

Rutgers University Senate
Academic Standards, Regulations, and Admissions Committee
Response to Charge S-0713

Charge S-0713, Weekend Exams: Evaluate the appropriateness or desirability of continuing to hold weekend exams. Consider the Rutgers University Student Assembly's "[Resolution Against Weekend Exams](#)," as well as the [Senate's February 2000 adoption of weekend exams](#). Consult with the Director of Scheduling and Space Management, University Registrar and others to research the statistics on conflicts with these exams. Make recommendations as to whether weekend exams should be continued.

This charge was prompted by the following resolution passed by the Rutgers University Student Assembly (RUSA), the New Brunswick student government association:

Resolution Against Weekend Examinations

Whereas, University Scheduling and Space Management has not historically scheduled Common Hour examinations during the weekend; and

Whereas, University Scheduling and Space Management has scheduled Common Hour examinations on Sundays for the Fall 2006 and Spring 2007 semesters; and

Whereas, a portion of University students are religiously observant from Friday night through Sunday; and

Whereas, other students may commute to the university and/or utilize the weekends for employment, extracurricular activities/obligations and leisure; and

Whereas, *University Regulation 2.4.7. Course Attendance* states that "Examinations and special required out-of-class activities shall ordinarily not be scheduled on those days when religiously observant students refrain from participating in secular activities"; and

Whereas, the Rutgers University Student Assembly recognizes that courses regularly meeting on Saturdays may have examinations during usual class meeting times and that students enrolled in these courses understand that examinations scheduled for these courses should not be changed; therefore

Be it hereby resolved, the Rutgers University Student Assembly urges the administration of Rutgers University to refrain from scheduling Common Hour and other examinations on Saturdays and Sundays.

In considering this charge, members of ASRAC met with University Director of Scheduling and Space Management Arun Mukherjee, with several faculty members from departments that hold common hour exams both on Sunday and late on weekday nights, and with several students involved in the creation of the RUSA resolution.

During the semester, there are, as far as we can tell, no exams given on Saturday except in courses that meet on Saturday. There are, however, usually one or two group final exams scheduled on Saturday for courses that do not meet on Saturday during the semester. While we find offering such Saturday final exams less than ideal, we doubt that it can be avoided and we are assured that any student who objects to a Saturday final on religious grounds is allowed to take the exam at another time. In the rest of this report we will, therefore, focus on Sunday common hour exams, which appear to be the major source of contention.

BACKGROUND AND FINDINGS

On the New Brunswick Campus, common hour exams have been given for many years in large courses with multiple sections meeting at different times, and often on different campuses, during the week. The common hour exams, taken by all students in the course, were normally held on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday evenings in a number of large lecture halls across the New Brunswick and Piscataway campuses.

Up until 2005, common hour exams were normally given during seventh period (6:10-7:30 PM) or eighth period (7:40-9:00 PM). Starting in 2005, however, common hour exams were no longer scheduled in 7th or 8th periods for two reasons:

- The cumulative effects of successive budget cuts led to a substantial increase in the number of large lecture courses being offered in the evening on all New Brunswick campuses, particularly during 7th period. A number of departments that had previously offered two medium-sized lecture sections of a course, one during the day and one at night, combined the two sections into one large section which they offered at night to accommodate students who work during the day. At the same time, there was an increase in the number of day students forced to take evening courses due to scheduling difficulties arising from elimination of courses and sections.
- The staggered class schedule in New Brunswick, introduced to deal with the route 18 construction project, means that 7th period on the Cook/Douglass campus (7:15-8:35 PM) overlaps with 8th period on both the College Ave. and Busch-Livingston campuses (7:40-9:00 PM and 8:10-9:30 PM, respectively), making it impossible to hold common hour exams 8th period on any campus.

Faced with the inability to accommodate common hour exams in either 7th or 8th periods, the decision was made, reluctantly, to offer departments two options for scheduling these exams:

- 9th period (9:40-11:00 PM) on a weeknight (except Friday)
- Sunday afternoon (3:00-4:20 PM) or early evening (6:10-7:30 PM)

Some departments have opted to give all their common hour exams on Sunday; others have opted for late night exams; still others have left the choice up to individual course instructors, some of whom have opted for late nights, others for Sundays. For example, in the current academic year, six SAS departments or programs plus the School of Engineering are giving common hour exams in one or more of their large courses. In fall 2008, 5 courses (or groups of courses) gave hourly exams on Sunday and 8 courses (or groups of courses) gave late-night hourly exams. For spring 2009, the numbers are 7 Sunday and 7 late-night exams.

As indicated by the RUSA resolution, Sunday exams are not popular with many students for a variety of reasons. They are particularly unpopular with students who have hourly exams on Sunday in more than one course. In practice, however, student objections to Sunday exams almost never involve religious observance. Faculty members who give hourly exams on Sunday report that very, very few students request to reschedule the exams on religious grounds, and that it is easy to accommodate those very few students.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

ASRAC agrees that, all things being equal, it is not desirable to give common hour exams on Sunday. Although Sunday afternoon or evening exams rarely cause conflicts for religiously observant students, they do cause problems for a number of students who have work or family obligations on Sunday and for commuters living far from New Brunswick, for whom it is a major inconvenience to make an extra trip to the campus. Many other students simply want to be able to devote Sundays to extracurricular or leisure activities.

We believe, however, that it is at least equally undesirable to give common hour exams from 9:40 to 11:00 PM. First and foremost, we are concerned about the safety of students waiting for campus buses or walking to their cars or dorms after 11:00 PM. Second, having to drive home late at night is a problem for commuters who live far from New Brunswick. Finally, after a full day of classes/work, many students are tired and not in any condition to do their best on a late-night hourly exam.

While we have concerns with Sunday common hour exams, we are not willing to recommend that they be eliminated unless an educationally and logistically sound alternative way of scheduling these exams can be found. It would not, according to Scheduling, be possible to move all the Sunday common hour exams to 9th period on a weeknight. Moreover, given our concerns with late-night exams, we would not recommend this approach even if it could be done.

One alternative to Sunday and late night exams that has been proposed is holding these exams in the College Ave. and Livingston gyms, as is done for group final examinations. This is not practical, however. The required setting up and taking down of chairs in the gyms would be very expensive and would cause major wear and tear on the gym floors. More important, holding common hour exams in the gyms 7th and 8th periods on weeknights would make the gyms unavailable to students for recreational purposes in the evening for more than half of the semester; this would be unacceptable given that the gyms are supported by student recreational fees. A more radical proposal we have heard is to eliminate common hour exams entirely and hold all hourly exams during normal class hours. This would not work, however, even if departments were willing to give up common hour exams, because lecture halls are filled to capacity in most large courses and it is not possible to give exams in an educationally sound manner in such crowded conditions. Nor is it possible to find enough empty classroom space to spread students out to take exams during normal class hours.

One suggestion with regard to common hour exams that we believe merits further consideration is to construct or refurbish several large spaces on campus, such as temporary classroom buildings, that could be used for common hour exams during the day or early evening on weekdays throughout the semester. We think, however, that ASRAC is not the appropriate body to determine the feasibility of this or other possible ways to solve the current New Brunswick problems with common hour exams. We do believe, however, that Sunday and late-night exams constitute a serious problem that needs to be addressed at the campus level. This is the basis of our one formal recommendation.

Recommendation: *We recommend that New Brunswick administrators, faculty, staff, and students make a serious, concerted effort, as a matter of priority, to find a practical, educationally sound alternative to late-night and Sunday common hour exams.*

We also offer several suggestions designed to make Sunday exams somewhat less problematic for students in the short term.

- We urge Scheduling and Space Management, the Registrar, and relevant academic departments to work together to distribute common hour exams among Sundays and weeknights so as to avoid large blocs of students having Sunday exams in more than one course.
- We urge faculty in courses with Sunday exams to use every means available to ensure that students are aware of the exam schedule when they register for a course so they can arrange work schedules and other obligations accordingly.
- We urge faculty to make alternative arrangements for students who can demonstrate, to the satisfaction of the relevant Dean of Students, that Sunday exams would cause severe financial hardship due to work or family obligations.

We believe that these suggestions are particularly relevant in the current economic downturn, which is causing financial hardship for many of our students.

2008-2009 ASRAC

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