Facing Final Exams, Papers, and Projects

The end of the semester will soon be upon us, but one hefty set of responsibilities still stands between you and a well-deserved break. In most of your classes, there will be some form of final assessment of how well you have achieved the course objectives. It is only natural that you begin to focus on exactly what you need to do to earn the grades you are hoping to achieve. As an economist who teaches about optimizing subject to constraints, I can hardly fault these thoughtful time-allocation exercises. Nonetheless, I hope that you will also use this opportunity to look at the big picture for each of your courses. In particular, think about what your professor was hoping you would get out of the course and how the various elements with which you struggled on a week-to-week basis for problem sets, essays, discussion board posts, and lab reports all fit together as part of a whole. It is likely that taking such an approach will also serve you well for mastering the details, as these are more likely to make sense when seen from a larger perspective.

While preparing for your exams, be sure that you also pay attention to your health. If you fail to get enough sleep or to take time for proper meals, you will not be able to focus as fully as you would like on your preparation and are likely to be inefficient in your studying and writing. I know that it sounds paradoxical, but it is also important that you take a bit of time to relax. This too will improve your efficiency and your ability to retain the material you need to know for exams.

Of course, despite our best efforts to be in good health, we sometimes get sick at the most inconvenient times. If you are too sick to take an exam, be sure to see a healthcare professional and bring documentation to the Office of Undergraduate Studies; it is only with such documentation that we can authorize a make-up exam. Also, remember that simply feeling a bit under the weather is not a good reason to postpone an exam. It would be nice to be able to put off our obligations until we are feeling at full capacity, but life rarely provides this luxury. Instead, we do our best on any given day, understanding that it will not always lead to our top performance. It might seem that postponing an exam until we feel better or have a bit more time to prepare will improve performance, but it also means having greater distance from the course material and needing to prepare when other distractions and obligations are likely to interfere. Waiting to take an exam may well lead to a poorer rather than better performance.

The same is true for Incompletes. Faculty should only be granting Incompletes when a student has just a small segment of the course left to do and extenuating circumstances prevent the student from completing this work on the same schedule as everyone else. The amount of time for completing the work should match the time missed because of the extenuating circumstances. Incompletes do not automatically give you until the 11th week of the next semester to complete the work. The governing principle here is equitable treatment of all students in the course. It is in your interest to get your work done on schedule and not allow it to extend into the next semester. You want to get off to a fresh start next semester without work from this semester still to be done. If you do need time next semester to complete this semester’s work, take that into account when planning next semester’s schedule.

Soon, you will be done with the semester and able to take some time for enjoying the holidays, visiting with family and friends, and relaxing. To our January degree recipients: Congratulations! We wish you great success in your next endeavors and look forward to learning about all of your future accomplishments. We know that you will make all of us who care about you and CWRU proud. To
everyone else: We look forward to seeing you next semester, well rested and ready to face new challenges in your coursework and other activities. I wish you all the very best for the holiday season.

Let me know what you think. You can write to me at jeffrey.wolcowitz@case.edu.