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The Final Stand for Final Exams

Have you ever had nightmares the night before you took your final exam?

Well, I would not be surprised if you had. Throughout the lives of many high school students, much dread has come from the months of May to June. With summer vacation just in sight, students would have to face the intimidating obstacle of final exams. Final exams are tests consisting of the whole year's curriculum, and a majority of students have to take them in order to prove their comprehension. Recently, many students have recorded rather poor performances on them. This has led to doubts about the testing effectiveness of final exams. However, others stay firm on the fact that the current structure of finals assesses the students' knowledge correctly. But, if one compares the strengths and weaknesses of the final exam structure, one can clearly note that it needs much fixing. Although final exams have been long used to assess student knowledge, numerous issues with their structure and implementation demonstrate that this is an outdated method of assessment that should be reviewed and replaced.

Although final exams help you prepare for college, the structure of the current system, specifically multiple-choice questions, does not help students learn overall. One of the most popular types of questions that appears on final exams is the multiple-choice question, also known as MCQs. However, there are many problems that arise with these

MCQs. Students and professors can agree that “multiple choice questions by definition are narrow” (Kerani). Therefore, MCQs contribute to more close-minded responses, as they only provide four to five answers. This would lead to students focusing on a specific component of the topic, instead of covering the broader and main message of the topic. Ultimately, this encourages students to prioritize memorization of the information, rather than application or original thought. Students would focus on just retaining the information, but they would ignore how to use it in different concepts and situations. However, there could be a case where the current final exam system would actually prepare students. Based on past experiences, students think “it’s a lot more important that you have that first experience taking final exams in ninth grade, rather than in your first time in college” (Elliot). It is true that memorization could produce study techniques that would be beneficial for college endeavors. This is because a majority of the assessments in college are multiple-choice questions. However, that does not help the student learn the material in the long run. Memorization would lead to students not being able to think for themselves and basing their thought process strictly on the material. This would never be helpful in college. Memorization leads to more forgetfulness of the material because you are not providing context for the material, so why would you keep remembering it? Studies show that “an average learner forgets 70% of what they learned within 24 hours and 90% of what they learned in a week if they do not make an effort to retain it” (Colman). This proves that providing context for information is an absolute necessity. The common format of final exams, which are the MCQs, inevitably does more harm than good for the students.

The percentage the final exam consists of the overall grade in the class could benefit the students, but the risks and redundancies that accompany it will undoubtedly bring less reward to the student. It is well known that the final exams contribute toward a percentage of the total grade in the class. Typically, final exams are 20% of the grade, with each quarter carrying a weight of 20% as well. This means that a final exam is worth the same as a quarter, or 10 weeks of school. It is essential to put this percentage into perspective. A student might have “a solid B, or 85% in the class. If [their] final exam is 20%, it is impossible for the grade to become an A but can be potentially lowered to a D if failed” (Kerani). This just shows the final exam has a high-risk, low-reward factor for the students. However, a redeeming factor is that students who struggled during the class have a “redemption” opportunity to raise their final grade. So, if a student genuinely worked hard during the year but fell short, they can have the opportunity to raise and get a satisfactory grade. However, if a student lazed off and didn’t try during the year, should they even have the opportunity to raise their grade using the final exam? That would lead to a false assessment of a student’s knowledge. But this only applies to students who struggled, so this does not help the other students who succeeded. With this thought in mind, stress will build up in the successful students, more specifically the students with A’s. With them trying to maintain their high grade, students will put in hours of studying and worrying about the test and their mental fortitude will be decreased, leading to a poor performance on the final exam. However, there are some schools that exempt students from final exams if they have an A in the class. But this is very inconsistent with other schools, so this should be common practice amongst all schools. So, the student puts in

all this effort for what? To get a good grade right? Well, what is the point if they already got a good grade on the same material? Students have said that “many finals cover material that [we] have already learned and already tested on” (Kerani). Students should not be required to take a test on the same information if they already received an exceptional grade on it during the class. This is just redundant information that is a waste of time and effort for the student studying for the exam. Students will ultimately risk more, mentally and grade-wise, than get a higher reward by taking the final exam.

With all these detriments that originate from final exams, there are some solutions that can make the student-life easier but also properly assessing their knowledge. One solution is “to tailor them to the classes they are taken in” (North Star Journalism Team). What this means is to make certain tests specific to their individual classes. For example, a science final can be a lab, or an English final can be an essay. This will help students practice their application of the material instead of memorizing facts, which will also help their memory of the information in the future. Another optimal solution is to make the finals optional. This way, students who struggled in the class have the opportunity to raise their grade, while those who already excelled do not have to risk their grade lowering. This will also reduce any stress a student will have knowing that the final is optional. One can also reduce the percentage the final exam has in your final grade, which will also reduce stress and drastically lower grades. All of these solutions are feasible and properly address the issues final exams have.

Although final exams have been long used to assess student knowledge, numerous issues with their structure and implementation demonstrate that this is an outdated

method of assessment. Changing the structure of the final exam is an absolute necessity. Students' mental fortitude gradually decreases as they study for the final exam, and this one test could change a student's grade for the whole year. Given the students' tough schedule already, they don't need to be doing any extraneous work that just decreases their mental health. This should be at the top of educational reforms being implemented in the future.

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