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The test has been canceled

Final exams are quietly vanishing from college

By Keith O'Brien | October 3, 2010

They incite panic in the souls of even the most diligent students. Everything about final exams is fraught with terror: the blue books passed out from the front of the room, the clock ticking on the wall, three hours to finish in some large auditorium with banked seating, and grade point averages hanging in the balance. If professors listen closely enough, they can hear the sound of pens scribbling and caffeine pumping through the veins of 200 students who have been cramming for days, intent on learning, if for no other reason than they don't want to fail.

These exams are not just a rite of passage, but a fundamental and longstanding tool that American college professors have been using, in some format, since the 1830s. Now comes the twist, the pop-quiz question of the day: What happens when the final exam starts vanishing from American higher education?

The answer: No one knows. But apparently we're about to find out.

Across the country, there is growing evidence that final exams — once considered so important that universities named a week after them — are being abandoned or diminished, replaced by take-home tests, papers, projects, or group presentations. Anecdotally, longtime professors say they have been noticing the trend for years. And now, thanks to a recent discussion at Harvard University, there are statistics that make clear just how much the landscape has changed.

In the spring term at Harvard last year, only 259 of the 1,137 undergraduate courses had a scheduled final exam, the lowest number since 2002, according to Jay M. Harris, the dean of undergraduate education. Harris said he's hesitant to read too much into the numbers, which, he said, don't include whatever final exams were scheduled in language courses, don't reflect the other forms of assessment that have replaced exams, and don't account for small seminar classes, which typically would not have a traditional, sit-down, blue-book final.

But the low rate of actual scheduled finals at Harvard last spring — just 23 percent — was considered significant enough to prompt one striking change. For years, final exams in Cambridge were considered a given, and the bureaucratic rules reflected that reality. Courses were simply assumed to include a seated, three-hour final exam; any professor who wished to opt out had to request permission. But that wasn't happening, Harris said, forcing the registrar's office to track down professors each semester, only to learn that, no, they were not planning on a final exam. So starting this fall, the onus has been flipped: The university will assume there will be no finals in courses. Any professor who actually wants to hold one will need to say so.

The change, which was first reported in Harvard Magazine, is not a statement on the value of final exams one way or the other, Harris said. But the shrinking role of big, blockbuster tests at Harvard and colleges elsewhere is raising serious pedagogical questions about 21st century education: How best do students learn? And what's the best way to assess that? Is the disappearance of high-stakes, high-pressure final exams a sign that universities are failing to challenge today's students, or is it just a long overdue acknowledgment that such tests aren't always the best indicator of actual knowledge?

"You can interpret this in two ways," said Robert Bangert-Drowns, dean of the school of education at the University at Albany SUNY. "One way is, institutions for higher education are abdicating their responsibility for having high standards and demanding high performance from their students. But on the other hand, if you looked at a lot of final exams in courses you'd think, 'This is not a very valuable standard.' These tests ask the kind of questions that students may never be asked again in their lives, in detail that they may never be asked again in their lives."

There's nothing magical about finals, Bangert-Drowns added. They can be arbitrary and abstract — an inauthentic gauge of what someone knows. Research, by Bangert-Drowns and others, shows that frequent testing is more beneficial. And yet, many still find value in the final exam. It might be stressful, even terrifying, but it has the singular power to force students to go back over material, think critically about what they have read, review hard-to-grasp-topics once more, and even talk about the subject matter with classmates and instructors — all of which enhance learning.

"You can measure an institution's performance, a department's performance," said James Engell, Gurney professor of English literature and professor of comparative literature at Harvard. "But the real question is: How much did your students learn? How much better are they at something now than they were when they started? And I think examinations — whether they're final examinations or other kinds of examinations — play a real part in that."

Exams, in one form or another, have been a part of higher education in America since the very beginning. Students attending Harvard in the 1640s, shortly after the college was founded, were required to take both entrance and graduation exams, according to Arthur Levine's "Handbook on Undergraduate Curriculum," an exhaustive, 662-page history of the subject.

But these early examinations were oral. The goal was often rote memorization: getting students to recite text verbatim. These "recitations," as they were called, were despised by students, required almost no intellectual analysis, and became increasingly hard to manage as college enrollment climbed and class sizes grew. Consequently, in the 1830s, Yale and Harvard began introducing written biennial tests. The notion spread, and by the late 19th century, such exams had become accepted practice on many campuses, according to John R. Thelin, author of "A History of American Higher Education."

"Prior to that time," Thelin said, "the idea that undergraduates would have known how to, or been inclined to, write three-hour essays on some intellectual topic would have been pretty unlikely."

So began the era of the grand final exam: great, sweeping tests, often taken in huge collegiate halls or auditoriums by large numbers of students on the clock. It was an efficient way to assess students in large numbers. But in more recent decades, researchers have questioned whether such finals are truly the best way to help students learn.

"With final exams, it's study, study, study. Take the exam — and now it's gone. Move on," said Linda Serra Hagedorn, a professor at Iowa State University and president-elect of the Association for the Study of Higher Education. "The better approach is to have a more holistic approach to learning where it's smaller increments, where one learns in steadier and smaller increments."

Such views are not only increasingly shared among professors, but also backed up by a growing number of studies. One such study, published last year, focused on more than 1,500 students taking algebra at Richard J. Daley College in Chicago between 2004 and 2006. M. Vali Siadat, the chairman of the math department there, compared the outcomes of algebra students who took weekly, cumulative quizzes over the course of the semester with those who received less rigorous, regular assessment.

Those tested weekly not only did better on the midterm and the final exams, but better overall, outperforming their classmates who did not receive regular quizzing by about 16 percent by the end of the semester. With regular, cumulative testing, Siadat concluded, the students were simply better prepared.

"The students know the final is just another act," said Siadat, who coauthored a paper on these findings last year with his Richard J. Daley colleague Eugenia Peterson. "It's going to be cumulative just like the previous tests. They're ready for it and they tend to do well."

University professors around the country have tried implementing such changes in recent years, putting more emphasis on weekly or even daily quizzes, smaller tests, and papers and less emphasis on formal final exams. At the University of Arizona recently, roughly one third of professors have reduced the value of large exams in students' overall grades, according to Thomas Fleming, a senior lecturer and associate astronomer at the university who chairs a committee overseeing general education courses. Fleming, who is part of the trend himself, said many professors have made the shift after realizing that some students simply aren't good

at taking exams. And perhaps not surprisingly, students are thrilled to avoid the terror of the blue books.

According to a poll that Fleming took last spring in a large 600-student astronomy course, 93 percent of students said they'd prefer weekly quizzes over a couple of large midterms and a final. Seventy-eight percent reported actually learning more that way, and almost all of them — 98 percent — said they were less stressed taking short, weekly quizzes than they were taking large exams.

"Some of it is just the whole situation, a psychological thing," Fleming said. "You're sitting in a room with maybe 150 other people. The clock's up there. You have maybe 50 minutes to do the exam and the fact that you're under pressure can lead to brain lock. You can panic."

And all the panic may be for naught. In a wired world, where Internet search engines have reduced the need for memorization of facts, final exams might not be as useful as they once were, some professors suggest. "Life is not structured like the exam anymore," explained Charles S. Maier, Saltonstall professor of history at Harvard. "Life is open book; it's not closed book."

Still, many are troubled by the idea that professors are giving fewer finals. Siadat said it's clear to him that students aren't doing well on in-class final exams. Otherwise, he said, professors wouldn't be eliminating them. And Maier suggested that other issues may be contributing to the trend at Harvard. Recent cutbacks have made it necessary, he said, for professors or their assistants to monitor their own final exams — an unwelcome task at best, and a nuisance at worst.

"A lot of people said, 'I don't want to go through that,' " Maier said. "They didn't say it openly. But it probably was a factor."

He and others would like to see more discussion of the issue. Harris, Harvard's dean of undergraduate education, said he'd like to gather more information on how different forms of assessment are working. One idea, he suggested, would be to follow up with students several months after a course has ended to see what information they have retained. Meantime, the academic calendar at Harvard pushes on through the fall.

This semester, according to the calendar, classes end on Dec. 2. The next 10 days are dedicated to reading period — a time when students are historically supposed to be preparing for final exams. And then there's still another nine days set aside for students to take the finals themselves — at least for the diminishing number of students who actually have finals to take.

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