Attitudes and Preferences of Cornell Undergraduates toward Academic Scheduling

Senate Educational Policy Committee

Executive Summary

April 2003
Purpose

Among the charges to the Educational Policy Committee (EPC) of the Cornell University Faculty Senate is to examine issues related to academic scheduling, course and room scheduling, preliminary and final examination schedules, use of protected time (4:30-7:30 p.m.), and related issues such as distributed learning. On the EPC agenda for the academic year 2002-2003 were several important items, one of which was the use of campus teaching facilities throughout the academic year. Preliminary analyses using administrative data on course scheduling indicated a compression of both the daily and weekly course schedules, with relatively few classes and significantly lower attendance in classes offered before 10:00 a.m. or after 2:30 p.m. any day, and relatively few classes offered on Friday afternoons. Furthermore, the data indicate an increase in the number of 75-minute T/Th versus to-minute MWF classes that further compress the work week. These data, coupled with student/parent complaints reported to the Office of the Dean of the Faculty regarding classes cancelled before Thanksgiving break, led the committee to examine scheduling practices throughout the semester. The committee focused its attention on three primary issues:

The use of evening versus in-class prelims and the use of night classes: Using administrative data the committee examined the use of evening prelims and night classes by course/professor. Of interest were the number of students enrolled in evening classes and the number of students enrolled in classes requiring evening prelims. The purpose of this analysis was to determine the degree to which academic demands were encroaching into the evening hours. The data indicated that, while the use of evening prelims has remained fairly stable over the last few years, the number of night classes at Cornell, has increased significantly, resulting in greater penetration of academic activities into the evening hours.

More than two final examinations in 24 hours: Despite the listing of final examination times during course enrollment, many students find themselves in the situation of having three examinations within a 24-hour period during final exam week. This makes it difficult for students to perform their best and pressures faculty to accommodate by offering make-up examinations for these students.

Class attendance before and after Thanksgiving and spring breaks: Of interest to the committee was anecdotal evidence suggesting that students, and possibly faculty, were further
compressing the length of the academic semester by skipping/canceling classes before Thanksgiving and spring breaks. Both students and parents complained to the Office of the Dean of the Faculty regarding this issue. Some complained that the Thanksgiving break was too short for out-of-state students to return home; others complained that they had planned their travel schedule around remaining on campus for their regularly scheduled class, only to have classes canceled prior to the break.

During its deliberations the EPC generated several alternative strategies for relieving scheduling pressure points. Among the ideas considered to reduce mid-week time compression were scheduling out-of-class examinations during the morning hours between 8:00 and 10:00 a.m., and companion sections of regularly scheduled classes during the 4:30-7:30 p.m. restricted time. The committee considered alternative final examination schedules in which study days are distributed throughout the examination period rather than consecutively at the beginning of the examination period. Another issue considered by the committee was the possibility of lengthening Thanksgiving break by one day, i.e., ending classes on Tuesday at noon, and accounting for that day of instruction by starting the Fall semester one day earlier.

Any scheduling policy recommendations from the EPC to the Faculty Senate regarding these issues would be controversial. For this reason the EPC decided to seek student input prior to finalizing its recommendations to the Faculty Senate. Members of the EPC worked collaboratively to develop a survey that was administered to all Cornell University undergraduates at the beginning of spring semester 2003.

The survey centered on the three major scheduling issues: evening prelims/classes, final examination schedules, and Thanksgiving Break. In addition, the survey included questions to determine student interest in out-of-class or “distributed learning” opportunities such as web-based courses, interactive test taking, on-line live office hours, etc. Two additional sets of questions were added to the survey because of their relationship to student stress and optimal scheduling. The first set of questions focused on student sleep patterns, periods of alertness during the day, and falling asleep in class. The second set of questions focused on Cornell’s varsity athletes, who face additional time constraints in managing the demands of an academic and athletic program.
Methodology

Objectives

The purpose of the study was to determine student attitudes and preferences regarding:

- Evening versus in-class prelims
- Use of the 4:30-7:30 p.m. and 7:30-10:30 p.m. time periods for academic activities
- Alternative final exam schedules
- Length of Thanksgiving break
- Distributed learning opportunities

In addition, the survey sought to determine student daily living patterns, and the particular constraints faced by athletes at Cornell University regarding their schedules both in and out of season.

Sampling

The survey was administered via the web by CIT. A total of 4 reminder notices were sent out to non-respondents in addition to the first invitation via e-mail. A total of 6,375 surveys were submitted out of 13,615 students who received a request to participate, with an overall response rate of 46.8%. Of these 6,375 surveys, 501 students submitted responses only to the first two questions on the survey which pertain to their prelim scheduling preference. This reduces the response rate for the entire survey to 43.1%. Below is a table of the breakdown of the responses to the survey. A small group of students completed the survey and emailed the survey administrator to express praise and concern.

Response Outcome:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Completed full survey</th>
<th>Completed only Questions 1 &amp; 2</th>
<th>Did not Complete</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5874</td>
<td>501</td>
<td>7240</td>
<td>13,615</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43.1%</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>53.2%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Executive Summary

PREFERENCE WITH RESPECT TO SCHEDULING OF PRELIM EXAMS

When do students prefer to take prelims?

64% of students preferred in-class prelims
26% preferred evening prelims

Even for large classes student preferred in-class prelims 53%

For those preferred **EVENING** prelims the reasons were:

87% more time to think
59% think more clearly in evening
58% less stressful

For those preferring **IN-CLASS** prelims

75% agreed with that they are tired in the evening and don’t think as clearly
76% said in-class prelims were less stressful
70% thought that evenings should be free of academic activity

PREFERENCES WITH RESPECT TO FINAL EXAM SCHEDULE

Opinions were **NOT CLEAR** on which final exam schedule would **reduce stress**:

39% thought the current schedule would
29% thought Option 1 would
32% thought Option 2 would

Opinions were **NOT CLEAR** on which schedule would **improve performance**

35% thought the current schedule would
31% thought Option 1 would
34% thought Option 2 would

Opinions were **NOT CLEAR** on which schedule they would **prefer**

41% preferred the current schedule would
27% preferred Option 1 would
32% preferred Option 2 would

Should we **continue** the current Cornell University final exam schedule?

61% agreed or strongly agreed
QUESTIONS REGARDING THE 4:30-7:30 TIME BLOCK

Should this time block be used for out of class prelims?
65% disagreed or strongly disagreed

Should we have the option of classes during this time period?
44% disagreed or strongly disagreed
34% agreed or strongly agreed

Should we allow classes during this period if sections offered at a regular time?
21% disagreed or strongly disagreed
44% agreed or strongly agreed

What about classes in the 7:30-10:30 time block?
50% disagreed or strongly disagreed
27% agreed or strongly agreed

THANKSGIVING BREAK

When did students start to leave for Thanksgiving break?
34% last attended classes on Wednesday before the break
46% last attended classes on Tuesday before the break
14% last attended classes on Monday before the break
6% last attended classes on Friday the week before the break
<1% last attended classes before Friday the week before the break

Were classes cancelled before the break?
28% had no classes cancelled before the break
33% had one class cancelled
27% had two classes cancelled
12% had more than two classes cancelled

Would students prefer to have a longer Thanksgiving break?
39% disagreed or strongly disagreed
49% agreed or strongly agreed

DISTRIBUTED LEARNING

Distributed learning would build flexibility into students’ schedule
61% agreed or strongly agreed
17% disagreed or strongly disagreed
Distributed learning would mean students learned more
30% agreed or strongly agreed
29% disagreed or strongly disagreed
41% no opinion

Distributed learning detracts from the learning environment
37% agreed or strongly agreed
31% disagreed or strongly disagreed
32% no opinion

Would you find the option of entire courses online appealing?
74% said NO

Would you find the option of entire lectures in streaming audio appealing?
51% said NO

Would you find the option of interactive tutorials appealing?
61% said YES

Would you find the option of interactive testing appealing?
56% said YES

Would you find the option of live office hours appealing?
57% said NO

STUDENTS’ DAILY PATTERNS

Alertness during class on a regular day
69% somewhat or very alert
28% somewhat or very sleepy

Number of hours of sleep during week night
5% have < 5 hours
24% have 5-6 hours
37% have 6-7 hours
27% have 7-8 hours
6% have 8+ hours

Number of hours of sleep during weekend night
2% have < 5 hours
5% have 5-6 hours
11% have 6-7 hours
30% have 7-8 hours
52% have 8+ hours
How many students pull all-nighters during the week?
79% never or seldom

How many students pull all-nighters during the weekend?
94% never or seldom

How many students fall asleep during class?
29% sometimes or often
38% seldom
32% never

How often do students take naps during the week?
52% sometimes or often
31% seldom
17% never

Hours of the day you feel most alert?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8-10 am</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-12 noon</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 noon-2 pm</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-4 pm</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-6 pm</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-8 pm</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8-11 pm</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 pm+</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What time do you go to sleep on weekdays? What time do you go to sleep on weekend days?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>before midnight</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>midnight-1:00 am</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:00-2:00 am</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>after 2:00 am</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>before midnight</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>midnight-1:00 am</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:00-2:00am</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>after 2:00 am</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What time do you wake up on weekdays? What time do you wake up on weekend days?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>before 8:00am</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:00-10:00 am</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00-noon</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>after noon</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
<td>99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>before 8:00 am</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:00-10:00 am</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00-noon</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>after noon</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RESPONSES BY CORNELL VARSITY ATHLETES

What is your time allocation like **IN SEASON**

- 35% more time needed for athletics
- 40% just about right
- 25% need more time for academics

What is your time allocation like **OUT OF SEASON**

- 31% more time needed for athletics
- 59% just about right
- 10% need more time for academics

**Pressure from coach** to spend more time in athletics?

- 51% no pressure
- 39% some pressure
- 10% considerable pressure

**Are your coaches’ time expectations for athletics reasonable?**

- 4% not reasonable
- 35% somewhat reasonable
- 61% extremely reasonable

**Pressure from faculty** to spend additional time in academics?

- 51% no pressure
- 39% some pressure
- 10% considerable pressure

**Is faculty accommodating of conflicts that arise from team travel schedule?**

- 13% not understanding
- 61% somewhat understanding
- 26% very understanding

**Is your coach generally understanding and accommodating of academic conflicts arising from your team travel schedule?**

- 4% not understanding
- 33% somewhat understanding
- 63% very understanding