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INTRODUCTION

Yale University prides itself on its course selection, or “shopping,” period, during which students can sample courses without committing to them. This grants students the flexibility to sample different courses, professors, and academic interests. However, given input from students, the YCC believes that shopping period can be made better and less stressful, and we have looked to peer institutions, data from our own student body, and held a focus group as a part of this inquiry.

PEER INSTITUTIONS

The following data comes directly from peer institutions and their websites. Additionally, this data has been collected through discussions with fellow student government organizations at universities (Columbia, University of Pennsylvania, Harvard, and Brown) which have similar shopping period processes to that of Yale. However, Yale’s shopping period is already longer than most of these other schools, which may present challenges in enacting further reform. For example, Columbia students must enroll in second semester classes by November 15, and Harvard only has a “Course Selection Week” rather than a Shopping Period.

Columbia University

Similar to Yale, Columbia students may participate in a shopping period like program where students can sample various classes at the start of the semester. However, they must initially register for classes in November of the prior semester. Their “change of program period” lasts for two weeks at the beginning of an academic term and students are allowed to add and drop courses through an online add/drop tool. Professors have complete control over their own waitlists where they can decide between auto-fill, where the class is filled using a computer-generated list, or self-managed waitlists, where the professors can decide which students get off the waitlist.

University of Pennsylvania

UPenn employs a course selection period that lasts for two and a half weeks. During this period, students can add and drop courses before finalizing their schedules on the online portal called Penn InTouch. Other than language classes under the 200

1 http://registrar.columbia.edu/event/registration
level and writing seminars, which may be added only until the end of the first full week of classes, all courses can be added to course schedules.

Harvard University

Harvard utilizes a shopping period similar to Yale. Each semester begins with course selection week, a period where students are not formally enrolled in any classes but can attend any class and decide which classes to enroll in. This shopping period ends in course registration. Course syllabi are distributed on the first day of class or digitally distributed through Canvas pages. By the end of course selection week, Harvard expects its students to enroll in at least four classes.

Brown University

Brown University has a course selection period for the first two weeks of the semester where students can freely add and drop courses without fees. However, failure to pre-register or register by the appropriate deadlines will result in late fees. Students can also add courses later than the second week, for $15, but not after the fourth week of the school year. Students can drop courses up to the last day of classes for the semester.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data from the 2017 YCC Fall Survey reveals both many opportunities as well as problem points regarding shopping period from the student perspective. First, of the over 1300 students surveyed, over 70%, strongly agree or agree that shopping period is a stressful time for them. This level of stress stays mostly consistent across subgroups within the student population, including among first generation and low-income students. The levels of students who disagreed or strongly disagreed with shopping period as being a stressful time hovered around only 12% for the total population, staying consistent among the subgroups of first-gen (157) and low-income (196). However, in speaking with students and soliciting comments in our survey, most Yalies appreciate Shopping Period and the flexibility it offers. As such,
reforms are in order, but the general practice of shopping period should stay implemented.

Next, we asked students to choose all of the major factors contributing to their stress levels during shopping period. Major factors for stress included the preregistration process for capped courses (852 students), the waitlist process in oversubscribed courses (804), the necessity of attending many classes and doing homework for these classes (794), and the lack of posted syllabi (521). This data helps show what aspects of shopping period upon which we should focus any potential reform.

Student testimonials describe Shopping Period as an excellent idea but whose execution could be improved to help reduce stress. Students also mentioned possible changes, including that “midterm schedules should be posted ahead of time” and that “some professors aren’t clear that their course is capped, or they don’t tell you how many students they’ll let in until the first day”.

The data also revealed a specific problem of syllabi posting. We asked how often students come across courses in the Yale Bluebook that do not have syllabi available. We found that 65%, or 742 students, always or often come across courses without available syllabi before shopping period, and 31%, or 351 students, have this problem during shopping period. One possible conclusion is that it would make sense to ensure that all course syllabi are posted before the start of shopping period, at which point professors should have already created a general course structure. The importance of this problem is highlighted by the fact that over 84%, or 964 students, find the posted syllabi to be very important or important in determining the courses they decide to shop and over 89%, or 1018 students, find syllabi important in determining which courses they actually take.

Among all departments, students generally find syllabi more influential in courses that are more reading and writing intensive such as English (202 students reporting), History (165 students reporting), and Political Science (120 students reporting). This data demonstrates that the most effective first step for any syllabi enforcement or reform would be for reading and writing intensive classes.

Lastly, the preregistration process, as noted above, is a large stress factor during shopping period due to the capped nature of seminars and certain lectures. Over 93%, or 1592, of students surveyed have used preregistration to enroll in a course, either for classes in their major, for large introductory classes, or for a different type
of class. When asked whether the pre-registration system reduces stress during shopping period, responses clustered around neutral, slightly leaning towards the side of agreeing. What this means is that while the pre-registration system is generally an effective one, there is likely some work that can be done to improve the student experience. One possible measure to improve pre-registration would be to standardize the process across departments.

To conclude, the shopping period data collected from the 2017 YCC Fall Survey sheds light on the positive and negative aspects of shopping period at Yale. Shopping period is quite a stressful time for many students, and there are specific challenges that necessitate reform. These specific areas include pre-registration for capped course, the waitlist process in oversubscribed courses, and the lack of posted syllabi.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Proposal I: Mandating a Syllabus to be Published on Canvas Class Sites at Least 2 Weeks Before Course Selection Period Begins

Yale offers more than 2,000 courses that span more than sixty-five departments and programs; the Course Selection Period makes it possible for students to explore their academic interests and find new passions. However, given the variety and number of courses, this process can be complicated and stressful. One of the key issues the YCC has identified is a lack of syllabi accessible to students both before and during shopping period. As noted in the data analysis section, 521 students indicated that a lack of syllabi as a cause of stress. Eight-hundred-forty-one respondents either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that the organization of shopping period was a source of pressure. We continued to investigate what exactly caused students stress using the remainder of the data and our interactions with students and Focus Groups.

One of the concerns expressed in the survey results was the lack of syllabi either before Course Selection Period or during; to understand the extent to which students faced this issue, we tried to qualitatively measure how frequently students encounter a course on YBB/Course Search/OCI that has no syllabus posted. When students were asked if this occurred “Never,” “Occasionally,” “Often,” or “Always,” 65.78% of students said “Often” or “Always.” This represents a high number of courses that lack any syllabi. This number becomes more troubling when one considers how critical students find syllabi in their decisions about which courses to shop, and which courses to ultimately take. Given how much students rely on syllabi
for some sort of direction in what courses they will be taking, the issues with having courses on Blue Book that do not make syllabi available. During the discussions within our Focus Groups, students noted that syllabi give a better glimpse at what sort of content the class will cover, either via the professor’s description, the readings and/or the assignments.

Course Selection Period grants students the ability to acquire a visceral understanding of whether they enjoy a course or not, can learn well given the condition of the class, and can balance out their overall schedules. During our Focus Groups, students also mentioned that information about major assignments and important dates were also useful in planning out which courses to take at what time. If two courses had midterms on the same day or had large projects due at times very close to one another, the student could assess whether such tasks would be feasible, and if so, better prepare for them at the start of the semester.

During our Focus Groups, students also noted that it was difficult to find information on who was eligible to enroll in courses for which students had to “get permission” from the professor. Students shared anecdotes of shopping a class only to be told after attending that the course was restricted to certain majors or people who had emailed the professor earlier. One of the Focus Group participants described their frustrations regarding a course which she could not take because students in the major had precedence, and the remaining seats were filled by students that had emailed the professor earlier. Transparency in terms of how classes are capped could be information that is delivered via syllabi, thus making it even more imperative to ensure that syllabi are available to students earlier in the term.

Given how central syllabi are in student decisions about which classes to shop and ultimately commit to, we believe that addressing the lack of syllabi would improve the undergraduate experience during course selection period. In order to accomplish this we make the following proposals:

1) Every course on Canvas should have a syllabus uploaded. Alternatively, Syllabi should be made available by departments themselves

Most students will use syllabi as their first avenue of engaging with a course. Students use syllabi to plan which courses they plan on shopping during selection period, making the process of choosing a class less stressful and more efficient. By ensuring that all courses have some sort of syllabus, we can avoid the challenges
associated with trying to find information about a class or making judgements about whether or not one should shop it.

Because all courses approved by a department must have already presented a syllabus, we suggest that departments themselves make some form of the syllabus available to students, even if the professor has not yet posted one on Canvas. The Council also wondered if it would be possible to flag courses that did not have a syllabus posted so that the professor, department, and Director of Undergraduate Studies (DUS) of the department could be made aware of the issue and remedy it.

2) **Syllabi should be posted at least two weeks before shopping period begins**

Because of the role syllabi play in decisions about which courses students shop, it would be most helpful if, at minimum, they would be posted two weeks before the start of Course Selection Period. This affords students more time to think about whether or not they want to try a course.

3) **Syllabi should, where possible, contain information on course-capping and admission policy**

Many students felt that their stress during shopping period stemmed from a lack of information regarding what classes they were actually going to get into. Transparency about how courses are capped and what the semester will look like as described in syllabi can help ease this stress by giving students the information necessary to know what their semester will look like, both, in terms of the courses they will be taking, as well as what kind of workload they could expect. Several students have shared moments where they have shopped a course only to be told that they are ineligible after having already gone to the class. This is a source of frustration because students are already packing their days tightly with plenty of courses. It also allows students to prioritize which classes to attend first based on their odds of acquiring a spot in a seminar.

**Proposal II: Creating an Online Waitlist and Centralized Pre-Registration Tool for Professors and Students**

The current waitlist process for oversubscribed seminars is incredibly cumbersome and results in many inefficiencies in the status quo, for professors and students alike. Currently, students often have to email professors to be added to the waitlist for a class they did not get into through pre-registration, and then professors must send
emails individually to each student confirming their place on the waitlist and then later notify them of their admission to the class.

We think that an online tool for waitlist process would be a particularly elegant solution to this problem. This tool would allow students to click on the seminar they want to get into and add themselves to the waitlist, wherein the tool would keep an internal tab of people’s places on the waitlist. Students might also be able to add notes to express personal interest in the class, and the professor could adjust the waitlist manually accordingly. If the class has spaces open, the professor can then just accept the next person off the waitlist. Once the class is full, the professor can close the class, notifying the remaining waitlisted students that they did not get in.

While this idea is entirely conceptual right now, it is very plausible as a standalone platform in the vein of the Bluebook website and Coursetable. The website would not have to be connected to Online Course Selection. Instead, it would just be a simple tool for professors and students alike.

**Proposal III: Mandating Scans for the First Day of Classes of the Shopping Period Readings**

Currently, many classes have readings assigned for the first weeks of class. However, if a student is not sure whether or not they would like to take that course, it mandates them to buy the readings (books, textbooks, or online access codes) despite this fact. Where possible, readings during shopping period should be available online to address problems with having to acquire texts for class.

The Yale Bookstore policy allowing students who purchase books for class during to be returned within the first week after shopping period. There is also the policy stating that a student can return books for a full refund within 30 days of purchase if they show proof of a schedule change. However, these policies are poorly advertised, and so perhaps efforts to make them better known would allow more students to have their readings during shopping period. This is important many students make their decisions about which classes to shop and which classes to take based on the readings of the course. When all students have access to these readings during shopping period, it will, additionally, help them pick classes to take.
CONCLUSION

Shopping Period is a valuable part of Yale’s commitment to a Liberal Arts education. The flexibility provided by this period allows students to explore a variety of academics that balance the “breadth and depth” that defines the College’s pedagogical philosophy. To enhance this experience, we recommend that syllabi are made available sooner and provide more transparency on who is selected for a course. It is our hope that these proposals will make shopping period less stressful for all.