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

Senators present: Alan Abramson, Dominique Banville, Christine Barthold, Sonia Ben Ouagham-Gormley, Jim Bennett, Alok Berry, Lisa Billingham, Virginia Blair, Melissa Broeckelman-Post, Meagan Call-Cummings, Carol Cleaveland, James Conant Richard Craig, Rick Davis, Shannon Davis, Betsy DeMulder, Stephanie Dodman, Christy Esposito-Smythers, Daniel Garrison, Tamara Harvey, Anne Holton, Dimitrios Ioannou, Aditya Johri, Brett Josephson, Larry Kerschberg, Timothy Leslie, Kumar Mehta, Daniel Menascé, Linda Monson, Robert Pasnak, Daniel Polsby, Keith Renshaw, Pierre Rodgers, Esperanza Roman-Mendoza, Catherine Sausville, Zachary Schrag, Joseph Scimecca, Solon Simmons, Suzanne Slayden, Donglian Sun, Kun Sun, Rebecca Sutter, Susan Trencher, David Wong, Andy Yao, John Zenelis, Jie Zhang.


Visitors present: Kristin Amaya, Administrative Assistant/Program Coordinator, Provost Office; Crystal Anderson, Assistant Director, Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning; Laurence Bray, Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education; Corbin, Cerny, Student; Kim Ford, Director of Personnel Operations, Provost Office; Donna Fox, Associate Dean, Student Affairs and Special Programs, College of Science; Christina Frasson, Videotechnology Specialist, Enterprise Collaboration, Information Technology Services; Jennifer Hathaway, Assistant Professor, Education; Camden Layton. President, Student Government; Doug McKenna, University Registrar; Janette Muir, Associate Provost for Academic Initiatives and Services; Cathleen Scully, Assistant Professor, School of Nursing; Jennifer Stevens, Team Lead, Arts and Humanities, University Libraries; Elizabeth Woodley, University Ethics Officer and Policy Manager, Compliance, Diversity and Ethics. Note: the list of visitors is our best manual tracking, and likely to be incomplete.

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: Chair Shannon Davis called the meeting to order at 3:02 p.m. She acknowledged that everyone is going through a lot of changes, all at the same time, and
thanked everyone for being at the meeting. She thanked everyone for their patience. Having received 88 emails before the meeting, she acknowledged that a large number of students are interested in, and paying attention to, the conversation that the Faculty Senate is having today. The Academic Policies Committee has worked hard over the last few days to prepare for this meeting in a very short order. They have engaged effort on faculty’s behalf and on behalf of the students. She thanked them for their work.

II. Report from Academic Policies Committee and Discussion

Incomplete Grades - Motion from the Academic Policies Committee

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.

The motion was approved.

Introductory remarks – Suzanne Slayden, Chair

These are extraordinary times. It is necessary to provide accommodations to students in terms of the grades they will receive this semester. There are several pathways – and after looking at the possibilities, narrowing them down, refining our thoughts, the committee has come up with specific grading categories. They depend on our unique way, our own way, of assigning what we call unsatisfactory grades. Recognizing for most of us, a C or better is necessary to act as a prerequisite. All of these specific grading categories are preceded by the letter X. Grade of (C to A+) would receive a grade of XC on the transcript. Grade of C‐ and D, are considered passing but unsatisfactory, would receive grade of XD on the transcript. Finally, F would receive a grade of XN on the transcript. N denotes no credit will be given for the course.

The presented options pertain only to undergraduate students who are not enrolled in special programs or courses. Graduate students have special considerations, so Graduate Council will work on deciding which courses might be eligible for this type of grading. Programs that are special cohort programs or contract, the decision will be made by the individual or academic unit in charge.

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.
For Graduate Students/Law School/Cohort Programs:

[As proposed]
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.

[As amended and approved]
Students, including undergraduates, enrolled in cohort sections or special programs will follow the decisions of their professional school or of the unit about which courses, if any, are eligible for the credit/non-credit option. Nothing herein shall apply to the Law School, which will separately determine the grading policies for the courses offered in the Law School. 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

- 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.

This was a great discussion point in the committee about whether faculty members would know if they opted in or out, in which case the faculty members would not know ahead of time what students opted to do. Later on it will say, not quite as strong word as will, but that’s what that means.

- Given this grading shift, the Dean’s List is suspended for the Spring 2020 semester.
No Dean’s List because we don’t have the proper grades to calculate.

- 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.

Everybody in the world is going through what we’re going through. So probably every transcript is going to note what has gone on should anyone ever forget that the grades might be an anomaly. We will have a notation on our transcripts.

After considering pros and cons, we’re submitting two options, the first one you see here. Students registered in courses graded A through F decide if they want to receive a traditional letter grade or receive the alternate letter grade we just talked about. If they do not make a selection, they are graded on the A to F scale. If it is practical, the registrar will allow us to submit A through F grades which will then be converted. We heard from so many people and so many good reasons and bad reasons not to do one option over the other.

**Options presented to the Faculty Senate:**

**Option 1:**  
*As proposed*  
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

*As amended and approved*  
Each student registered in A-F graded courses decides individually, 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, and for students who opt into alternative grading, the submitted grade would 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. But it is something that we have some capability around.
• Students registered and paid for classes with the expectation of getting an A-F grade and some may feel that a “contract” between them 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.

The committee was offered the third option that instructors make this choice. With the pros and cons, the cons far outweighed the pros. The committee also found that few, if any, faculty expressed any support for this option.

That concluded the Academic Policies report.

Chair Shannon Davis: Thanked the committee for its hard work. She invited -- University Registrar Dr. Doug McKenna, and Associate Provost Janette Muir, to share their thoughts with the faculty senate.

McKenna: One of the concerns expressed was whether we are able to mask the grade type. Instructors should not necessarily know which of their students have elected the grading scheme in advance of calculating their grades. The university is working on identifying feasibility of this and implementing it. Currently, there is a process in place that converts the SN and SA grades to F. The registrar’s office is looking at retooling that process to report A through F. Both proposals are doable, and the processes can be in place well in advance of
when grades are submitted.

Associate Provost Muir: Note that the core of the discussion is whether it the student’s choice or university’s choice to go to this credit/non-credit option? If it is clear there are clear exemptions for other programs, then it should be okay. She acknowledged Suzanne for her hard work in sifting through suggestions, feedback and crafting these options for discussion. She also acknowledged Chair Shannon Davis for her hard work and collaborative engagement in helping university adapt to the changes.

Senator expressed importance of using electronic tools and communicating with students to help them best understand where they stand in a course to make a meaningful decision.

Senator Daniel Polsby acknowledged the cohesiveness of the proposal brought forward by Suzanne especially considering the short time-frame and the circumstances. He proposed a friendly amendment to the second paragraph on page three:

To insert -- “Nothing herein shall apply to the Law School, which will separately determine the grading policies for the courses offered in the Law School.”

[Amended Proposal to read]

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. Nothing herein shall apply to the Law School, which will separately determine the grading policies for the courses offered in the Law School. 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.

The motion was seconded. Associate Provost Muir confirmed this is not problematic that the Law School have different grading standard.

The amendment was approved.

Senator: Raised concern specifically about the line -- “This deadline may be extended by the University if circumstances warrant.” Suggested that it be amended to -- “extended by the University if circumstances warrant as long as the date is before the final exam.”

Senator Slayden: The committee discussed this, and with many different dates currently being discussed regarding adjusting the calendar this was intentional language. As the university thinks through and adjusts the calendar then it can identify an ideal time for a deadline. If it is so desired, the committee can come back to the Senate with that but for
now she expressed reservation about changes.

Follow up: Students should make decision based on information excluding the final exam grades.

Senator Slayden: We understand that, and that’s committee’s thinking and hope also. However, if the situation worsens or for other reasons semester is further delayed -- it is not a good idea to impose a firm deadline at the current time.

Senator: Expressed that there are merits to whether it is appropriate to only let students decide based only on the semester and including or excluding the final exam. Currently, our goal is to provide some clarity on options moving forward and we have at least two scheduled meetings between now and that date. We could come back at a later time to address that.

Associate Provost Muir: As we’re dealing with these academic policies, we’re trying to align as much as we can with our current policy structures, rather than trying to create new things. Where we can work within is the best and adapting to this circumstance. If we were in a regular semester, we would not be asking or letting students decide after a final how they want their grade done. That’s never anything we have done before. Under these circumstances we know faculty are working hard to offer the best they can. We don’t want this to get held up, we have every intention to have these things resolved before finals or degree conferrals.

Senator: Expressed value of clarity to both students and instructors on grading as well as standards for grading. That would be good reason to allow students to make the decision even after finals are over.

Senator: Expressed concern about perception of grades as XC and in future getting confused with C plus an X. Offered alternative suggestions.

Senator Slayden: Agreed but emphasized that the specifics of the notations adopted are not important at the current moment. Also clarified that all transcripts will contain definitions of whatever notations are finally adopted to reflect those categories.

A Senator from the School of Nursing noted for us, the XC would be problematic since 70 is not a passing grade. Classes must have at least a C+ to be considered passing. Nursing would need to have some sort of change.

Another senator expressed that such nuances were going to be a problem in several areas. Almost every course has a prerequisite. The way it stands now we will have to manually admit every student. By the time we finish factoring everybody’s concerns, we will be back to an A+ through F- scale.
Senator: There are going to be different kinds of caveats across different programs.

There was continuing discussion about deadlines adopted by various other universities. Examples were cited for universities that adopted deadlines before final exams and those that have adopted deadlines after the final exams. Concerns associated with creating administrative nightmare were also raised. Points were also raised about clear and repeated communication to the students about details that are finally adopted.

Chair Davis: Noted that she would prefer to hear pros and cons between options unless senators were ready to move to a vote. She also reminded senators that these options were only applicable to students currently at the Fairfax/Science and Technology/Arlington campuses and not applicable to Mason Korea.

Senator: proposed a small edit: In the For Graduate Students/Law School/Cohort Programs paragraph, the third line:

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.

Senator noted there is not necessarily a graduate school in all colleges or units. Suggested considering that we leave the decision to the professional school or of the unit administering the course.

Senator Lisa Billingham is moderating a chat and thanks everyone for their thoughtful comments. Summarizing the chat and comments:

- Making sure we are considering the language we just spoke about to define “unit” as school/college/department or programs
- Relayed a question: If the Law School can have some discretion, is it possible for other colleges or units to also have similar discretion?
- Regarding the May 11th deadline, she quoted “We are unsure how individual circumstances will change going forward; increases stress on people deciding and grading. This is about technology and access. We (and the students) may not realize or foresee those constraints today.

Senator: Does the course by course decision mean the majority of students make a decision?

Chair Davis: The interpretation here is that each student will make a unique decision in each course only for themselves in that course. If they are taking your course, they may choose a letter grade; if they are taking my class, they may choose the alternative grading scale. Whatever grading scheme they choose and whatever grade they get would be converted by the Registrar.

Follow up: So students who are doing well and have the likelihood of getting an A, they want to go on the A through F scale. It shows up on their transcript if we choose Option 1.
Senator: Expressed concern regarding clarity of the deadline. The students can make the decision up to the last day of classes, which would mean May 11th. But with extension does that mean that they may be able to make a decision later?

Chair Davis: This is a placeholder for now to get us to move forward. If there is a need again, the deadline may be extended by the University. The expectation is that by at least May 11, students would be able to choose the credit/non-credit option.

Senator Slayden: Confirmed Chair Davis’s interpretation, emphasizing that the committee wanted to be as flexible as possible. We do not know the circumstances the University may find themselves in. This could apply to individual students or cohort students. It is the reasoning for the language.

Senator: Asked why the language cannot be changed to say, “until the last day of classes”? Nothing that with change of circumstances the wording to provide the necessary flexibility.

Chair Davis: Indicated her preference to postpone the discussion over nuances of the date until voting has been completed to select Option 1 or Option 2.

Senator: Has a question about the last phrase: “which will then be converted by the registrar to alternate grades.” This implies regardless of what the student chooses, the grade is going to be converted to this other classification system; the action by them, automatically given.

Senator Slayden: Committee added that later after talking to the Registrar and after they make a choice to opt out for credit/no-credit. Faculty would submit grade A to F. The Registrar would then convert it, the last sentence should be default action is regular grading.

Doug McKenna: That is the intent of the last sentence about how faculty are recording grades or submitting grades, not having to do with the student’s grade scheme. Students opt in and the goal is for faculty to consistently only report A through F grades. Faculty will not know which students have selected the alternate grade scheme.

Chair Davis: Reconfirmed -- All faculty will submit A through F grades. If the student opted in, the Registrar’s Office would convert the grade to the alternate grade. Is that correct?

Doug McKenna: Yes, that is correct.

Senator: Commented on Option 1. This course by course designation to me seems to be a little odd. There is this variability that students will have access and living under extraordinary circumstances right now. Why not have a student select to have an option and apply to all of the courses not individually to each course? It seems a burden to do course-by-course.
Senator Slayden: Clarified that there is variability between faculty’s preparedness to deliver online, as well as the differing nature of the courses being taken by the students. For this reason, course by course option for students was considered appropriate.

Chair Davis: Believes that language in Option 1 can be clarified. Beyond that, invited any additional discussion on Option 1 versus Option 2?

Senator: Commented on Option 2 that should university make this decision for the students - - Students who receive tuition reimbursement from their employer may be adversely impact because it is often based on the grade in the course.

A motion was made and seconded to close debate and vote.

Poll was conducted on WebEx with specific request for only Faculty Senators to vote. The tally of votes exceeded number of senators and indicated that it was not a valid poll.

Chair Davis announced that the poll would be conducted using Qualtrics, and distributed only to Faculty Senators who participated in the meeting. The poll would be electronic version of paper voting in face to face meetings. The poll will be conducted soon after the meeting and results announced as quickly as possible.

Chair Davis returned discussion to the language of the proposals. First there was the language of unit versus graduate school. The suggestion undergraduate students completing special programs will follow the decisions of the professional school, or in this case, because we don’t have graduate schools, college or how about college or school about which courses if any are eligible for the credit/non-credit option.

Senator: The suggestion was replace “graduate school” with “unit’. A motion was made and seconded to change “graduate school” to “unit”. The motion passed.

Language proposed by Doug McKenna: “to the extent practicable, faculty will submit A through F grades, and for students who opt into alternative grading, the submitted grade would be converted by the registrar to alternate grading.” The amendment was seconded.

Discussion on the amendment:
Senator: What is meant by “to the extent practicable”? Doug McKenna: Because of technical challenges – the goal is to enable all faculty to submit A through F grades and not worry about if students have opted into an alternative grade scheme.

The was follow up discussion and clarification comments on various possibilities and outcomes. Doug McKenna answered the concerns regarding how students would indicate their preference, how the deadlines will be enforced and how the conversion would take place.

Chair Davis reiterated Doug’s earlier statement there was a desire for the choice of grading
scheme to be a decision between the registrar’s office and the student, not with the faculty member. The goal was for faculty not to know what was chosen

There were additional comments regarding:
- Grading scheme choice being course-by-course as opposed to all courses.
- Implications, if technologically the conversion from A-F to alternative was not practicable by automated means.

Senator made a suggestion to make the first sentence more specific?
Change from “students registered in” to “students individually make the choice”

The amendment was approved with one “no” vote.

With additional discussion on refining the language and punctuation, it was decided to further refine the language to provide greater clarity.

Combined suggestions were proposed and seconded.
The amendment passed.

Chair Davis: On question of refining the language around deadline, Chair Davis noted that there are three more meetings scheduled in the month of April. This would give the Academic Policies Committee some time to spend with the Registrar’s Office thinking through what the possibilities could be for the deadline. It would also give the university community opportunity to provide feedback. These can be brought back to the Senate for discussion about the deadlines.

III. Adjournment: The meeting adjourned at 4:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Kumar Mehta
Secretary