GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY
AGENDA FOR THE SPECIAL FACULTY SENATE MEETING
MARCH 24, 2020
3:00 – 4:15 pm
Electronic Meeting*

Purpose of the Meeting

The purpose of this meeting is to deliberate and vote on proposed grading policy changes for Spring 2020 based on information provided by the administration and the Faculty Senate Academic Policies Committee.

Only business stipulated in the call to the special meeting may be transacted.

I. Call to Order

II. Report from Academic Policies Committee and Discussion

III. Adjournment

* WebEx Meeting Information

Meeting link: https://gmu.webex.com/gmu/j.php?MTID=mdec76c3b8488f4c31125ccfd1d499c0d

Meeting number:
614 616 744

Join by video system
Dial 614616744@gmu.webex.com
You can also dial 173.243.2.68 and enter your meeting number.

Join by phone
+1-415-655-0003 US Toll
+1-202-860-2110 United States Toll (Washington D.C.)
Access code: 614 616 744

Live captioning will be provided by the Office of Disability Services.
Response to Global Health Emergency
Emergency Grading Accommodations
George Mason University
March 25, 2020

Due to the decision to enact social distancing following the CDC recommendations related to the novel coronavirus, all face-to-face classes have been converted to virtual instruction for Spring 2020. This decision may negatively affect faculty and students who experience technical difficulties or for whom the virtual instruction creates a hardship. It may also prove difficult for instructors to accurately or fairly assess the learning outcomes of students in their classes. As a result of these concerns, and understanding that these are extraordinary circumstances, the university will provide alternate grading options. The administration presented several options to the Faculty Senate. The Academic Policies Committee solicited faculty feedback concerning the options, and after consideration is recommending the Faculty Senate choose one of the two options below. Once approved, the emergency grading accommodation goes into place on March 25, 2020 and will be active for the Spring 2020 semester only (at this time) to address the global health pandemic. The Committee is also recommending a change in policy around Incomplete grades for Spring 2020 courses.

Both options involve new definitions for traditional grades for this semester only. The two options presented are accompanied by pro and con statements contributed by faculty.

Specific Grading Categories
A transcript notation for Spring 2020 with grade definitions will be as follows:

XC – Credit for course equivalent to a C or better
a. Student receives credit for the course.
b. Grade does not calculate into the GPA.
c. Grade meets the C or better standards for pre-requisites/progress to degree.

XD – Credit for course equivalent to a C– or D
a. Student receives credit for the course.
b. Grade does not calculate into the GPA.

XN – Equivalent to a failing grade (F) in the course
a. No credit earned for course.
b. Grade does not calculate into the GPA.
Credit/Non-Credit Grades

For Undergraduates: As of March 25, 2020, Mason will expand the grading categories to include Credit/Non-credit grades for undergraduate students. If Option 1 is chosen, undergraduates will have until at least May 11, 2020 to choose the Credit/Non-credit option for undergraduate courses (100-400 level) they are registered in the Spring 2020 semester. This deadline may be extended by the University if circumstances warrant. Students, including undergraduates, enrolled in cohort sections or special programs will follow the decisions of their professional school or of the Graduate School about which courses, if any, are eligible for the credit/non-credit option.

For Graduate Students/Law School/Cohort Programs: Graduate programs may select specific graduate courses that are eligible for Credit/Non-Credit declaration by April 1, 2020. For courses not selected, graduate students shall have the option to request a change in one or more of their courses to this new grading declaration. All requests will have to be submitted by May 11, 2020, and will be subject to their academic unit’s approval based on the following parameter: the student must provide a compelling reason why their academic success has been affected by the changes triggered by the Coronavirus/COVID-19.

How this Accommodation Applies to Undergraduate Students

- All courses will be graded as normal (letter grades). Undergraduates can choose to make their courses credit/non-credit for the Spring 2020 semester except for graduate or professional school courses, which can be taken as credit/non-credit only when deemed appropriate by the program or school Dean.
  - Ex. An undergraduate in the College of Education and Human Development would need to confer with their Dean or designee to validate whether an education course can be placed on credit/non-credit due to licensure concerns.
- A grade of XC, XD will not be factored into the GPA; however, these courses will count towards earned semester credit hours.
- Courses graded as XC and XD under this exception during Spring 2020 will count towards applicable curricular, major, continuation, and graduation requirements.
- For students who opt for credit/non-credit grading, faculty members will be aware of students who choose this option when submitting final grades.
- Given this grading shift, the Dean’s List is suspended for the Spring 2020 semester.
- George Mason University will include a transcript note on all academic records, regardless of grading basis, indicating the extraordinary circumstances of the global public health emergency during Spring 2020.
Options presented to the Faculty Senate:

**Option 1:** Students registered in A-F graded courses decide on a course-by-course basis whether they want to receive a letter grade in the class or if they will receive an alternative grade as noted above. The default selection if no action is taken by the student will be A-F grading. To the extent practicable, faculty will submit A-F grades, which will then be converted by the Registrar to alternative grades.

**Pros:**
- Empowers students to make a decision and exert ownership over their academic record.
- Rewards students who have invested effort into their spring courses. Motivates students to continue to do their best work.
- If the instructor does not know of the student's declaration, the grading in the class can be consistent. Students registered and paid for classes with the expectation of getting an A-F grade and some may feel that a “contract” between then and the university has been broken if they are not given the choice.
- Some programs have a minimum GPA requirement for graduation. Some students may be relying on their performance in these last few courses for raising their GPA to graduate.

**Cons:**
- Potentially significant administrative burden.
- Burdens faculty by not having a consistent grading system within the same class. Disadvantages students with poor Internet connectivity, lives especially disrupted by the pandemic, or trouble learning in an online environment.
- Students can decide at the last minute to not receive A-F grade, knowing they might get a C, for example. Faculty who are already stressed by the change in format will put effort into devising assignments for nuanced assessment, only to have that effort wasted as poor-performing students opt out.
- Accurate determination of grades will be especially challenging; it is not reasonable to expect instructors to be able to make the usual distinctions required in a letter grade system.
- Giving students a letter grade 'opt in' choice would in fact lead to increased stress and anxiety for many students. E.g., some students would feel pressured to opt in for a letter grade because not doing so would be interpreted to mean that their performance was not strong.
**Option 2:** The university implements alternative grading for all spring 2020 classes that had not been graded by March 9, 2020. All classes would move to the Credit/Non-Credit grading plan.

**Pros:**
- Least complicated from an administrative standpoint.
- Removes the burden on faculty to ensure academic integrity, especially in large classes where exams are the only assessment option.
- All classes for all students will have these grades for Spring 2020 so transcripts will be more consistent.

**Cons:**
- May disadvantage students who were performing at a high level and who still expected to receive high grades for the semester.
- May demotivate students (and instructors) from adhering to rigorous academic standards and pursuit.
- Could present problems to students who want to transfer.
- Violates the “terms” of the “grading contract” that the student made with the university when registering and paying for the course.
- We do not know how professional/graduate schools will approach these grades in the future and we might be disadvantaging our students in an already competitive field (such as med school/ law school particularly).

**Option 3:** Instructors teaching A-F graded sections decide on a section-by-section basis whether the students registered in the section should receive letter grades or Credit/Non-Credit grades. The instructor has until the last day of the class to make the declaration with the Office of the University Registrar. The default selection if no action is taken by the instructor will be A-F grading.

This option has been removed for consideration by the Academic Policies committee based on the following reasons:

- Disadvantages students with poor Internet connectivity, lives especially disrupted by the pandemic, or trouble learning in an online environment.
- Instructors might make the decision based more on their own personal feelings without considering what would be best for the students.
- Different students have different life circumstances and this option does not take that into consideration.
- Most faculty do not want to be the one to make the choice for their class.
- Different sections of the same course could be graded differently, by instructor choice. It is undesirable that unit administrators make this choice for faculty in some units.
- It has not been selected by peer universities, and few if any Mason faculty expressed support for it.
Incomplete Grades
Incomplete grades (I) may be given to students who are passing a course but who may be unable to complete scheduled coursework by the end of the semester due to extenuating circumstances. Instructors should be flexible in awarding Incompletes if the student requires additional time to finish coursework. The deadline for completing work related to an Incomplete grade received in Spring 2020 should be extended to the end of the Fall 2020 semester. The current deadline for completing work for the spring semester is October 23rd, 2020.