

# Exams Destabilized

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Faculty Retreat | September 18, 2025



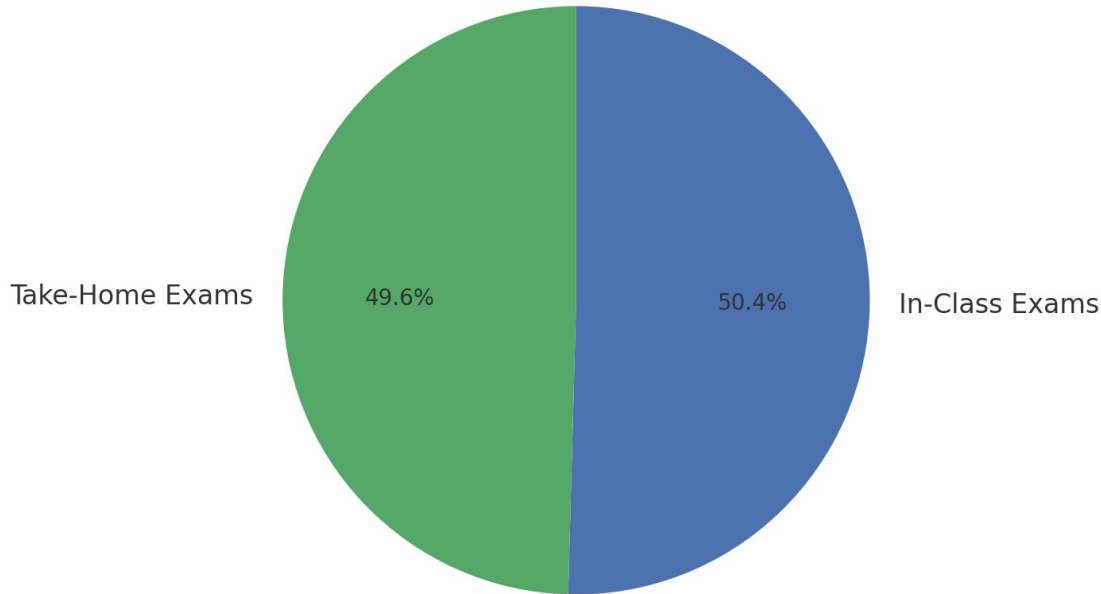
**Penn Carey Law**  
UNIVERSITY of PENNSYLVANIA



*If we were starting from scratch,  
how would we design exams?*

# Introduction: Current Exam Practices

**In-Class vs Take-Home Exams (Fall 2024 + Spring 2025)**

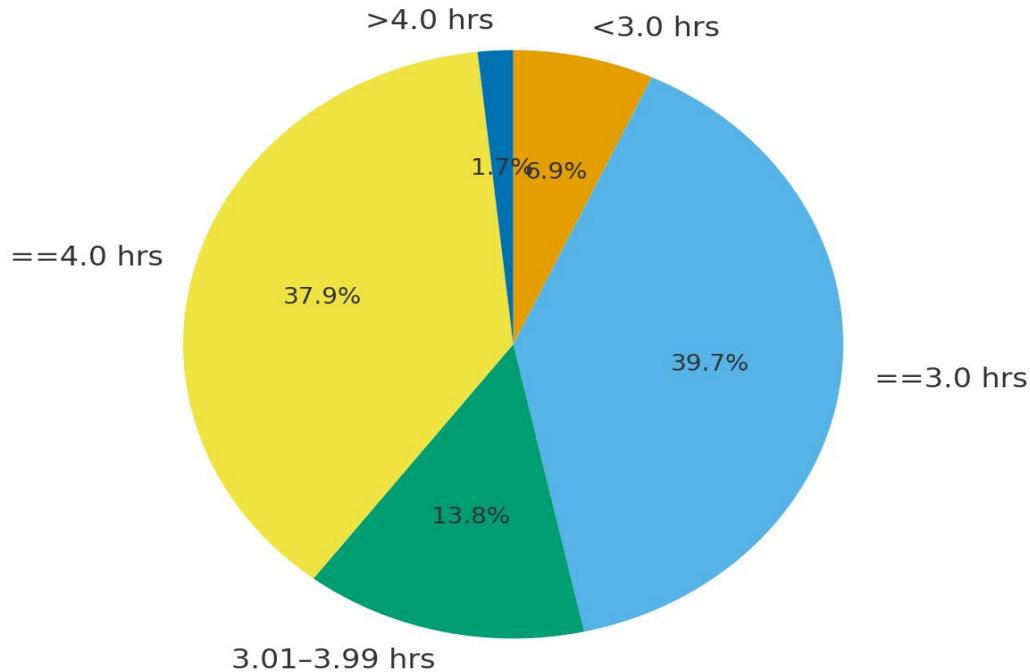


Fall '24: 27 in class, 21 takeaway  
Spring '25: 32 in class, 35 takeaway

115 total exams (note: 300+ courses)

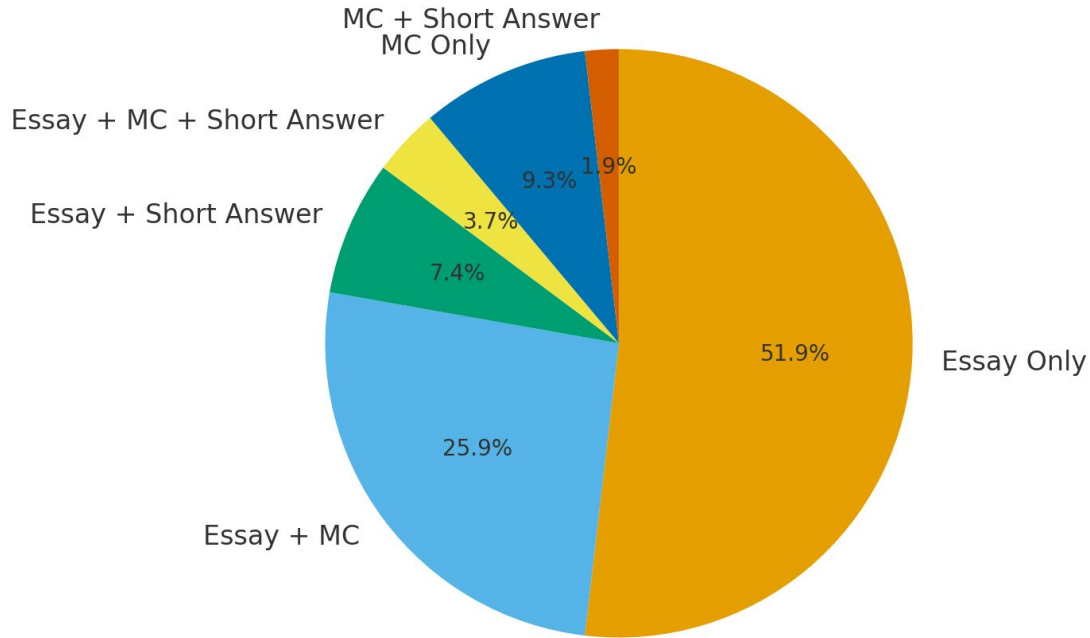
# Introduction: Current Exam Practices

**Distribution of In-Class Exam Lengths**

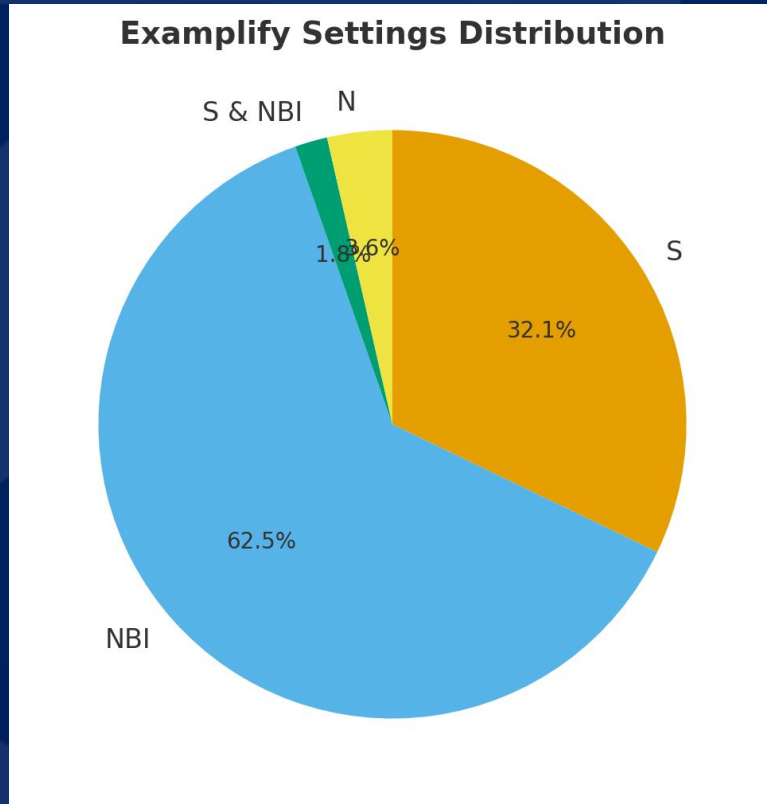


# Introduction: Current Exam Practices

**Distribution of Exam Formats**



# Introduction: Current Exam Practices



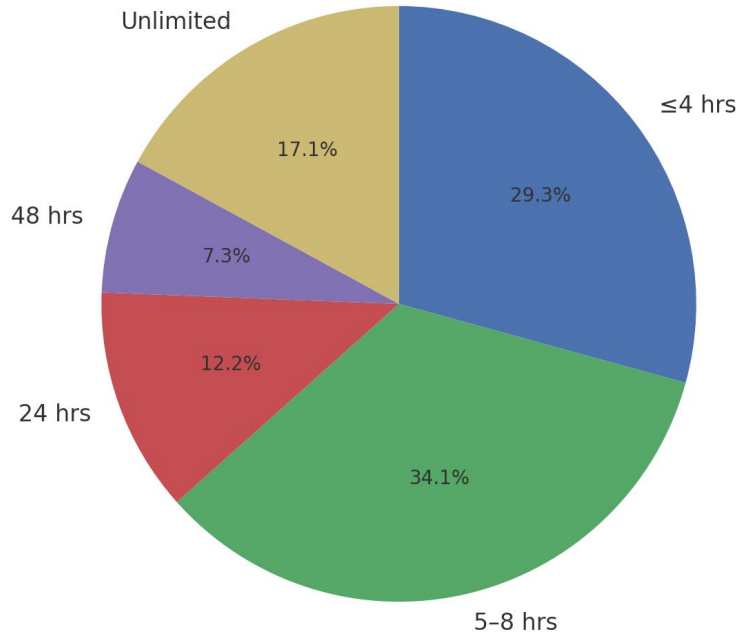
**S = secure mode**

**NBI = non-secure, no-internet**

**N = non-secure**

# Introduction: Current Exam Practices

Takeaway Exam Lengths (2024-25)



# Exams Destabilized

Law school exams were once **stable**, (largely) **uniform**, and **central**.

Now — three important simultaneous forces:

1. Accommodations
2. Artificial Intelligence
3. Market for Grades

*My agenda: continue an ongoing conversation, encourage experimentation, offer no prescriptions*

# Force #1: Accommodations

If students aren't under time pressure, then what are we **measuring**?

If we **are** measuring performance under time pressure, then how to understand the differential time constraints inherent in the system?

Is time pressure the **right mechanism** to reveal distinctions between student performance?

# Force #2: Artificial Intelligence

A futuristic robot with a human-like face and a metallic body is sitting at a desk in a classroom. The robot is looking down at a laptop. In the background, other students are sitting at desks, some looking at their laptops. The scene is dimly lit, with a blue tint.

AI can probably pass your exams.

- straightforward essays
- policy questions
- multiple choice questions

AI may not be excellent

- usually weak on layered reasoning and judgment

Some variability in allowed use on exams.

Students increasingly concerned about peer misuse

# Force #2: Artificial Intelligence

How should we think about AI use (in the exam context)?

- a threat to exam integrity & fairness of student assessment
- a regulated tool that can improve performance
- a key professional skill that should be measured

Should modern exams reflect AI's role in legal practice?

- but: what is that role?

How should we address student concerns about AI cheating?

# Force #3: The Market for Grades

Law firm hiring continues to **move earlier** in students' careers

- to a lesser extent, clerkship hiring as well

Grades are still critically important signals of student performance

Higher stakes for both students and faculty

- Fewer grades → each one matters more
- Shorter timelines → increasing challenge to produce grades

**Fairness and comparability pressure intensifies**



## Force #3: The Market for Grades

In this environment, what are our responsibilities to our students?

- Do we owe students more coherence in exams?
- Do we owe students more reliability in grading?

# Coda: Can Technology Help?

## AI assistance in exam creation

- multiple choice and essays
- easier to create multimodal assessments, practice questions

## AI-assisted assessments

- tools that 'discuss' scenarios with students
- tools that allow students to receive preliminary feedback

## AI-assisted essay grading

- tools to triage exams, assure consistency, provide feedback

**Technology as a supplement to academic judgment, not a substitute**

# Coda: Can Technology Help?

Can AI reduce exam burdens while maintaining rigor?

Can AI unlock new ways of assessing performance?

Where should academic judgment stay non-delegable?

# Some Big Questions

Is the traditional exam model broken, or can we just tweak it a bit? How?

Should we rethink some core assumptions?

- anonymous grading
- end-of-term assessments
- grade distributions
- plurality of exam types, formats

*If we were starting from scratch, how would we design exams?*

# Next Up in Pedagogy Conversations

Wednesday, October 22

Wednesday, November 19

Meanwhile: Consider how you want to grow your teaching.

**Talk with me about how I can help.**