

An Overview of Half-Credit Courses

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Student Committee on Undergraduate Education
University of Pennsylvania



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I. Introduction

The University of Pennsylvania prides itself on its commitment to a multidisciplinary undergraduate experience for all of its students. Although its undergraduate population is divided into four distinct schools, Penn promotes the “One University” concept in order to encourage students to develop and pursue various interests across schools. Through coordinated dual-degree programs, inter-school minors, and requirements to enroll in classes outside of a student’s chosen major, Penn places high value on multidisciplinary learning. As stated by Penn’s very own Benjamin Franklin, “The doors of wisdom are never shut.”

In evaluating aspects in which Penn’s academic community can be improved and aligned more closely with these concepts surrounding learning, the Student Committee on Undergraduate Education (SCUE) has begun to explore and understand the status quo of half-credit courses at Penn. After conducting thorough research for the past year on Penn’s current half-credit offerings through faculty opinion, student input, and similar classes at peer institutions, it has become clear that half-credit courses offer the unique ability to add value to a student’s education outside of the standard undergraduate curriculum. More specifically, these courses can be structured to offer avenues for (1) academic exploration of theoretical knowledge and practical skills, (2) promotion of student well-being, and (3) professor engagement—concepts which align closely with Benjamin Franklin’s vision for Penn.

Academic Exploration

Half-credit courses provide students the opportunity to explore a specific academic topic in a more manageable setting, by allowing students to take some courses in a shorter time frame with a more limited academic consequence of the grade. This can result in lower stress and a smaller time

commitment when compared to full-credit courses. Offering more half-credit courses signals to students that the administration not only wants increased learning and exploration opportunities, but also supports taking classes for purposes outside of fulfilling mandatory credits. Half-credit courses provide students with the flexibility to avoid overburdening themselves, and normalizes the idea of taking fewer credits to reduce hyper-competition among students. These offerings encourage students to engage in academic activities that will decrease stress and increase natural intellectual curiosity.

Student Wellbeing

Over the past few years, the topics of mental health and student wellbeing have dominated conversations around Penn’s campus. Although student life and campus norms play a huge role in impacting personal wellbeing and health, academics and day-to-day work have a substantial impact on whether students are feeling overwhelmed by their lives or confident in their abilities. By allowing students to undertake a less burdensome course load, half-credit courses provide the opportunity to explore multidisciplinary topics without sacrificing substantial time, energy, and health.

Professor Engagement and Exploration

SCUE believes that half-credit courses give professors the opportunity to create and administer courses that directly align with their research interests and topics that they otherwise are unable to incorporate into the traditional class offerings and class model. By offering the ability to delve deeply into a nuanced and more interesting topic rather than a basic introductory one, professors can attract a wider range of students and promote engagement across disciplines.

II. Status Quo

Half-credit courses, offered across Penn’s four undergraduate schools, are meant to provide either a lighter, less dense version of the current courses offered or a deep dive into an up-and-coming topic. Half-credit courses (generally 0.5 CU, versus the average class at Penn, which is 1.0 CU) can be offered in a variety of structures:

- 1.5 hours per week for a full semester (compared to 3 hours per week for 1 CU)
- 3 hours per week for the first half of a given semester
- 3 hours per week for the second half of a given semester

The structure and content of any given half-credit course is largely derived and created by a specific professor, graduate,

or undergraduate student, who has interest in teaching a more specialized course. As such, half-credit course offerings change over time and vary with professor, student turnover, and commitment from one semester to another. Therefore, it becomes difficult to maintain consistent half-credit offerings across all departments at Penn. However, some departments that have been more notable in maintaining half-credit course offerings outside of traditional labs and supplementary mandatory courses are Wharton’s Marketing, Finance, and Statistics departments; the College’s Music department; and the Engineering School’s Computer Science and Electrical and System Engineering departments.

Why Students Want More Half-Credit Courses

Based on the responses of more than 870 undergraduate students from a survey sent to the entire student body (see *Appendix*), half-credit courses are generally well received at Penn. Students who have taken these courses expressed that they had positive experiences as the classes were less stressful, more enjoyable, and offered knowledge in a new discipline. In fact, one student even noted that she “learned more in [her half credit course] than in any of [her] 1 CU classes.” SCUE was able to consolidate the survey results in order to pinpoint the main reasons students chose to enroll in half-credit courses during their time at Penn:

1. *Engaging material:* Students found these courses gave an overview of different topics within a particular subject area (i.e. consumer neuroscience).
2. *Manageable course load:* Half-credit courses tend to provide students with the flexibility of creating a more feasible course load and allow for appropriately-paced lectures.
3. *Build relationships:* Half-credit courses allow students to get to know the instructor and build relationships through interest-guided discussion and participation.

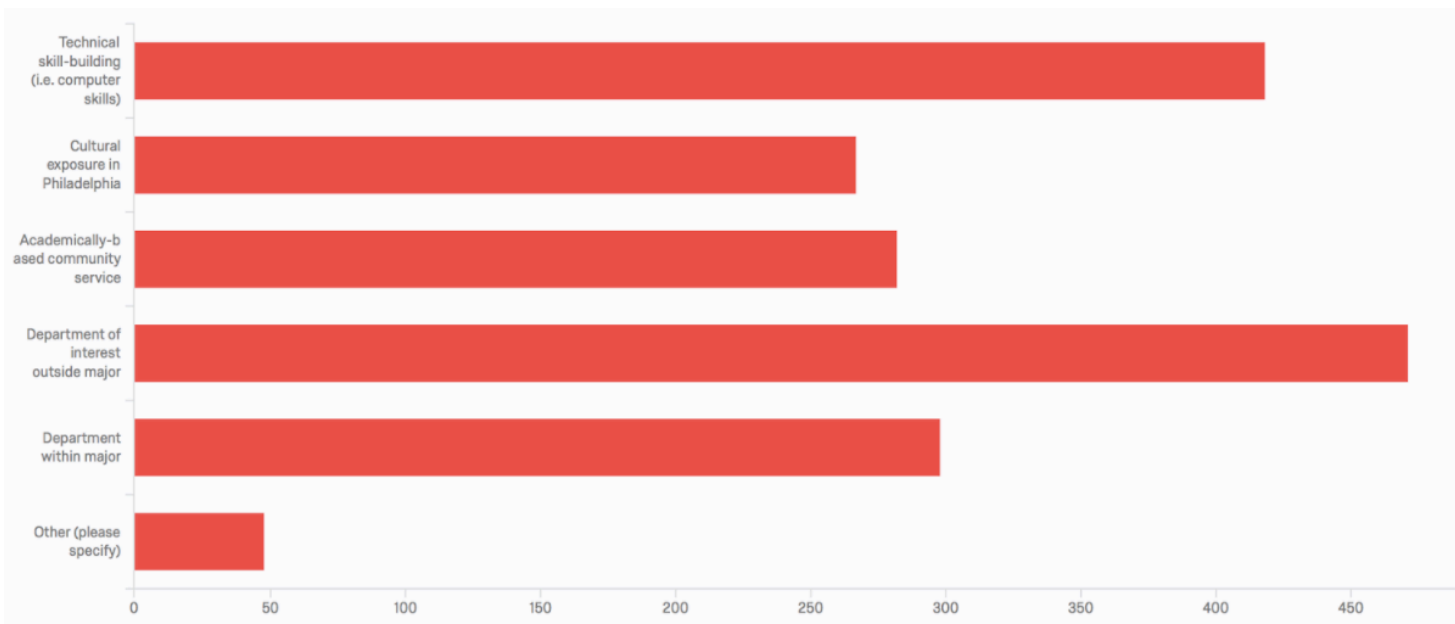
Where is Student Interest Right Now?

As seen in the results from the survey, there is a growing demand for new half-credit courses. Of those who responded, 58% said they had never taken a half-credit course before; however, when asked if they would want to take one in the future, 95% responded “Yes” or “Maybe.” Given that the freshmen class was the most responsive to our survey (34% compared to 27% of 2019, 22% of 2018, and 17% of 2017), SCUE believes that student engagement will continue to grow, and half-credit courses will be well received and utilized. The most common reasons why students had previously not taken half-credit courses include: scheduling difficulties, inability to search for these types of courses on Penn InTouch, lack of awareness of their existence, and limited selection.

What Value Would Half-Credit Courses Add?

Of the students who responded to the survey, 77% said they would be interested in taking a half-credit course in a department of interest outside their major, and 68% said they would consider pursuing a course that focused on technical skill-building. In **Figure A**, it can be seen that students are interested in using half-credit courses as an outlet for academic exploration.

Figure A: In what subjects areas are students most interested in taking a half-credit course?



III. Purpose of Half-Credits

Student Perspective

As mentioned, students report a variety of reasons for taking half-credit courses and generally enjoy their time in them. SCUE believes these offerings serve an important purpose in a Penn undergraduate education and allow room for fundamental exploration, flexibility in scheduling, and critical skill-building that can be used across disciplines. Half-credit courses also offer the opportunity for students to maximize their course load limit, especially during their freshman year. Considering the five and a half course load limit in Wharton, Nursing, Engineering and the four and a half course limit in the College, half-credits enable students to take the maximum number of courses allowed.

Exploration

Half-credit courses make exploration more accessible by providing structured academic opportunities to learn about a new subject or skill. Depending on a student's school and major, there are varying degrees of exploration a student can pursue outside of their intended area of study. In addition, while Penn offers many interdisciplinary programs that bridge different majors and schools, offering a variety of half-credit courses in different departments gives students the opportunity to design their own interdisciplinary curriculum and undertake intellectual challenges. It is also more likely that students will find it more convenient to explore a field that is unrelated to their major through a half-credit course.

Course Load

Students benefit from the increased flexibility that half-credit courses offer. In addition, they are able to take on extra academic opportunity without the commitment of a full course unit and the class-time, assignments, and content embedded in a full course. In fact, some students cited their experience in a half-credit course as being “a lot less stressful than a full CU course,” which helped balance their course load for a given semester. First semester students in the College of Arts and Sciences in particular can benefit from a variety of half-credit course offerings as their 4.5 CU maximum course load potentially includes space for such courses. Moreover, as Wharton revamps its MGMT 100 course from a single 1 CU class taken first semester freshman year into four 0.5 CU classes taken every year, half-credit courses can play a large role in balancing Wharton students' schedules and ensuring that the new structure does not necessitate a heavier course load in terms of credit.

Skill-Building

While there are opportunities on campus to develop and learn new skills, from technical to public speaking, offering grade-bearing courses in these areas is beneficial to students and gives a structured format that is appealing. Students may want to learn a completely new skill, or they may want to build

on existing knowledge. For example, one anonymous student shared in the SCUE-administered survey on half-credit classes, “I already know Android development, but [I] want to [learn] iPhone development.” Student interest in these opportunities is clear from the over-enrolled Wharton Dean's Undergraduate Advisory Board's (WAB) financial modeling course and introduction to coding seminars. Converting these types of non-credit bearing courses into half-credits will allow students to take advantage of these opportunities more easily. Offering courses that are a lower time commitment but help students progress steadily in their goal of exploring a new interest, learning a new instrument, or studying a new computer language helps tie together the various facets of their education.

Professor Perspective

SCUE recognizes the enormous impact professors, faculty, and staff have on the Penn undergraduate education, from inspiring students to sharing individual research with the community. With this in mind, half-credit courses are a useful tool for instructors to incorporate new content and experiences in the classroom, as well as to further advance their individual research questions, analyses, and findings. While SCUE recognizes the unique course load constraints facing professors addressed under the “Obstacles Addressed” section, there are many different logistical configurations that enable professors to teach a half-credit course and take advantage of its benefits for the entire Penn learning community. SCUE hopes that departments offering half-credit courses will be able to create dialogue around best teaching practices and will similarly provide resources for faculty or students who are designing new syllabi.

Content

Half-credit courses provide a unique forum for instructors to develop and teach content that is of particular interest to them. For example, a graduate student in Computer Science designed a programming language that is exclusively taught at Penn by the graduate student in the half-credit course model. Additionally, instructors can highlight their research interests in these courses, as sometimes broad survey courses may be difficult to link with more specific topics. Given that half-credit courses are commonly used for exploration, SCUE believes that sponsoring courses that cover a variety of topics, themes, and questions broadens horizons for both students and faculty.

Teaching

Half-credit courses allow graduate and undergraduate students to gain critical teaching experience in a supported setting. SCUE recommends that departments should partner with the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) when developing course syllabi and consider the ways in which half-

credit courses can be innovative forums for learning. A professor from the Computer Science department stressed the transformative role that her teaching experience played during her graduate studies and finds these courses to be a great way to gain this experience. The opportunity to combine research interests and teaching experience make half-credit courses unique spaces for intellectual collaboration.

Variation of Course

Along with introducing unique research and teaching methods, half-credit courses carry the flexibility to correspond with experiential learning, whether it be through an

international business course or a course that utilizes the myriad of resources in and around Philadelphia. Offering a greater breadth of these courses will allow more students to benefit from these experiences and find something that's most interesting to them. In SCUE's 2015 White Paper, SCUE discussed how harnessing the untapped potential of Philadelphia resources, like museums and cultural events, can supplement traditional teaching in the classroom. A half-credit course affords the instructor the flexibility to schedule off-site field trips as necessary or sponsor a trip over a university break.

IV. Obstacles Addressed

While there are many benefits to half-credit courses, SCUE acknowledges there are some obstacles to address as professors work with departments to expand their offerings. These obstacles arise from both the student and faculty perspective and include lack of knowledge about half-credit courses, logistical barriers to creating such courses, and increased teaching load on professors.

Knowledge about Courses

Although many students have reported positive experiences with half-credit courses, 58% of survey respondents had not enrolled in a half-credit course at Penn, and of those who had, many simply participated in half-credit courses such as mandatory labs or accompanying recitations. Many students are not aware these opportunities exist because they often are not well-publicized. Furthermore, even if a student is aware these courses exist, it is difficult to sign-up. Penn InTouch does not currently have a filter for half-credit courses, which has historically made it challenging for students to navigate the system. Moving forward, however, the reimplementation of Penn InTouch as a part of the NGSS project can address this issue, with the hopes that it would make it easier for students to enroll in half-credit offerings. Despite this, some half-credit courses start halfway through the semester, and these courses are not currently listed on Penn InTouch, making it more difficult for the student to discover the course and making the student responsible for seeking out an advisor to get enrolled. Along the same lines, many half-credit courses also do not appear on Penn InTouch because they were not finalized in time for advanced registration. In either case, students must find out about these courses in alternative ways. Addressing the difficulties of enrolling in half-credit courses may encourage students to pursue these classes.

Creating Courses & Logistics

The process for creating new courses is long and difficult and can take more than a year. Taking an idea, developing it

into a course, and then pursuing the requisite department and school approval is a serious undertaking, especially for faculty with busy schedules. However, SCUE believes the upfront administrative work is essential to help add new and exciting discourse to the intellectual community at Penn. Beyond the process of creating a course, it is also difficult to determine the quantity of material that constitutes a half-credit as opposed to a full credit. SCUE believes that through departmental collaboration, instructors can exchange feedback surrounding their experiences creating syllabi and teaching courses. CTL could also serve as a resource for instructors in developing and evaluating syllabi, as CTL has cross-departmental and cross-disciplinary experience. There is a certain degree of trial and error that inevitably takes place with new classes and half-credit courses are no exception. SCUE understands that creating a new course is difficult and that a lot of energy and effort are poured into creating these new structures. The addition of new topics and the potential for new learning experiences, however, makes half-credit courses a valuable addition to the undergraduate education.

Teaching Load

Departments have different guidelines concerning the number of credits that faculty teach each semester. Regardless of the exact number, teaching half-credit courses inevitably adds to the teaching load, something that many faculty may not have the luxury of doing. If faculty do have room to teach such courses, it is often just as much work to prepare for a half-credit course as it is for a full credit course. To overcome this, departments could seek to include more graduate and undergraduate students as instructors of half-credit courses, as these populations greatly benefit from the teaching exposure. However, on a broader level, half-credit courses present an opportunity to experiment with a new topic, try out a new teaching method, or genuinely pursue an area of study that is often left out of traditional courses. Although the logistics may feel challenging, the opportunities created truly have the potential to benefit the Penn community.

V. Summary

Status Quo

As seen in the results from the SCUE-administered survey, there is a growing need and interest among students and administered for half-credit courses. These offerings provide students the opportunity to explore engaging material and build relationships with professors while maintaining a manageable course load.

Purpose of Half-Credit Courses

Student Perspective

Half-credit courses allow students to learn in a formal setting about a subject which may or may not be in their major. Furthermore, half-credit courses allow for greater customization of course load, so students can add 0.5 CU instead of a whole CU to their class schedules. Lastly, students can take these courses for additional skill building and opportunities to explore topics outside of their area of expertise.

Professor Perspective

SCUE believes that half-credit courses allow professors to incorporate new content and further explore their individual research questions by making use of unique teaching methods and partnerships with graduate and undergraduate students. SCUE further believes that half credit courses can further provide the opportunity for professors to utilize the Penn community to its fullest and explore the city of Philadelphia through interactive field trips.

Obstacles Addressed

Knowledge on Courses

Due to the lack of a filter for 0.5 CU courses on Penn InTouch and the fact that many begin halfway through the semester, many students are unaware of half-credit class offerings and their registration details. Despite this, NGSS has plans to address the Penn InTouch issues with its latest update, and SCUE believes that the advising system can be more transparent in providing students with information regarding half-credit offerings each semester at the school and department level.

Creating Courses & Logistics

The process for creating new courses can be tedious and can require significant time and attention by professors and the administration. Despite this, SCUE believes that the energy spent pursuing new courses and the subsequent collaboration within departments is essential for bringing new and innovative offerings to students.

Teaching Load

A final concern for professors and faculty is often the teaching load associated with creating new courses, especially when there is no precedent for doing so. Although creating

half-credit courses can increase the workload for professors, help can be provided by graduate and undergraduate students who can aid with teaching these lower commitment courses.

Moving Forward

SCUE holds that increasing the frequency and variety of half-credit courses will provide students, professors, and departments the opportunity for academic exploration and flexibility. Half-credit courses are a useful avenue for professors to incorporate new content and experiences in the classroom, as well as to explore their research interests and analysis even further. Additionally, the survey data indicates that students are interested in taking half-credit courses to engage in multidisciplinary learning and skill-building. Given this mutual benefit, SCUE believes that professors and department heads play an essential role in promoting the growth of half-credit courses.

SCUE recommends the following actions:

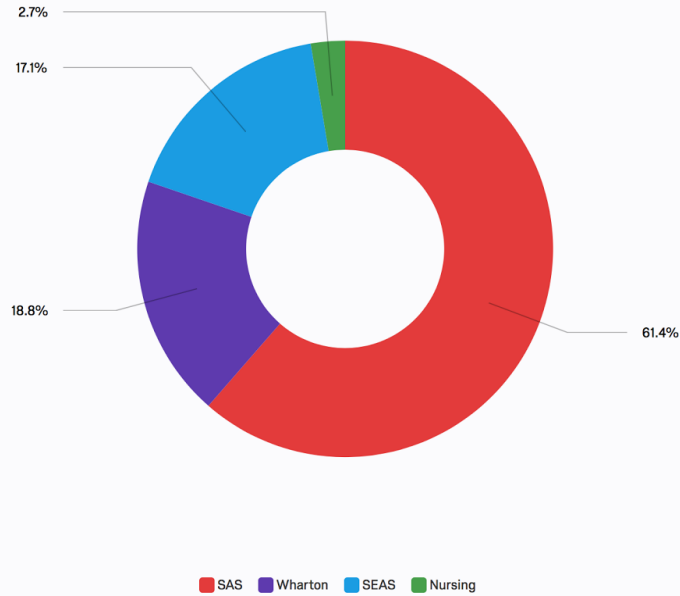
- Professors and faculty work in collaboration with their department heads to identify areas of interest for half-credit courses and further promote these classes.
- Departments collaborate with advising across the University to promote and market half-credit courses, especially prior to freshman year.
- As the new NGSS system is phased in, departments should address their needs or concerns about advertising their courses with the NGSS team.
- The Center for Teaching and Learning should continue to provide useful resources for faculty trying new teaching styles, something professors may experiment with in half-credit courses. Departments should encourage their teaching instructors to take advantage of CTL's resources.
- While half-credit courses provide a valuable platform for current faculty, graduate and undergraduate students also benefit from teaching such courses. Soliciting interested students and providing guidance to aid them in pursuing these teaching opportunities is beneficial for departments.
- Above all, SCUE is willing to work with departments to develop individualized paths for increasing the quantity and quality of half-credit courses.

SCUE is interested in hearing any input you may have in regards to this initiative to grow half-credit courses at Penn, and would be more than willing to guide you through the process of navigating the implementation of concrete action items or creating an individualized path for increasing the quantity and quality of half-credit courses. If you have any questions, comments, or initial interest, please feel free to email scuedolphin@gmail.com. Thank you!

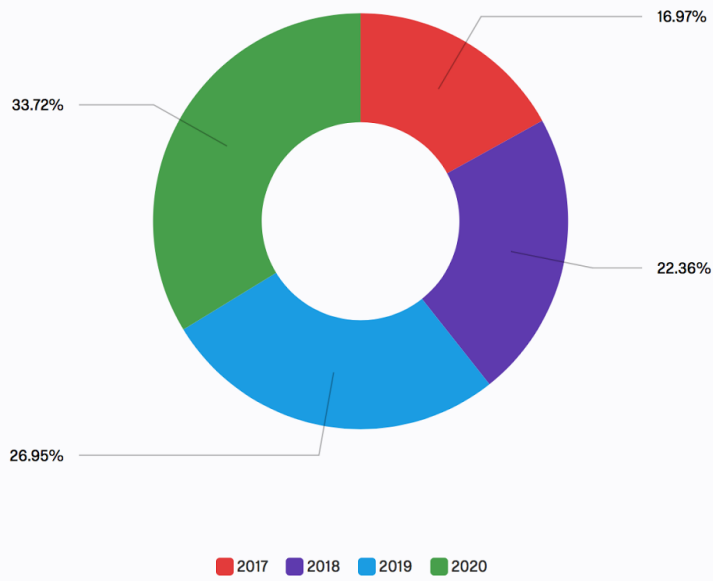
VI. Appendix of Survey Results

Survey Results

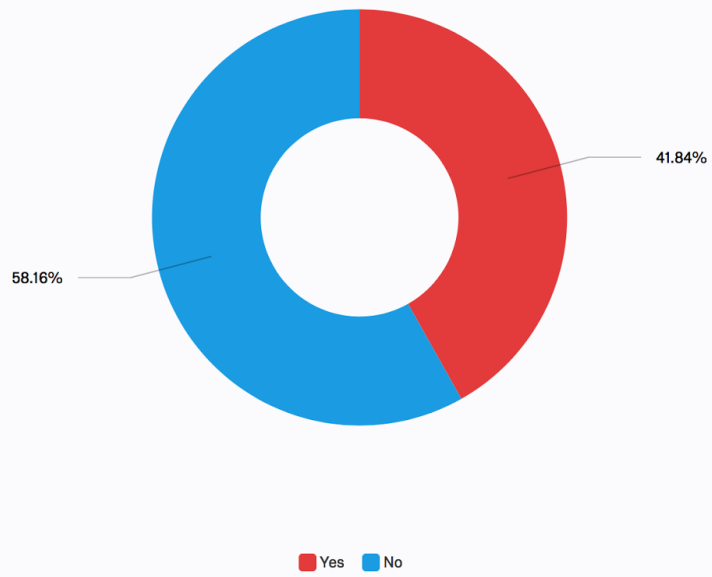
What school are you in?



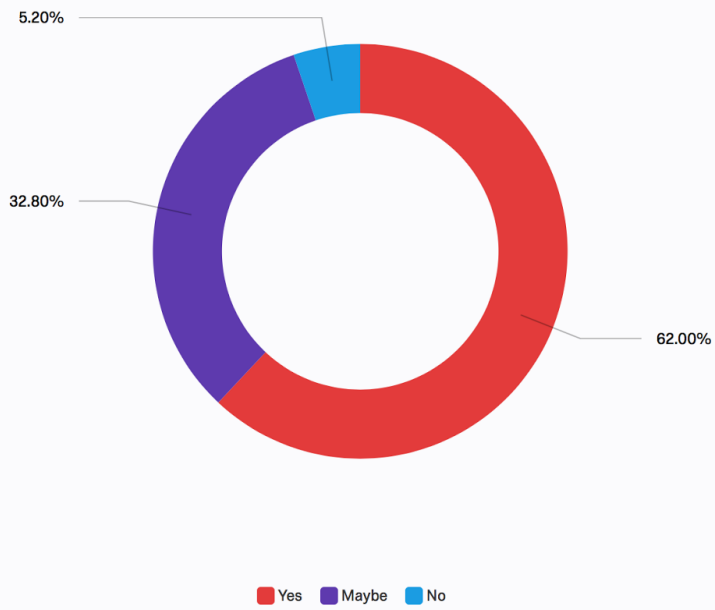
What year are you?



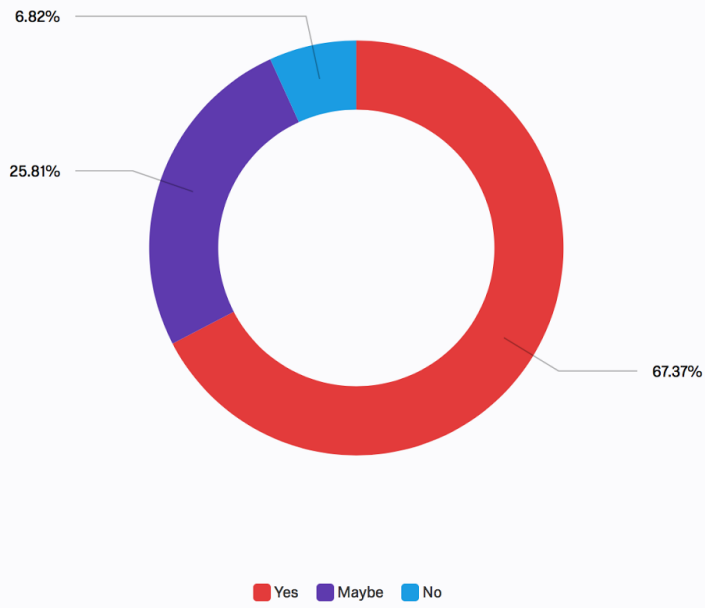
Have you taken a half-credit course?



Are you likely to take more half-credit classes?



Would you be interested in taking a half-credit course outside your school?



Have you ever wanted to take a half-credit course?

