

SRA MAROON PAPERS



THE McMASTER STUDENTS UNION | KEY POINTS & RECOMMENDATIONS FROM SRA POLICY PAPERS

POLICY PAPER UNDERGRADUATE COURSE MANAGEMENT

PREAMBLE

Tests and assignments are the common means of evaluation for most courses offered at McMaster University. They are administered with the goals of not only evaluating the student's performance fairly, but also ensuring that the student has learned the course material. However, when examinations and papers conflict time wise with one another, or with other coursework, these goals are sometimes not met. A conflict occurs when examinations and papers are scheduled too closely to one another, or when other coursework is scheduled in the close proximity of such work. When this occurs students cannot be truly evaluated fairly or consistently, and it is also probable that a student will not learn effectively with such stress levels. This paper examines current policy and is meant to act as a general guideline for all faculties.

PRINCIPLES

The MSU believes that:

- Students should be given adequate time to complete their course work, prepare for, and write their examinations.
- Students should be made aware of the existence of policies that pertain to evaluation, including but not limited to: examinations, laboratory reports, take home examinations, papers.
- Students and instructors should uphold the policies outlined in the Undergraduate Course Management Policy.

CONCERNS

The MSU is concerned that:

- Not all due-dates or testing dates are communicated to students at the beginning



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of the term, which may pose challenges to students trying to manage multiple due-dates.

- Students face unhealthy amounts of stress towards the end of the semester due to balancing final assignments, learning new course content, and preparing for examinations.
- Students have due-dates for assignments or take home testing that fall during the examination period, as scheduled by the Office of the Registrar.
- Students are not made publically aware of what days of the term are covered by the Assessment Ban.
- Students and Instructors currently do not have an avenue with which they can easily report violations of the Undergraduate Course Management Policy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The MSU recommends that McMaster University:

- Explicitly state due-dates for all marked material used in the calculation of the final course grade in course outlines
- Undergraduate Course Management policy amended the Undergraduate Course Management policy to prohibit all tests, take home exams, assignments, laboratories, papers, etc., regardless of weighting, during the Assessment Ban period.
- Set the due- date on the last day of examinations for final take home examinations or cumulative assignments that are due during the examination period.
- Launch a campaign to publicize the Assessment Ban prior to each examination period.
- Make the Assessment Ban dates a required component of all course syllabi as mandated by the Undergraduate Course Management policy.
- Amend the Undergraduate Course Management policy to include a section on a course of action for reporting infractions of the policy.
- Create an online form whereby students and instructors can submit violations to the Assessment Ban.

FURTHER READING

For more information about Undergraduate Course Management, visit the **General Policies section** of the MSU website to read the full Policy Paper.



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POLICY PAPER

Undergraduate Course Management Policy

Introduction

Tests and assignments are the common means of evaluation for most courses offered at McMaster University. They are administered with the goals of not only evaluating the student's performance fairly, but also ensuring that the student has learned the course material. However, when examinations and papers conflict time wise with one another, or with other coursework, these goals are sometimes not met. A conflict occurs when examinations and papers are scheduled too closely to one another, or when other coursework is scheduled in the close proximity of such work. When this occurs students cannot be truly evaluated fairly or consistently, and it is also probable that a student will not learn effectively with such stress levels.

The issue of examination and term work conflicts has become an increasingly important issue amongst undergraduate students, and will become even more significant as student enrollment continues to increase. A large course offering, in combination with a larger student population, means a greater number of potential examination conflicts. In addition, with the permanent adoption of fall break, there is further strain placed on scheduling examinations within a limited period.

Currently, the University recognizes only final examination conflicts, which only accounts for three examinations in one calendar day and fails to recognize other equally serious scheduling conflicts. The assessment ban covering the last five days of classes does not cover students effectively due to several exemptions, and has not been enforced in many cases. Mid-term examinations, assignments, and papers are often just as important, as the student must also deal with ongoing classes. This paper examines current policy and makes recommendations in all of the above areas. However, it must be noted that this policy is meant to act as a general guideline for all faculties as it is realized that due to the nature of each Faculty, differing modes of evaluation may be utilized.

I. The Final Examination Ban

The Policy

The Undergraduate Course Management Policy most recently adopted by the Senate on June 4, 2014 outlines the Assessment ban, which covers the last week of classes. Each year the dates are to best listed on the Sessional Dates section of the Undergraduate calendar. Initially adopted by Senate in 1980, the examination ban covers the last five days of classes in a term plus the day or days between the end of classes and the beginning of exams. For example, in the 1999/2000 Fall Term, the last day of classes was Friday December 3rd and examinations started on Monday December 6th. The ban therefore covered the period starting Monday November 29th through Sunday December 5th.

The Assessment Ban was put into place to enable students to continue attending classes while also beginning to prepare for examinations that are held during the

official University examination period. However, this ban is subject to many exemptions.

As stated in the Undergraduate Course Management Policy under SECTION C: ASSESSMENT BAN, the following applications and exemptions are stated:

Application:

a) Assignments worth more than 10% of the final course grade that are assigned at the beginning of term and noted on the course outline can be due during the Assessment Ban period.

b) Assignments worth more than 10% of the final course grade cannot be assigned during the Assessment Ban period.

c) Tests and exams cannot be scheduled during the Assessment Ban period.

d) Take home exams worth more than 10% of the final course grade cannot be assigned or due during the Assessment Ban period.

Exemptions:

a) Tests, including lab tests, are exempt when:

- *the test is held in the normal class or lab time slot AND*
- *the test is worth no more than 10% of the final course grade.*

b) Requests for a waiver of the ban must be approved by the Faculty or Program Office before being considered by Undergraduate Council.

It is common for students to have tests or assignments during the ban period given the above exemptions. However, one must note that the weighting is not necessarily reflective of the work involved in the preparation of the assigned work. In addition, this examination ban does not consider laboratories scheduled during the last week of classes. Many of these require a great deal of time: preparation for the lab, execution of the lab, and writing lab reports. Practical examinations are also exempted during the ban if they are scheduled during the regular laboratory period despite the fact that there is a considerable time of preparation required.

An examination ban is needed which will better serve students, allowing them to attend all classes during the final week of school and prepare effectively for their final examinations without additional stress. This would also recognize the large time investment that such minor assignments take from exam preparation. Regardless, examination bans should not have any exemptions, and such a ban would be a positive step in the direction of allowing students to maximize their academic potential.

II. The Scheduling of Final Examinations

Currently, the only regulations, which exist governing the scheduling of examinations recognize:

1. More than one examination scheduled at the same time.

2. Three examinations in one calendar day (midnight to midnight).
3. Three consecutive examinations over two days.
4. Two consecutive examinations if the first one is 3 hours long for December exams only.

However, the use of “calendar day” severely restricts the original intent of the policy. For example, a student who has two consecutive morning exams followed by a night exam is covered under the policy, but a student who has a night exam followed by two exams the following day is not covered by this policy.

A student with three exams in such a short time period, even if they are not all scheduled for the same calendar day, is faced with the same if not higher stress level. The obvious solution is for the student to study for all of the exams in advance. However, review of material before writing an examination is highly recommended, and having to review too much material is detrimental. It has been suggested that “there are two possible sources of interference when we try to recall information: proactive interference is interference from material learned before the information we want to recall, retroactive interference is interference from material learned after the information we want to recall”.¹ Such intense examination schedules heighten the interference effect since a student’s focus is on not only one or two exams, but also three or more. This would disadvantage such students by virtue of their course selection rather than their true academic ability. In addition, a night exam followed by a morning exam barely allows for the recommended seven-to-nine hours of sleep, without considering preparation time or commuting time before the next exam.² This is virtually the same situation as two consecutive examinations because there is not time to study in between, and the problem is compounded if a third exam must also be done in relatively close proximity.

It is realized that these cases are rare, but students in such situations are not recognized by current policy and are thus penalized. The aim of the policy is to ensure that students are given an equitable chance to perform their best. As such, it is recommended that the policy be changed to a 36-hour period. This would take into consideration the event that a student has a night exam followed by an early morning exam and another night exam. The students would then have an opportunity to rest and prepare themselves appropriately for each exam since one would be moved.

Application of the Policy

Currently, assignments and tests, which violate the existing ban, still occur during the last week of classes. Many professors fail to comply with the current

¹ “How Much Sleep Do We Really Need?” *How Much Sleep Do We Really Need?* National Sleep Foundation, 1 Jan. 2014. Web. 26 Feb. 2015. <<http://sleepfoundation.org/how-sleep-works/how-much-sleep-do-we-really-need>>

² “How Much Sleep Do We Really Need?” *How Much Sleep Do We Really Need?* National Sleep Foundation, 1 Jan. 2014. Web. 26 Feb. 2015. <<http://sleepfoundation.org/how-sleep-works/how-much-sleep-do-we-really-need>>.

examination ban by not assigning work as the course progresses. This often leads to the accumulation of assignments just before examinations. Although this policy is meant for professors and Faculty Deans, the onus is often left solely on the student to report such infractions.

Principle One: Students should be given adequate time to complete their course work, prepare for, and write their examinations.

Final examinations are typically the most heavily weighted component of a course evaluation and are completed during the official examination period as scheduled by the Office of the Registrar. However, for classes that do not evaluate students using a final exam, often a larger project is due near the end of the term. These deadlines often fall in the last week of the term, often during the examination and test ban. The extra time required to complete that larger projects or assignments, may impede on a students ability to prepare for final examinations and therefore jeopardize their ability to perform their best during the final examination period.

Concern One: Not all due-dates or testing dates are communicated to students at the beginning of the term, which may pose challenges to students trying to manage multiple due-dates.

All students are provided with a course syllabus at the beginning of the term, which includes all graded components of the final course mark. However, this breakdown of grades is not always paired with due-dates for the corresponding work. In some instances this means that due-dates are communicated to students throughout the semester either in class or via Avenue. Last minute announcement of due dates may place undue stress on students, and make it more difficult to balance course work across multiple classes.

Concern Two: Students face unhealthy amounts of stress towards the end of the semester due to balancing final assignments, learning new course content, and preparing for examinations.

Up until the approval of the recent fall mid-term break, classes typically ended on the Wednesday, with examinations beginning on a Friday. However, the newest sessional calendar for 2015-2016 indicates that examinations the day after classes end. This means that students are potentially required to learn and understand material in less than 24 hours, in order to be adequately prepared for an examination that may be scheduled on the first day. This may place undue stress upon students concurrent with the completion of other labs, assignments, tests, etc. This is further exacerbated for those students who are enrolled in classes without final examinations. These classes often have largely weighted projects or papers that are due just before the commencement of final examinations. According to data obtained by the American College Health Association through a Canada National College Health Assessment, 38.6% of students reported receiving a lower grade on an exam or an important project; receiving a lower grade in the course; received an incomplete or dropped the

course; or experienced a significant disruption in thesis, dissertation, research, or practicum work due to stress and 27.1% attributed these struggles to sleep difficulties.³

Concern Three: Students have due-dates for assignments or take home testing that fall during the examination period, as scheduled by the Office of the Registrar.

Some course grading schemes do not include a final examination scheduled by the registrar, but rather have final assignments or take home testing with due-dates that fall during the Registrar scheduled examination period. For some students this may result in timing conflicts. This is because the Registrar does not schedule these assignments, and their due-dates may conflict with Registrar scheduled examinations, placing undue stress on students.

Recommendation One: That course outlines explicitly state due-dates for all marked material used in the calculation of the final course grade

Professors should distribute work evenly throughout the course of the term, and make explicit the dates for all assignments, tests, and papers on the course outline so that students can plan appropriately. Currently, the Undergraduate Course Management Policy states that all due-dates should be included in the course outline “if possible”. It is recommended that the inclusion of tentative due dates at minimum be mandated to assist students in managing their time and resources accordingly. Such dates should be followed as strictly as possible to ensure that students are able to prepare for all evaluations to the best of their ability.

Recommendation Two: That the Undergraduate Course Management policy be amended to prohibit all tests, take home exams, assignments, laboratories, papers, etc., regardless of weighting, during the Assessment Ban period.

Naturally, as the end of a term nears, course work is required to evaluate student learning. However, if this course work falls during the Assessment Ban, no matter the weighting, it may infringe on a students ability to prepare for their final examinations. As a result, the Examination ban should be amended to include all tests, take-home exams, assignments, laboratory reports, papers, etc, regardless of the weighting. It stands to reason that the weighting of an assignment is not reflective of the actual time investment on the part of the student. By fully eliminating graded work during the examination ban, students will be better able to prepare for their final examinations.

Recommendation Three: Final take home examinations or cumulative

³ American College Health Association. American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment II: Canadian Reference Group Executive Summary Spring 2013. Hanover, MD: American College Health Association; 2013.

assignments that are due during the examination period should have a due-date on the last day of examinations.

In order to alleviate stress placed on students when due-dates for non-Registrar scheduled assessments fall during the Registrar scheduled final examination period, all non-registrar scheduled final assessments should have a due date that coincides with the last day of examinations. By moving the due-dates for assessments to the end of the examination period, it would ensure that all students have ample time to prepare and study for registrar scheduled examinations, and time manage in a way that is conducive to their examination schedule.

Principle Two: Students should be made aware of the existence of policies that pertain to evaluation, including but not limited to: examinations, laboratory reports, take home examinations, papers.

Imperative to academic success as a student is the knowledge of existing policies. It makes sense that all students should be made aware of University policy that covers academic work directly correlated to their final grades in a course.

Concern Four: Students are not made publically aware of what days of the term are covered by the Assessment Ban.

An important problem with the current examination ban is its lack of publicity. Currently, it remains the responsibility of the students to become educated on which days are covered under the Assessment Ban. Responsibility also lies with the student to report infractions of the ban. Without the appropriate publicity, it becomes difficult to enforce such a policy, as it depends on the students' knowledge of it existence. As a result, students are not aware of the procedures available to them when such conflicts occur.

Recommendation Four: That a campaign be launched to publicize the Assessment Ban prior to each examination period.

As many students are unaware of the exact dates that the Assessment Ban covers, a public campaign is recommended to inform students. This campaign would allow students to be confident in what is and what is not covered by the Assessment Ban, and would allow for easier reporting of infractions. Such a campaign may include social media advertisement, poster media campaigns, announcements by professors, advertisements on the Avenue to Learn home page, etc.

Recommendation Five: That the Assessment Ban dates are a required component of all course syllabi as mandated by the Undergraduate Course Management policy.

The inclusion of Assessment Ban dates within the course syllabi would ensure that every student is made aware of the ban in conjunction with specific course requirements. By publishing the dates of the Test and Examination in a document that every student receives at the beginning of the course, students are no longer responsible for accessing the Undergraduate Course Management Policy of their own accord. This inclusion ensures that all students are aware of policies governing their coursework.

Principle Three: Students and instructors should uphold the policies outlined in the Undergraduate Course Management Policy.

The Undergraduate Course Management policy is “intended to communicate clearly the University’s expectations with regard to the responsibilities of both students and instructors and to assist students in planning ahead and managing their time and resources accordingly”. Therefore, it is important that both students and instructors understand and uphold all requirements stipulated within the policy,

Concern Five: Students and Instructors currently do not have an avenue with which they can easily report violations of the Undergraduate Course Management Policy.

Currently, there is no organized means of reporting infractions to the Undergraduate Course Management Policy. If there are any infractions levied against the policy, it is up to the student or instructors discretion to report the infraction to whichever body they see fit. In order for the policy to be effective, all infractions must be dealt with accordingly to ensure that students and instructors are benefiting from the policy’s practice.

Recommendation Five: That the Undergraduate Course Management policy be amended to include a section on a course of action for reporting infractions of the policy.

In order for the Policy’s integrity to be upheld, both students and instructors should have a designated process through which they may report any and all infractions to the Policy. The inclusion of a section outlining steps that should be undertaken when reporting infractions would be beneficial to all parties involved, as reporting would be both consistent and streamlined. In addition, through a pre-determined process, all infractions should be tracked and analyzed for follow-up or for data purposes in the future.

Recommendation Six: An online form should be created whereby students and instructors can submit violations to the Assessment Ban.

Students and instructors should be able to report violations to the Undergraduate Course Management Policy in an easy to access and streamlined manner. The creation of an online form will allow for streamlining, ease of reporting, and a way to follow up with violations in an easier manner. The creation of an online form ensures that the policy is being upheld, and allows for a more transparent implementation of the policy.

Conclusion

Policies regarding final examinations and term work need to be amended and updated to better meet the needs of students. The implementation of the changes recommended above will benefit students in that they will be provided with fair and consistent evaluations. These changes will further allow them to learn and prepare for examinations in a way that is representative of their abilities. The intent of this policy is to ensure that students are provided with the best opportunities to succeed and to acknowledge the academic stress that student's experience. This policy does not seek to remove the challenges associated with a university education; rather, it is an attempt to ensure that all students are given an equal opportunity to perform to the best of their academic abilities. It is hoped that the MSU and the University can work together to find creative methods to achieve these objectives for McMaster's students.

Works Cited

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