Traditional final exams – supporting arguments:

1. Research suggests that material covered on final comprehensive exams is more often committed to long-term memory than material not covered on final exams. Reviewing the information through studying and test-taking strengthens memory. (Students who also take unit tests throughout the term often perform better on final exams.)

2. While unit tests (“spaced material”) provide the most effective method for learning specific content, comprehensive final exams are more effective in tying together concepts from the whole course (“massed material”), leading to a greater understanding of abstract and conceptual relationships.

3. Traditional exams are an “effective means of evaluating student mastery of course material” if the course content is derived from primarily objective data (e.g., exams are more commonly found in math classes than in writing classes). They provide a standard by which to assess the students’ knowledge and ability to work with course-specific content, as well as a means to determine whether students are meeting the desired outcomes of the course.


Additional Reading:


UCLA: http://dailybruin.com/2010/07/25/ despite_decrease_in_harvard_courses_traditional_finals_ucla_is_keeping_its_blue_books/


Bloom’s Taxonomy of Cognitive Levels - All can be assessed through traditional exams http://tep.uoregon.edu/resources/assessment/multiplechoicequestions/blooms.html

Traditional final exams – opposing arguments

1. "Teaching to the test.” Traditional exams are often content-based rather than competence-based. They often do not represent all of the desired outcomes for a course, instead focusing on details (facts) rather than course objectives (skills obtained, critical thinking, abstract concepts, etc.). Add to this that many students are grade-focused, and the result is potentially apathy toward final exams. http://chronicle.com/article/Stop-Telling-Students-to-Study/131622/

2. Frequent testing in place of a midterm/final model increases the amount of engaged learning time. Instead of studying the material for 2 days prior to a final exam, students spend more time with the material throughout the semester. In theory, this also means the students learn the material more thoroughly and receive higher grades. http://www.azcentral.com/arizonarepublic/news/articles/2010/05/11/20100511professors-giving-less-weight-final-exams.html?nclick_check=1

3. Traditional exams “kill learning diversity,” that is, they are unfair to students who do not learn best from repetition and memorization, and to students who are not “good test-takers”. Therefore they do not accurately measure the learning that actually occurred during the semester. http://kansan.com/opinion/2013/04/28/ouyang-university-exam-structure-hinders-students-achievement-chances/?print=26693026572

Additional Reading


Alternatives to the Traditional Final Exam: http://www1.umn.edu/ohr/teachlearn/resources/jit/jit-end/final/

Assessment as the Key to Effective Testing http://blog.bokcenter.harvard.edu/2012/02/08/key-terms-assessment/ ; http://blog.bokcenter.harvard.edu/category/assessing-student-learning/