

# Attitudes and Preferences of Cornell Undergraduates toward Academic Scheduling

## Senate Educational Policy Committee

### Executive Summary

**With assistance from:**

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# 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

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## 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:

Completed full survey	Completed only Questions 1 & 2	Did not Complete	Total
5874	501	7240	13,615
43.1%	3.7%	53.2%	100%

# 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
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*Would you find the option of entire lectures in streaming audio appealing?*

51%	said NO
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*Would you find the option of interactive tutorials appealing?*

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

56%	said YES
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*Would you find the option of live office hours appealing?*

57%	said NO
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## **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?*

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

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

19% before midnight

34% midnight-1:00 am

30% 1:00-2:00 am

17% after 2:00 am

5% before midnight

12% midnight-1:00am

26% 1:00-2:00am

57% after 2:00 am

*What time do you wake up on **weekdays**?*

24% before 8:00am

70% 8:00-10:00am

6% 10:00-noon

<1% after noon

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

2% before 8:00 am

26% 8:00-10:00 am

54% 10:00-noon

18% after noon



## 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