



New student registration

A review of the process used to register entering students for courses in the fall of 2008

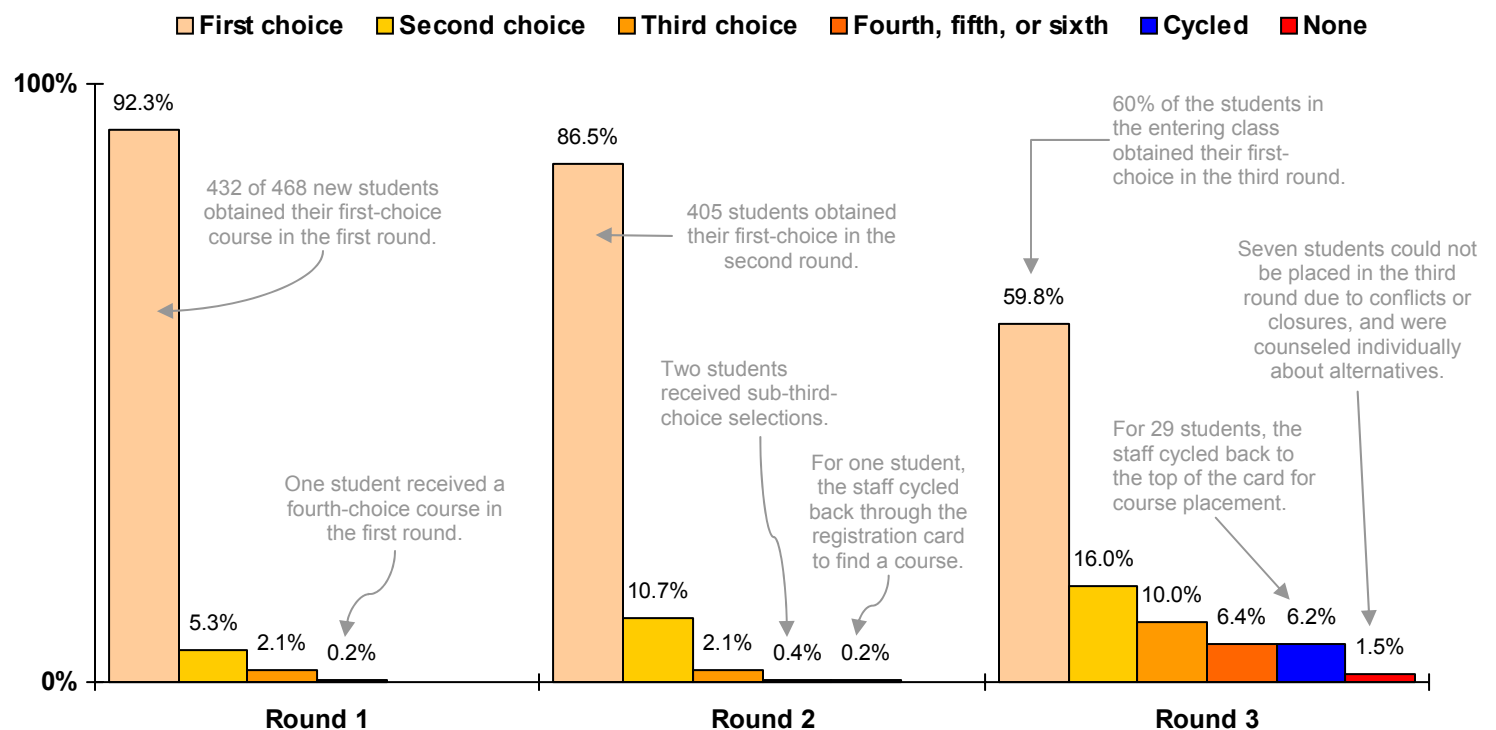
September 2008

For the fall of 2008, Grinnell College developed a new system for enrolling first-year students in first semester courses. After speaking with their advisers, first-year students filled out a newly designed registration card. This card allowed students to register their priorities for courses in three rounds — each round represented one course. (The tutorial brings the number to four.) Then the students submitted their cards to the Registrar, whose staff enrolled the students in a queue that was randomly ordered. At the end of the first round, the queue was reversed, and students were registered in the second round for their next course. All cards were shuffled to determine the queue for the third round. We expected this approach could provide better access to priority courses and would greatly diminish the distress that students had experienced if they were at the end of the queue in the old Harris system.

- More than 90 percent of the students were able to obtain their first-choice course in the first round.
- Nearly 90 percent were able to obtain their first-choice in the second round.
- Even by the third round, after positions had filled during the first and second rounds, 60 percent of the students were still able to obtain their first-choice courses.
- Eighty-six percent of the students were able to register for a first, second, or third-choice course in the third round of registration.
- Slightly more than half of the students received their first-choice in all three rounds.
- Nearly three-quarters of the students obtained a first- or second-choice course in all three rounds.

(continued)

Figure 1: Course choice fulfillment by round



Some students, however, did run into problems:

- Twenty-nine students ran out of third-round choices and the Registrar's staff needed to cycle back to the top of the registration card to complete students' schedules. In some cases, this produced a schedule that included courses the student had intended as viable alternatives but not as a viable *combination* (e.g., two courses in the same department or two lab sciences).
- Seven students were not able to enroll in a third course at all.

In both these situations, where it came to our attention soon enough, the Associate Dean or the Registrar's staff telephoned tutorial instructors to alert them to the problem and help propose a solution. The goal was to ensure that all students were enrolled with a viable schedule of courses before the course schedules for the class were released. In more than half the cases, the students accepted the proposed solution. In the other cases, the students and tutorial advisers worked out a new solution at the Post-Registration Forum in Harris. In a few cases, students entered Harris without a viable schedule.

HARRIS

The Dean's office requested that tutorial instructors and chairs of each department attend the Post-Registration Forum at Harris. We expected far fewer students to attend Harris than had done in other years. We have now done an analysis of who among the students attended Harris and what sort of transactions they made there.

While the overwhelming majority of first year students were able to register for the courses they wanted, not all were able to obtain the particular course-sections they preferred. Therefore, sixty-three new students (13 percent of the entering class) completed a drop or add transaction during the Harris session. In the great majority of cases, this involved moving among sections within the courses in which they were enrolled.

Roughly two-thirds of the Harris transactions were by returning students. One hundred twenty-seven returning students (about 12 percent of the on-campus returning student body) used the Harris session to complete drop/add transactions. In our conversations with faculty members who attended Harris, it seems that two faculty members from each department were readily able to manage the Harris transactions for the department.

CAPACITY & DISTRIBUTION

Figure 2 shows course capacity and utilization for new students by division for fall 2008. The pie chart (Figure 3) indicates that 38 percent of the four and five credit courses for which new students enrolled were in the Humanities division, 38 percent were in the Science division, and 24 percent were in the Social Studies division.

Figure 2: First-year capacity & utilization

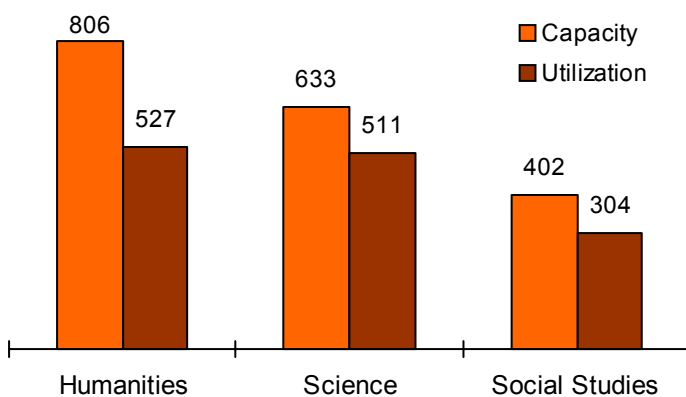
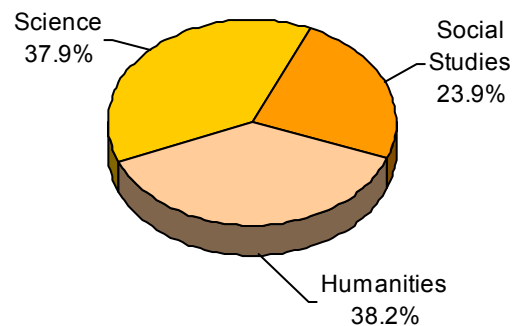


Figure 3: Course distribution of new students



The overall course-to-student ratio was more favorable in the fall of 2008 than the fall of 2007, but still not as strong as earlier years.

COURSES

The demand for some courses exceeded the available spaces. Below are the courses for which five or more new students requested a course in the first or second round but could not get into the course (instances that were not due to simple scheduling conflicts):

| | | | |
|--------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|
| ART-138 (14) | BIO-150 (14) | ANT-104 (12) | PSY-113 (9) |
| CHM-210 (8) | ECN-111 (6) | SOC-111 (6) | ART-142 (5) |

OBSERVATIONS

In this first iteration of the new registration process, we have learned how to better instruct the tutorial advisers in ways that should reduce the number of problem cases next year. For example:

- Not filling out the registration card with a deep, varied selection of courses or times, especially in the third round put students at a disadvantage because the Registrar's office ran out of scheduling options.
- Because most students obtained their first choice in the first round, we can reasonably advise tutorial advisers to choose second round choices that do not produce scheduling conflicts with first round first-choice courses.
- Students who did not display flexibility in time-of-day preferences (through varied courses with different times or by marking "any section"), or who created obvious scheduling conflicts by the way they completed their cards, encountered more difficulties.
- We observe that there were very few options for first year courses in the Tuesday/Thursday sessions.

CONCLUSION

Overall, we are very pleased with the result. Thanks are owed to faculty members who helped in the design of the process, as well as the tutorial faculty who were patient and positive with the experiment. By all accounts, the students themselves consider it a much better, fairer and happier system — which was the goal. ❖