

Making Block Exams Fair to All

The Argument

Block exams were originally an efficient way to ensure that students were graded equitably in large lecture-classes. Before its general adoption, especially in the sciences, the block exam rarely disrupted other scheduled classes. In recent years, however, evening classes have been repeatedly compromised by block exams. A student may be absent for exams two or three times during the semester, each absence equal to almost a week of class time, yet by university rule the exams take precedence and no absence may be counted.

All block exams are scheduled E2-3. Given limited classroom space during the day, courses that require a three-hour block are often scheduled at night (many classes meet during the evening block because they are seminar or studio classes whose work requires one extended period). One of the formal rules of pedagogy is that no course should interfere with the meeting of another course. A class that over-runs its hour, for example, must give way to the scheduled class. The block exam is unique in having priority over scheduled classes.

The university's solution has been to advise students not to take evening classes if they have block exams. If the university continues to expand, conflicts between block exams and evening classes will only increase. (Worse, though block exams are officially scheduled during E2-3 [8:20-10:10 pm], many instructors require students to report to the exam room at 8:10 pm or even 8:00 pm, further infringing on scheduled class time.) The onus of a solution should fall on the block exams, not on the innocent courses.

Block exams have also increasingly been scheduled during the final week of classes. Though the university rule permits such exams only if they do not cover the entire course's material, it is widely known that in some courses this is the final exam. These final-week exams completely disrupt the conflicting classes, since instructors usually structure a course so that the final week is the climax of a semester's study.

The conflict between block exams and evening courses should not simply be resolved in favor of the exams. There is a simple solution. In a class with hundreds of students, a few will need a make-up exam due to illness or family emergency. Since in almost all cases a make-up exam will be given, students with conflicting classes should be permitted to take the make-up.

The Proposal

1) Any student whose scheduled class conflicts with a block exam shall be given the option of a make-up exam. Students who do not choose the make-up exam may be marked absent by the instructor of the scheduled class.

[stronger] a) When the student has a conflicting class of one class period, or

[weaker] b) When the student has a conflicting class of at least two class periods.

2) No block exams shall be scheduled during the last week of regular classes in a term.