analysis. The data would seem to show that Harvard and Yale, which have forms of a shopping period, have the most spread of the data set, with standard deviations of 39.27 and 31.27, respectively, while Columbia and Stanford (both of which have add/drop periods coupled with pre-registration) had higher standard deviations, indicating less uniformity in the distribution and therefore less spread of disciplines among the students.

As the committee searches for and hypothesizes regarding reforms to course enrollment in their current form, we urge that the committee deeply consider how those changes might affect students' abilities to truly

Advising

Harvard touts advising networks to prospective undergraduate students, and in a way, they're not wrong to do so. First-years are given a Peer Advising Fellow (PAF), an academic adviser, and a proctor; most departments have their own peer concentration advisers and departmental advisers; and sophomores receive advisers and concentration advisers in their houses. The problem with advising in the status quo is not necessarily the number of programs that exist for the general student, but instead in the quality and allocation of responsibility that results as a consequence.

For first-year advising, the quality of academic advisers varies widely across the student population. Many academic advisers have little to no familiarity with the undergraduate curriculum, given that a good portion of them are faculty at graduate schools instead of undergraduate schools. As a result, much of the academic portion of advising falls on the PAFs, who are much more familiar with the undergraduate system of education at Harvard, having already gone through at least two semesters of academic planning at the college. However, PAFs are not specialized in any specific discipline, and certainly cannot directly accommodate the academic concerns of nine different Harvard students. As a result, in order to effectively advise students academically, PAFs instead teach students how to utilize shopping period and course registration to better navigate classes.

Another area of advising where Harvard is severely lacking is advising for students from diverse backgrounds. As recently as last year, Harvard invested in creating a pre-orientation program called FYRE for students from first-gen, low-income backgrounds, thanks to years of activism from student leaders on campus; there are still no pre-orientation programs curated for students of color. Any new initiatives to change shopping period must take into account the benefits that shopping period hold for students have far more at stake with their education -- FGLI students and students of color -- than students from more comfortable backgrounds. When students can't take risks, they are less likely to explore academically in registering for classes -- shopping period accounts for that, allowing students to step into classrooms and experience non-traditional disciplines without commitment.

If changes are being made to course enrollment, then they should take into account the current first-year advising system, and make sure that radical changes follow suit to ensure that our first-years and other institutions are not left in their broken states. We would recommend the following changes:

- 1) **Revitalize the recruitment and training process for first-year academic advisers.** There should be no excuse for academic advisers not knowing how general education works. All academic advisers should at least be acquainted with the general field in which their assigned first-year student's interests are situated (an academic adviser in the social sciences for students who have indicated interest in government and history). Most of all, academic advisers must be familiar, if not by affiliation then by training, with the fundamental aspects of undergraduate life.
- 2) **Create more instructional resources to help first-years become accommodated to the college classroom.** One of the benefits of shopping period is that first-year students have an opportunity to navigate different classroom formats without risk for a small amount of time before school starts. Although there are no alternatives to the value of experiencing different classrooms first-hand through shopping period, more resources to help students feel more comfortable in the significantly different academic environment of Harvard might help with the transition from high school to college. It would be absolutely ideal if those facets of shopping period could be preserved, but more resources would also provide support to those students who need it.
- 3) **Create more resources for FGLI students and students of color.** FGLI students and students of color need to be more supported institutionally, whether it be through the creation of cultural support centers such as those at Yale³⁵ and Princeton³⁶, and initiatives to support FGLI students such as those at Stanford³⁷ and Yale³⁸. Faculty mentorship programs, cooperation with the BSC for expanded tutoring services, and more engaging outreach through videos to help support students academically are a few concrete initiatives that should go hand-in-hand with any new considerations regarding course enrollment.

³⁵ <https://yalecollege.yale.edu/campus-life/cultural-affairs-centers>

³⁶ <http://fieldscenter.princeton.edu/>

³⁷ <https://diversityandfirstgen.stanford.edu/resources>

³⁸ <https://fgli.yalecollege.yale.edu/>

Accessibility, Preparedness, and Student Stress

Much of the general student population begins considering future courses as early as the semester before, if not a year before, the term in which they enroll in courses. While it is not reasonable for professors to be mandated to provide information on their plans of instruction a year prior to their teaching, it is also not reasonable that some syllabi aren't complete by the first day of classes, much less after shopping period.

Hand-in-hand with this issue is that oftentimes, the syllabus is not enough to show students what a class might be like -- many times, even after shopping a class for the first time, students aren't fully aware of how academically challenging or accessible a class might be. In order to make decisions about classes, students often defer to the first assignment for the class, whether that be a set of readings or a problem set. However, there are many instances where those resources aren't immediately accessible, and students must fork over some money without even knowing whether they will take the class or not; some even decide not to take the class because of the investment it requires in the beginning.

Finally, one problem that students face in course enrollment at Harvard is the lottery system, of which the committee should already be aware. In the Undergraduate Council's shopping week survey, at least half of students that had entered lotteries indicated that they were more stressful than not. Any changes to course registration seeking to create positive changes should accommodate the lottery system.

For all of these problems, we recommend the following solutions:

- 1) **Syllabi should be made available to students at least two weeks before shopping period.** The Yale College Council made a similar recommendation in their report on course selection, and we agree that this could alleviate student stress and also allow for better general preparedness in the College. The Canvas site should be made available on the my.harvard course search tool, with the syllabus provided on each course site. Information on lotteries, course-capping, and application policies and processes should also be included on syllabi.
- 2) **Lotteries and limited-space course application processes should occur on a specific, standardized tool, and the timeline for lotteries should be standardized across all classes.** As of now, different departments have very different methods of admitting students into exclusive courses, whether they are exclusive by application or by lottery. Some seminars have in-person application processes; others have a first-come, first-serve capping process; some classes offer applications through Google

Forms; and lotteries are run through Canvas, my.harvard, or something else altogether. All of these should be processed using an online tool -- either a new section of my.harvard, or an entirely different website linked to students' my.harvard accounts. Students would be allowed to opt into a lottery or apply to a seminar or other exclusive course using this platform. It would also reduce confusion on the professor side, since everything would be through a single, centralized platform, and for lotteries, that information could be dispersed automatically by the software. Additionally, students would greatly benefit if all those lotteries occurred at the same time -- applications, results, and selection. If everything occurred on a standardized timeline, there would be far less confusion and far less stress during shopping period for students.

- 3) **All readings and problem-sets should be accessible for free during shopping period.** Students should not be required to buy any books or software to decide whether or not a course is right for them -- all readings should be accessible online and scanned for students to read, and all software required to perform problem-sets should be provided for free to students. In an ideal world, this would occur throughout the term for all classes, but if that cannot happen, students should at least not expect a financial barrier to entry.

Conclusion

Shopping period is a vital part of Harvard's commitment to a liberal arts education. As the committee continues to search for alternatives to our current form of course enrollment, we would urge that the committee keep in mind why students are so passionate about shopping period, and dig deeper to ensure that the ultimate outcome is one that reflects strong consideration of the factors listed in this report, as well as all other conversations that the committee has had with members of the undergraduate student body.