

# Understanding Graduate Students' Course Selection Decisions

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## ABSTRACT

To increase the accuracy of course scheduling and avoid under- or over-enrolled courses, it's important to understand factors that influence students' course selection process. Our study surveyed graduate iSchool students about their course selection decisions. The student accounts confirm earlier study findings that course selection is influenced by class time, course content, student interest in course material, and the professor's reputation. Students obtain course information from the online course planning system, the syllabus archive, and word of mouth (from peers and advisors); therefore, all these sources of information need to be available to facilitate students' decisions. The study found that student demographics, particularly employment and caregiver status, influence and often constrain course choices. The findings highlight the importance of tracking student demographics as they move through their graduate program and supporting student course planning with timely information about future courses and professors.

## ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Education of information professionals; Students; Curriculum; Information practices; Education.

## AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Course scheduling; Student course selection decisions; Course-related information; iSchools.

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# INTRODUCTION

Faculty and administrators of iSchools and other academic units often face challenges with under- or over-enrolled courses. The inability to accurately predict student demand for a particular course results in cancelled courses, waitlists, and, ultimately, unhappy students, faculty, and administrators (Hinton, 2012). To better understand how to avoid mismatches between course supply and demand, we conducted a study to examine the factors that influence students' course selection processes at the Pratt Institute iSchool. Our findings expand the existing knowledge on the importance of information about a course and a professor for students' enrollment decisions (Galotti & Umscheid, 2019). The findings highlight the importance of understanding student demographics and available information sources in increasing the probability of achieving equilibrium in courses' supply and demand curves. The study's findings will be of interest to academic administrators, students, and faculty.

## RELEVANT LITERATURE

In preparation for the study, we examined existing reports on the student course selection process by searching for publications related to the concepts of "course selection process" and "course scheduling" in the federated search interface of the Pratt Institute library, as well as Google Scholar. We further refined the initial searches by adding concepts that emerged from the literature review, i.e., "time of class." The analysis of the prior literature indicated the three dominant clusters of attributes that affect student course selection decisions: a) time of class, b) course content and general interest in course material, and c) the professor's reputation.

Kardan et al. (2013) surveyed graduate students to determine factors that affect satisfaction in the courses they select and concluded that students' ability to enroll in the courses they want plays a key role in student satisfaction. At the university level, factors such as the availability of classrooms and instructors can limit course offerings. To mitigate these limitations, Kardan et al. (2013) suggest that universities examine historical enrollment data and waitlists to identify classes that are most popular and ensure that resources are available to offer these courses. The study findings emphasize the importance of the time of class for students who consider the time needed to do coursework and students who are employed (Kardan, et al., 2013). Chen et al. (2023) used algorithms and mathematical models to determine solutions to various course scheduling problems, such as the availability of professors, facilities to run classes, and class times. The study developed a model for the course planning process that relied on hard and soft constraints and could increase professor and student satisfaction (Chen et al., 2023).

Sturludóttir et al. (2021) conducted a study that examined course selection data from three undergraduate programs over five years. The study concluded that the perceived relevance of a course to one's career and general interests is an important factor in the course selection process. The perceived difficulty of the course content is another important factor in students' considerations for the total course-related workload each semester (Kardan, et al., 2013). Hayes

and Prus (2014) demonstrated that syllabi from previous semesters serve as a crucial source of course information for students in determining their interest in a course, general interest in the course topic, the potential relevance of the course to their career goals, and the perceived difficulty of the course. Syllabi are also influential in providing students with first impressions of a professor and their course material through the description of skills to be acquired by students in the course (Wickline, et al., 2023).

The personality of a professor and the style and quality of instruction are other important course-selection criteria discussed in the literature. When students are unable to interact with the future professor and personally assess their teaching style, they turn to other students' assessments of professors (Brown & Kosovich, 2015). The qualities students look for in a professor are linked to the perceived difficulty of the class, what can be learned from the professor concerning the student's future career prospects, and the general instructor's personality (Brown & Kosovich, 2015). Students consider friends, peers, and academic advisors trustworthy sources for obtaining course-related information (Hayes & Prus, 2014). Additionally, students often access quantitative and qualitative data on the reputation of a professor from RateMyProfessor.com or the archive of end-of-course student evaluations.

Dash and Ahmadi (2021) found that student involvement in scheduling their preferred classes leads to better outcomes than schedules generated by the administration.

While most of the prior work has been done with undergraduates, our study aims to amplify students' perspectives and focus on the course scheduling priorities of graduate students.

## **METHODS**

We employed the survey method to understand the student decisions involved in the course selection process at the four graduate programs of the Pratt Institute iSchool: Library and Information Science (LIS), Museums and Digital Culture (MDC), Data Analytics and Visualization (DAV), and Information Experience Design (IXD). We first administered a questionnaire to understand the importance of various factors contributing to student decisions vis-à-vis student demographics. We then conducted in-depth interviews with participants to gain a deeper understanding of their responses to the questionnaire. The interviews were conducted by graduate research assistants to facilitate open conversations without the involvement of faculty or administrators. The questionnaire collected demographic information about the students and factors that might influence their course selection decisions, based on prior research and information sources available to Pratt iSchool students (e.g., course syllabi and course evaluation data). Both required and elective types of courses were treated equally due to the availability of multiple sections of the required courses. The complete copy of the study instruments can be found at: <https://bit.ly/CourseSelectionStudy>. We acknowledge the limitations of self-report survey methods and plan to incorporate enrollment and other observational data into our future work.

Study participants were recruited through the school's internal mailing lists. A total of 28 students completed the questionnaire (10% response rate based on the pool of enrolled students), with a program breakdown of 15 students from the IxD program (12% response rate for the program), 11 LIS students (10% response rate), 2 DAV students (10% response rate), and one from the MDC program (6% response rate). The low response rates could be explained by the overall trend in lower response rates for surveys (Stedman et al., 2019), participants' fatigue due to the recruitment of students for various projects within the iSchool, students' interest in the topic, lack of financial incentive, or other factors (Hikmet and Chen, 2003). However, self-selection of participants into the study might have ensured that students who care the most about the course schedule were represented.

Of the 28 respondents, 26 are full-time students (meaning they take two or more courses each semester). Fourteen students are employed part-time, seven are employed full-time, and seven are unemployed.

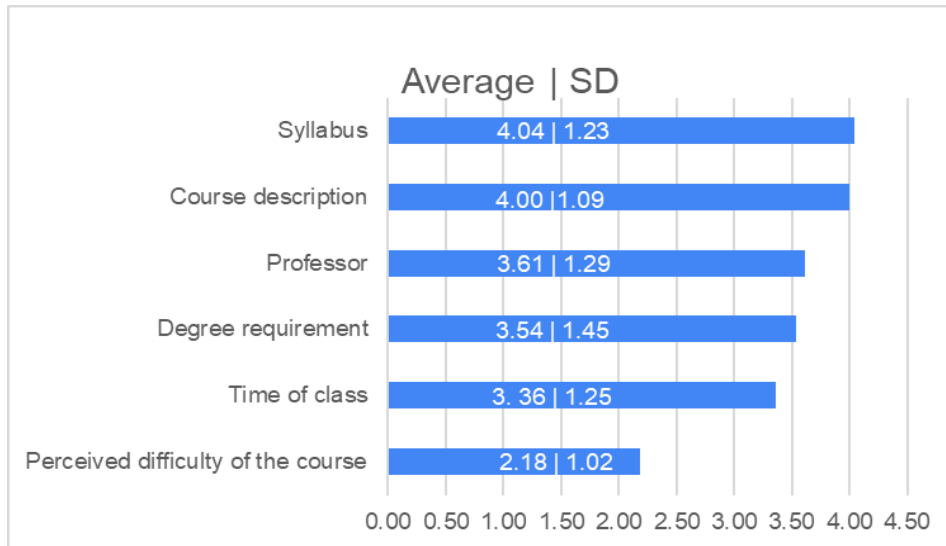
We asked questionnaire respondents to provide their email if they wanted to participate in virtual interviews to discuss their course selection process. The semi-structured interview questions (link above) solicited additional details about the main themes of the questionnaire instrument. A total of 15 students from three of the iSchool's programs were interviewed and received a \$15 gift card for their time. Participants' responses were analyzed by two researchers using the thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

## **FINDINGS**

We asked participants to rate the importance of six factors in their course selection decisions, using a Likert scale where five corresponded to the most critical factor and one corresponded to the least important factor. Average ratings summarized in Figure 1 indicate that the course-related information from a course's syllabus and description (found in Graduate Bulletins and other sources) is the most important in influencing student decisions, with perceived course difficulty being the least important piece of information.

### **Figure 1**

*The Average Ranking (with Standard Deviation) of Factors in Course Scheduling*



*The Average Ranking (with Standard Deviation) of Factors in Course Scheduling*

During the follow-up interviews, 9 of the 15 interviewees emphasized the importance of having access to the iSchool syllabus archive that provides them with helpful information about the course (including course description, reading materials, and assignments) and allows them to assess the course content against their professional interests. Eight interviewees mentioned the professor, their expertise, and alignment with student career goals, teaching style, and familiarity with the professor as important elements of the course selection process, a factor that was also chosen by questionnaire respondents.

*“Syllabus is most important because I want to see the links of the readings, general interest and workload, if there are professor reviews online I also look at those, maybe ask other classmates about the professors” UX04.*

Respondents identified multiple methods for learning about course offerings. The most frequently chosen source of course-related information was consultation with classmates and peers about course offerings (N= 24, also mentioned by 8 interviewees). Nineteen respondents marked the syllabus archive and the online course planning system as helpful information sources. The interviewees (N=8) clarified that the course planning system allows them to narrow down selected courses and then use the syllabus archive to further research the course content. Sixteen respondents indicated that they discuss the course offerings with their academic advisors.

*“I occasionally consult with classmates and friends. I also meet with my academic advisor once a semester with an idea of classes I am interested in and take into account her opinions and suggestions.” LIS14*

Ten respondents indicated that they plan their coursework multiple semesters in advance, with others planning it from one semester to one month in advance.

The iSchool offers in-person classes Monday through Friday at three meeting times: 11:30 am-2:20 pm (“morning class”), 3:00 pm-5:50 pm (“afternoon class”), and 6:30 pm-9:20 pm (“night class”). Twenty-one respondents selected more than one preferred time and day of

the week for class: respondents preferred the morning class 16 times, the afternoon class 21 times, and the night class 11 times. The eight respondents who ranked time of class as the most important factor in choosing courses are all employed in part- or full-time work in addition to studying at the Pratt iSchool. Respondents most frequently chose Wednesday as their preferred day for courses (N=26), closely followed by Tuesday (N=24). Respondents chose Monday and Thursday 19 times. Only six respondents marked Friday and weekend days as preferred for classes. The interview data further confirmed that the students with full-time jobs mainly sought the afternoon and night classes, whereas students employed part-time more often requested the morning and afternoon classes. The participants emphasized that the time of class was not only a contributing factor but also a limiting factor in course scheduling: if class times did not align with their schedules, they could not take the class due to constraints such as employment and caregiving.

*“Class time is most important to me because I have very limited availability.” LIS03*

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The project examined information sources and factors contributing to Pratt Institute iSchool students' course selection process. Reports from the surveyed students confirmed the importance of many factors outlined in previous publications: course description, degree requirement, professor, and time of class are all relevant to the course selection process (Brown & Kosovich, 2015; Hayes & Prus, 2014; Kardan et al., 2013; Chen et al., 2023). Course content was particularly critical to our respondents, who were not constrained by work or caregiver responsibilities outside of their academic program. Participants from all four programs considered information about course content and professors to be critical for their course selection decisions and reported obtaining this information from the course planning system, syllabus archive, and word of mouth (peers, advisors). In follow-up interviews, participants emphasized the importance of course content, particularly its relevance to their future careers. Unlike undergraduate students in prior studies, our participants did not prioritize course difficulty when weighing their course options, a difference that could be attributed to graduate students' different maturity and motivation levels compared to undergrads. The participants who focused on course content relating to future careers were less likely to consult with advisors about course decisions. Surprisingly, only one of the participants referred to the prior course evaluation archives as a useful source of information about the course and professor, likely due to low awareness of this resource (something that the school should promote better). While not all students and faculty are aware of it, the school could promote it, especially during the course registration periods. Class times that students most preferred included classes scheduled during mid-week, with slightly higher preferences for the afternoon classes. However, the time of class preference had the highest dependency on student employment and caregiver status, with students who are employed full-time often preferring night classes.

More than half of the respondents planned their courses between one semester to one week in advance of the registration period. However, 10 participants mentioned planning their

coursework several semesters in advance, emphasizing the importance of providing these students with long-term course schedules/plans (2+ years ahead). Only three participants mentioned the multi-year course planning spreadsheet maintained by the iSchool administrators as a helpful tool for planning courses across multiple semesters, indicating that this resource should be better promoted.

Based on the study findings, we offer several recommendations for supporting students' course selection decisions:

- Offer multiple sources of information about the content of the course and the professor, including their description, readings, assignments, meeting times, etc. While a syllabus offers the most detailed information, additional sources can aid in different stages of course selection. Prior course evaluations can help finalize the selection by providing other students' assessments of the course's difficulty and the teaching style of the course's professor. Peer and advisor input is also valuable, especially for students who might not meet for in-person and/or synchronous instruction or [School's] social events.
- Institutions that make professor ratings and end-of-course evaluations available to students should promote this resource to students during the course selection and registration periods.
- While certain class time preferences might be specific to students of particular institutions (early afternoon/midweek classes for Pratt iSchool students, administrators should monitor students' demographics, especially their employment and caregiver status, to determine the best class times for students.
- Over a third of our participants mentioned planning their coursework several semesters in advance. Whether students plan their courses one or several semesters ahead, supporting their planning with information on future course offerings would be helpful. While such planning tools are often available to administrators and faculty, they should be promoted as valuable resources for students.
- Course difficulty was not a key predictor of students' interest in a course, a factor that might characterize the undergraduate population in prior research. It would be interesting to further explore the desirable course difficulty levels for the iSchool students.

Course selection is a complex process requiring students to assess multiple sources of course-related information and map it to their individual needs. Therefore, systematic assessment of the evolving students' needs and constraints and the timely provision of comprehensive course-related information are important factors for matching the supply of courses with student demands.

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