

# JMU Faculty Senate Feedback on Proposed Spring 2015 Final Exam Schedule

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## Summary

The faculty members who responded to the request for feedback are very concerned and largely opposed to having exams on Friday. Some of the concerns that appeared more frequently included:

- Removing Friday as an instructional day is particularly troublesome for lab classes in several of the natural sciences that do not follow a “normal” MWF schedule. Because of limited lab facilities, lab sessions must be scheduled throughout the week, including Fridays, and removing one Friday from the semester creates scheduling difficulty.
- There is a great deal of concern that beginning exams on Friday does not allow sufficient time for students to prepare for the exams on that day.
- Many faculty members introduce new content to students right up through the last day of the semester. Beginning exams on Friday not only removes one day of instructional time, but does not give students enough time to digest the new material prior to the final exam.
- A number of faculty members believe this schedule calls into question the university’s commitment to academic rigor
- On the other hand, a number of faculty members favor shortening the semester by one to several days to have a formal reading period prior to finals.
- Several comments indicated that holding Saturday exams and graduation while keeping Sunday open highlights a lack of sensitivity and commitment to religious diversity on campus. (This was not a frequent comment, but it is included in the summary because it represents opinions of those in a minority, where not having their voice heard is perhaps one of their main obstacles.)

## Raw Feedback

- Having a day off in between the last class and the first exam will solve the problem, as far as I’m concerned, so this plan looks reasonable. If the day off is dropped, though, then those “first Friday” exams should be dropped as well, without question.
- My main concern is that it takes yet another day away from instruction, and also puts a burden on students’ prep time. I wonder that they couldn’t just condense the exam time to 5 days (Sat/M/T/W/T); have exams in the evening or some such.
- I’m trying to figure out how the emails just forwarded from the registrar amount to a serious response to the three bits of feedback that faculty provided last year.
  1. Last year’s faculty feedback: “There was concern that the spring exam schedule was made without adequate transparency and consultation with the faculty.” Response thereto, from today’s email: **“Unfortunately there will not be time for discussion at a Senate meeting prior to when the feedback is required.”** (emphasis added)

2. Last year's faculty feedback: "Shifting some exams to Friday shortens the amount of time that ... [those] students will have to prepare."  
Response thereto, from today's email: "**~3,800 will have exams on Friday**"
3. Last year's faculty feedback: "Starting exams on Friday takes away one day of instruction from the spring semester."  
Response thereto, from today's email: "**Wednesday, April 30 is the last class meeting of all classes with exams scheduled on Friday, May 2nd.**"

Comment: In what interesting sense is that a "response"?

It would be very useful to know what the positive reasons for the proposed changes in the Spring 2015 schedule are.

- I was one of those early Friday exams last Spring, so I can speak from experience. Knowing far in advance and preparing both myself and the students for that short turn around did not seem to have a broad effect on student performance, but I am sure that it did affect some in a negative way. I did have a few reschedules because of the classes which had an exam time in the next slot (10:30am - 12:30pm).

My initial sense is that moving the final exam time for MWF 8am classes to 10:30am is a good thing for the majority of my students, but that it could further squeeze students for final exam preparation time in classes that will meet later on Friday or impact a greater number of students by pushing the exam time backward from 8am.

I also have a unique experience from last Fall, when a snowstorm canceled my regularly scheduled 8am final exam and moved it to another time. That day, even though the university was officially closed, I gave students the opportunity to write the exam at the regularly scheduled time. Many took advantage of that and many with whom I spoke later expressed a feeling that, had they seen the email welcoming them to take it at the regular time, they too would have preferred the earlier time.

While the accommodation of the extra 2 hours of preparation time is generous, the greater impact of that time change may in fact cause a rippling effect in performance on other course final exams.

I believe keeping the 8am Friday time slot for MWF 8am classes is, for the maximum number of students, better for overall performance and I can still make accommodations for the handful of students who are squeezed by that schedule. Perhaps, by keeping the 8am time and skipping the 1030am start time, we can create a schedule that relaxes that first day enough to allow students to maximize their performance on final exams that are administered on that first Friday.

Let me know if you want to chat more about this. Please feel free to identify these thoughts as mine to both Michelle and Teresa. --Johnathan Walker, IDLS

- I am fine with the proposed schedule, and especially pleased with the addition of the reading day which we have been asking for. Now if we can just keep our colleagues

from scheduling exams non that day....

Thanks for all you do.

- Just to clarify: Final exams in Spring 2015 will still begin on the Friday immediately following the last day of classes (April 30)?

I have two qualms with this schedule, to which you allude below:

- I already struggle to cover my course material in the time allotted. Therefore, losing one day of instruction due to final exams is problematic and frustrating to me as an instructor.
- Last spring, my students continually complained about ending classes and jumping right into final exams, with very minimal time to prepare for their first exam (i.e., beginning Friday exams at 10:30a really does not make a dime's worth of difference in allowing sufficient prep time). In fact, some students had a last exam on, say, Wednesday, and then their final exam for that same class on Friday. Granted, not all students sufficiently study for their finals, but we are doing a disservice to the responsible students who do prepare with the proposed exam schedule.

Between you and I, once again, the quick turnaround for feedback is disheartening and reaffirms that the administration is not really interested in our feedback and will do as they may with the exam schedule. If they actually taught classes, they would understand why faculty are "up in arms" about the proposed exam schedule.

- It's not clear to us whether there would be regularly scheduled classes on Thursday (the day before the start of exams). This is important, because many graduate courses meet only once per week, at night, and sometimes their final exams might be on a Thursday night. (We have a graduate MPA program). We're worried that students might have a class and final exam simultaneously scheduled.
- I think JMU might relieve faculty concerns about rigor, AND work in another study day or two, by reducing the number of "teaching" weeks to 14. Make the length of both fall and spring semesters the same....
- Don't schedule exams during the last week of classes. The registrar has been able in the past to not schedule exams when students should still be taking classes.
- I like this schedule better. Since classes end on a Wednesday, they still have one day to prepare for a Friday exam. I would prefer to go into exams earlier as students with a Friday exam during regular finals week are always trying to get out of it. It's a nightmare in GPOSC 225....
- I am fine with the proposal as outlined. This allows for Friday evening graduate graduation without exams during the day.
- I oppose an exam schedule that begins on Friday. I would not oppose a schedule that begins on Saturday and ends on the following Friday.
- Friday exams are objectionable on their face, regardless of when they are scheduled (in the day) to begin.

Many of us have research papers due in the last week of classes. Exam week is supposed to be the following week. It is not okay to have students studying for finals while they also have research papers to write.

Indeed, this seems to fly in the face of the university's policy prohibiting faculty from offering final exams at any time other than final exam week. This is supposed to be because it interferes with other courses. So, why exactly are they offering final exams, then, at a time other than final exam week? Either they have a time honored policy that we are supposed to adhere to, and they ought to be as well, or they are a pack of hypocrites, and they should no longer expect faculty to honor a policy that has become pointless.

Plus, scheduling exams during the last week of class is an admission that they don't take academics seriously, have no respect for research papers, and actually only believe that students need an hour or two to study for an exam (which would be true if this were a totally BS institution-- apparently what they expect/ desire it to be).

- (partly a reply to the previous response): UVa, William & Mary, Oberlin, etc. have exam periods that start in the middle of a week rather than on a Monday. In turn, Oberlin's fall semester is 13.4 weeks long while UVa & William & Mary's fall semesters are 14 weeks long.

Nobody questions these institutions' dedication to students' academic success & enrichment – because they provide reading days and, most importantly, because of the centrality of the academic mission to their spending decisions.

I share your observation that as faculty members we have many reasons to be disappointed in JMU's level of dedication to academics.

I just don't think that this calendar proposal is one of those reasons.

- One of the main issues our department faces is that we have classes that have one lecture that is broken into several lab sections that each meet once a week for three hours. For a given class, this may entail as many as 16 different labs that need to meet during the week in one designated classroom. These classes need to stay together to maintain the ability for intertwining of the lecture and the lab.

During Spring semester this is tough. We miss a Monday for MLK Day, a Tuesday for Assessment Day, and now a Friday for exam week. With the addition of Friday this scheduling effort makes it very difficult to maintain the same number of weeks of lab class that we have in the Fall which in turn requires lessening the academic coverage of the Spring classes.

We would appreciate having fewer partial weeks in the schedule. (Some people suggested we might hold Assessment Day during the same week as MLK day to minimize the impact on lab scheduling, but our Assessment Committee did not think this

was a good idea.)

- Multiple Biology faculty responding commented that they are still bothered by the lack of student study time before Friday exams. Many suggest we consider a minimum of two to three days for students to process material before being tested on an exam or even consider a whole week of study time. Some of them have very strong opinions about this see below:

- It is absurd to have exams on Friday of the last day of classes if we claim to care at all about academic rigor. The schedule should not force faculty to change their course content or assessment means (either classes will have to remove a half week from their semester or modify their exams because students will have no time to prepare). Rather, it should facilitate these things. If anything should be changed, exams should start LATER rather than earlier (I realize this is prohibitive for many non-pedagogical reasons, but I feel it is worth noting this schedule is moving in the wrong direction).

It is also completely unclear to me why we would cause all this controversy by starting exams on Friday and then skipping Sunday? Perhaps I am reading the schedule wrong, but if we can have exams on Saturday why can't we have them on Sunday? It still doesn't provide the reading days students deserve, but at least it prevents schedule conflicts.

- Exams do not begin until 10:30am on Friday to allow time for students to review class material Friday morning." Is this really how we want students to study for their final exams?
- Having an exam on Friday limits the amount of time students have to prepare (already stated in original feedback). I have done some 'experimentation' in my classes on when is enough time to prepare for an exam. If students are given less than 3 days from when new material is presented in class to their exam time the grades decreased. They do not have time to mentally digest the material to a level of adequate understanding. If given more than a week to prepare the grades start to go down again. This is likely because they start to forget the material. Having an exam on a Friday of the last week of classes hinders the student's ability to mentally digest material.
- Because of the still shortened study time and having to decrease the academic coverage in the Spring Semester to accommodate the new schedule, some faculty still question whether Friday graduation is worth the cost of limiting the academic opportunities for many more students.
- The following are other specific comments that biology faculty made that I tried to summarize above.
  - Thanks for the information. The proposed schedule is better than what was done last spring, but still provides students less time to study for finals than the schedules used previous to last spring (classes ended on Friday, Finals started on Monday).

If the options are this plan versus last spring's, then this one for sure. If there's

still tweaking to be done, I'd love to see more time given for the students to prepare for finals.

- Thank you. My main comment is more about the root of this change, I believe it was so that graduation ceremonies could take place over two days? I think it's ridiculous that the university is not finding a way to hold all undergraduate graduation ceremonies on one weekend day, given the expense to the university, inconvenience and expense for families, and major disruption to the exam schedule and last week of class.
- It still screws up the Physiology practical exam schedule and basically knocks out having labs on Friday.
- Again, higher administration has made a mandate without consideration for the lab classes offered in the sciences. If exams start on the final week of classes then lab classes that fill a week's schedule would have to be cancelled on that final week of class. Alternatively, those lab sections that were held on Friday would have to be rescheduled or cancelled. Cancelling them is not an option to be fair across all sections. However, having exams start on the final Friday of classes may not impact those labs that have already concluded for the semester. I would be curious to know how many of our lab classes end their lab sections before the final week of the semester.
- Thanks for corrections/clarification. I am going to assume that a student could have lab on Thurs. even if their lecture exam for the same class was on Friday. Fortunately, given the proposed lecture meeting times for bio114 for Sp15, there will not be any Friday lecture exams but I'm curious whether any other lab/lecture class does have Fri. lecture exams scheduled and whether that will be perceived as a conflict. Alternative: don't look and claim ignorance if it comes up later...
- I am vehemently opposed to the proposed schedule. I hope Dr. Alger is not too proud to admit that he made a mistake 1st time around.
- While last spring we didn't have any Friday labs in BIO214, we won't necessarily be able to maintain that. It is extremely difficult to make up the lost instructional time - and in Spring, we already struggle with MLK Jr Day and Assessment day.
- While 270 doesn't normally schedule labs on Fridays, we were forced to last Spring due to conflicting times with lecture. I ended up having to split up my Friday lab and give the lab exam twice because half the class had a chemistry final exam at the same time the lab exam was scheduled. Quite the headache.
- My opinion is that the spring exam schedule should allow students some time to study before the exams start.
- Having exams starting on that Friday really does not work for Science lab classes. What happens is that we end up losing a whole week of lab instruction. I'm pretty sure that most of the bio core labs have lab practicals that last week of classes - however, if final exams start on Friday, then we have to have our lab practicals the week before which eliminates a week of lab from our schedules. One week of lab is a lot of material to lose, and it is not easy to plan to absorb that into earlier weeks as we have many very involved labs including multi-week experiments, and writing assignments, etc. Also, I'm under the impression that

the university does not want us to stop scheduling labs on Friday, which is what I'm going to have to try to do if they insist on continuing to schedule the exams this way. I'm copying the other biology lab coordinators on this email.

- The new schedule is a step in the right direction, but I still think students should have a full weekend before finals start. We do not need two days of graduation ceremonies, which is driving this change. It is more important that students have a fair chance to prepare for finals. Also, we do not need to shorten the semester by losing any more class days. We should have the last full week of classes and allow the students to have a weekend to study. This is the best model to uphold academic integrity of the class.
- This sounds like a reasonable accommodation
- I would say that this policy (and the decision to hold exams/ graduation on Sat and not Sun) assumes that faculty and students observe Sunday and not Sat as a holy day, **which reminds Jews and other non-Christian members of the community that they are not considered as fully recognized members of this this community.** If I remember correctly last spring the Provost's response to this concern last spring was that faculty who have conflicting religious obligations should arrange for peer coverage and that students with religious obligations should be accommodated individually. This puts faculty in the position of offering individual solutions for an institutional problem and I think creates an added burden on the basis of religious identity (in the case of faculty who must find peer coverage).
- This is a pedagogically unsound schedule and it **assumes Christian hegemony.**
- For what it's worth, I still don't like this system of Friday exams. While I appreciate the effort to arrange things so that a comparatively small number of students actually taking exams on Friday, the real problem for me is how **this chops up the weekly flow for people teaching on MWF.** Sure, we might get the same number of class sessions over the semester as before, but how these courses are divided by actual weeks matters as well. In the case of my MWF class, to make this more concrete, I have students doing small group applied exercises and presentations, with the class divided in thirds. **A final week that ends on Thursday chops up the week in a strange way that completely disrupts the usual flow of the semester.** I appreciate the difficulty of managing commencement at what is now a large university, but this decision still frustrates me in **placing the "needs" of fundamentally administrative issues above the basic integrity of the academic mission that should be the core of our mission.**
- The Saturday exams are more troublesome to me than the Friday ones. Students (or faculty) should not have to come in on the weekend. **This is particularly difficult for students and faculty with children.**
- My own take on it is that it is anti-intellectual and anti-educational. The schedule suggests that administration has no real sense for the actual work that we do here. It reminds me of the time that football stadium construction was begun during finals week, and the "solution" to that apparent contradiction was to hand out ear plugs to students. Most universities go the opposite way. **They put reading days in between the end of classes and the start of exams.**

If this schedule remains in place, I will reschedule my classes, and hold no class in that last week. **I care about students' educations and will do what I can to give them reading days.** Aside from that, of course, they can't come to class and pay attention in any case. They're too stressed out.