



Provost and Executive Vice Chancellor

900 University Avenue
Riverside, CA 92521-0101

May 30, 2019

To: Dylan Rodriguez, Chair of the Academic Senate

Fr: Ken Baerenklau, Associate Provost (on behalf of the UCR Course Scheduling Committee¹)

Re: Request for review of Senate Regulation R1.8.1

Dear Dylan:

Earlier this academic year, we started a discussion about final exam scheduling. The issue was originally brought to my attention by a faculty member who noticed that some of his students had their last lecture in his class on Friday and had to sit for their first final exam less than 24 hours later on Saturday. I looked into this and found that although the Registrar is able to avoid scheduling a Saturday final for a class that meets on Friday, they are unable to prevent every student who has a Friday class from having to take a Saturday final for a different class. This contrasts with other campuses that have a designated “reading period” after classes end, ensuring that no student begins their exams the day after finishing their classes.

I looked into final exam scheduling practices and the existence of reading periods on the nine general UC campuses. The table below summarizes what I found.

Campus	Terms	Exam length	Exam hours per 5 weeks of instruction	Exams on first Saturday?	Exams on first Sunday?	Reading period?
Berkeley	Semester	3 hours	1	No	No	Week
Merced	Semester	3 hours	1	Yes	No	No
Davis	Quarter	2 hours	1	No	No	Weekend
Irvine	Quarter	2 hours	1	2 classes	1 class	Weekend*
Los Angeles	Quarter	3 hours	1.5	Yes	Yes	No
Riverside	Quarter	3 hours	1.5	Yes	No	No
Santa Barbara	Quarter	3 hours	1.5	Yes	No	No
Santa Cruz	Quarter	3 hours	1.5	No	No	Weekend
San Diego	Quarter	3 hours	1.5	Yes	No	No

* Irvine has 3 exams (for large classes) on the first weekend, so nearly all students have a guaranteed reading period.

The campuses are ordered in the table such that the top four and the bottom five each share a common ratio of exam hours to weeks of instruction. Of the four campuses that have 1 hour of exam time for every 5 weeks of instruction, three have a reading period. Of the five that have 1.5 hours of exam time for every 5 weeks of instruction, only one has a reading period. UCR is in the bottom group. If we were to join the top group by reducing our exam length to 2 hours (or even 2.5 hours) and reduce passing time from 30 to

¹ <https://csc.ucr.edu>

20 minutes, we would be able to have more exam blocks per day, forego Saturday exams, and institute a weekend reading period for all students.

Shortening exams to 2.5 hours or less would produce a secondary benefit, as well. Not only could we reduce the number of exam days from 6 to 5, but we could increase the number of exam blocks per day from 4 to 5, which would give us 25 total blocks – one more than we currently have. This would help to reduce the number of final exam conflicts that arise because we currently do not have enough blocks to avoid all conflicts for all students.

I discussed the possibility of shorter exams with the Course Scheduling Committee (CSC), which has some oversight of final exam scheduling. Because the length of an exam block derives from a Senate regulation, CSC members felt the issue should be brought to the Senate Executive Council. Bracken Dailey and I subsequently met with you and the Council during Winter quarter. Reactions from Council members were decidedly mixed and a consensus did not emerge. Some members supported the idea, expressing that few of their students stay for the full 3 hours, and those that do aren't making much progress on the exam towards the end of the block. Sentiment also was expressed that it would be relatively easy to revise a final exam to accommodate a shorter block. Other Council members objected to the idea, and expressed concerns about possible grade compression and potentially disadvantaging students who would otherwise use the full 3 hours. These members proposed other possible solutions rather than adopting shorter exams. These proposals are listed below along with the challenges associated with each:

1. **Move Saturday exams to the Saturday following exam week.** Moving exams to the trailing Saturday would shorten what is already a very tight processing period after the quarter ends. After winter quarter, there is only one day available for staff to make enrollment adjustments in response to winter quarter grades (such as dropping students from classes when they fail a prerequisite) before the start of the next quarter. Fall quarter also is very tight. Although there is more time, there is also a longer and more complicated financial aid process because determinations of Satisfactory Academic Progress must be made to assess eligibility for future aid. In spring, the trailing Saturday also is part of graduation weekend. Moreover, the grading period after each quarter is already short, with the grade submission deadline only four days after the end of finals. Shortening it further would increase the number of faculty who are unable to submit their grades before the deadline.
2. **Use software to optimize a final exam schedule for each quarter.** Currently we base our final exam schedule on class meeting patterns: all classes that meet at the same time (say, MWF 9am) have their exams at the same time. As long as students don't register for two classes with the same meeting pattern (in which case they would have to be in two different places at the same time to attend classes), then we avoid final exam conflicts. Alternatively, it was suggested that we could wait until after the add-drop deadline each quarter, observe which classes our students are enrolled in, survey the faculty about whether they need a final exam block, and give the data to a computer program that would be designed to sort exams into blocks. Ideally, we would have enough faculty opting out of final exams so that we could schedule exams only on weekdays, and the sorting algorithm would be able to find an allocation of exams that avoided conflicts for all students. In practice, I think we would be very lucky to produce such an outcome. First, the

number of faculty opting out of their final exam could be too small, in which case we would still need Saturday. Second, with fewer blocks than meeting patterns, it may be impossible to find a conflict-free allocation of exams. For example, if a course has only 8 students and each student is taking 3 unique other classes, then it won't be possible to find an alternative exam block for this course that doesn't create a conflict for at least one student. And third, even if a conflict-free solution exists, it may be very hard for the algorithm to find it.

3. **Maintain the status quo.** This preserves any benefits associated with 3-hour exams, but it doesn't create a reading period and it doesn't help to reduce the number of exam conflicts.

The Course Scheduling Committee discussed this feedback and decided—with the exception of one dissenting member—to request a review of Senate Regulation R1.8.1 which states (emphasis added):

*The instructor in charge of an undergraduate course shall be responsible for assigning the final grade in the course. The final grade shall reflect the student's achievement in the course and shall be based upon adequate evaluation of that achievement. The instructor's methods of evaluation must be clearly announced during the progress of the course. Evaluation methods must be of reasonable duration and difficulty and must be in accord with applicable departmental policies. The methods may include a final written examination, a term paper, a final oral examination, a take-home examination, or other evaluation device. **If a final written examination is given, it shall not exceed three hours' duration and shall be given only at the times and places announced in the Schedule and Directory.***

Such a review—specifically of the maximum duration for final exams—will ensure that the regulation reflects the current will of the faculty, informed by the tradeoffs that are described above. If the Senate decides to reduce the maximum exam length, I expect the Registrar's Office will work to reduce the number of exam days and create a weekend reading period for all students. If the Senate decides not to reduce the maximum length, I expect the Registrar's Office will maintain the status quo given the challenges associated with the first two options described above. Regardless of the outcome, the Course Scheduling Committee welcomes other suggestions about how we can improve final exam scheduling.