GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY
MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL FACULTY SENATE MEETING
NOVEMBER 2, 2020
Electronic Meeting 3:00 – 4:15 pm


Visitors: Julia Adams (Adjunct Faculty – UNIV 100), Faras Ali (Student), LaShonda Anthony (Director, Academic Integrity); Badar Ashfaq (Student), Kaveh Akhavan Astaneh (Student), Daniel Behrooz (Student), Colin Billings, (Student Senate Liaison), Andrew Bunting (Executive Director, Enrollment Services); Tom Butler (Senior Associate Registrar), James Casey (Assoc. Director, Virginia Serious Games, Assistant Professor, Computer Game Design, CVP), Vita Chalk (Associate Dean, Undergraduate Affairs (CHSS)), Christopher Costa (Adjunct Faculty, Antonin Scalia Law School), Matthew DeSantis (Executive Director, Institutional Effectiveness, OIEP), Angela Detlev (Assistant Provost, Institutional Research, OIEP), Julio Diaz (Office Manager, University Life), Cynthia Fuchs (Interim Director, CVPA), Mohamed Gebril (Assistant Professor, Cyber Security Engineering, Volgenau School of Engineering), Fred Geldon (Adjunct Professor/Computer Science Department); Fatou Diouf (Term Assistant Professor – ISOM), Renate Guilford (Associate Provost for Academic Administration), Tawhid Hannan (Student), Matthew Hicks (Director, Information Technology and Security, College of Health and Human Services), Michael Hieb (Research Associate Professor, C41 and Cyber Center, VSE); Kimberly Hoffman (Lead Science and Technology Team and Mercer Library, University Libraries), Caitlin Horan (Director of Graduate Academic Services, School of Business), Ayham Ishtaiwi (Student), Devon Johnson (Associate Professor, Criminology, Law and Society), Emily Johnson (Academic Advisor, Health Administration and Policy, College of Health and Human Services), Lisa Kahn (Associate Dean for Research/Graduate Studies, CVPA), Ibrahim Kargbo (Academic Advisor, Adjunct Instructor); Niha Kazmi (Undergraduate Student, School of Business); Minhyuk Ko (Student), Laura Kosoglu (Associate Department Chair and Associate Professor / Civil and Environmental Engineering Department); Misty Krell (Director of Academic Affairs, School of Integrative Studies), Nicholas Kremposky, Student; Caitlyn Largent, Jaime Lester (Associate Dean, CHSS), Jocelyn Lewis (Head, Resource Acquisition, University Libraries), Kim MacVaugh (Librarians Council Secretary, University Libraries), Igor Mazin, (Faculty Representative to the Information Technology Governance Group); Doug McKenna, University Registrar: Theodore Mims (Student), Uthra Mk, Janette Muir (Associate Provost, Academic Initiatives and Services), Bobbi Nelson (Assistant Director, Transfer Credit Articulation, Admissions), Amanda Ogisi (Associate Director, Academic Integrity), Eunkyoung Park (Director of Assessment and Planning, University Life), John Phaup (Adjunct, Schar School of Policy and Government), Christy Pichichero (Associate Professor of French and History), Star Pierre (Student), Solan Rahali (Student),
Purpose of the Meeting

The purpose of this meeting is to discuss and prepare to vote (by Qualtrics following the meeting) on possible alternative grading options for the Fall 2020 semester.

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.

II. Discussion of Possible Alternative Grading Options for Fall 2020

Chair Shannon Davis thanked senators and guests in attendance, and noted that special meeting can only include conversation around the item that was listed on the agenda:

The purpose of this meeting is just to discuss and prepare to vote (by Qualtrics following the meeting) on possible alternative grading options for the fall 2020 semester. Only business stipulated in the call to the special meeting may be transacted. Therefore, any discussion that we have today, any votes that we may take during this meeting must be connected to the call to this specific meeting, which is to focus in on grading options for the fall 2020 semester.

Chair Davis noted relevant related developments with the rationale presented: a) the resolution passed by the student senate, b) adoption of similar policies by other academic institutions in the Commonwealth, and c) concerns communicated by several students to her, to University Life, and to other faculty.

A set of options were proposed by the Academic Policies Committee below:
Background Information on Alternative Grade Mode Discussion

The administration has asked the Faculty Senate to consider approving an alternative grading policy for this semester, Fall 2020. Several options were discussed by the administration and the Faculty Senate Academic Policies Committee.

The Faculty Senate Academic Policies Committee proposes that the Faculty Senate discuss and vote (by Qualtrics following the meeting) on the following two grading options for Fall, 2020. (Note: the options do not extend to Spring, 2021.) There is a brief rationale accompanying each option.

Option 1: **Keep the current traditional grading system.**

*Rationale:* The university has not had significant disruptions or covid outbreaks; faculty designed courses for the previously-announced delivery modes this semester; special grades beyond the original emergency could impact student’s professional goals; we are going to live in a disrupted world for a while and this is the new normal; mental health experts recommend consistency for troubled students. This option already affords students the opportunity to request S/NC grading on some coursework.

Option 2: **Employ the alternative grade mode used in Spring 2020 for Fall 2020**

*Rationale:* Representing the student body, the Student Senate\(^1\) has requested this option; high levels of stress, anxiety, concern for overall well-being, and student’s concerns about their ability to be successful are being reported by those who work closely with our students – including members of the faculty, advisors and coaches, University Life staff, as well as others in student serving units; many other institutions are considering or have adopted an alternative grading approach. As in Spring 2020, students would again be able to choose the alternative grade mode without that decision being noted by the instructor.

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\(^1\) On October 15, 2020, the Student Senate passed a resolution (R#6) stating the following:

"**Therefore, be it resolved**, that the Student Senate of George Mason University, being a representative body tasked with representing student interests, gives its full faith and support to the proposal to adopt an alternative grade system option for the Fall 2020 semester, and encourages the administration of George Mason University to be aware of and act on these concerns through the implementation of such a system; and

**Therefore, be it further resolved**, that the Student Senate of George Mason University calls upon the Faculty Senate and the Office of the Provost of George Mason University to accept the student proposal for the adoption of an alternative grading system for the Fall 2020 semester."
- 15.5% of total undergraduate grades were alternate grades.
- 37,217 students received a grade and of those students almost 8,700 selected an alternate grade mode which means approx. 23% of students selected at least one of their courses to be in alternate grade mode.
- 8,328 CRNs were graded courses; approx. 49% of all graded CRNs had at least one student who selected an alternate grade mode.
- Approx. 2,400 students changed their minds and switched back to regular grade mode. These are students who saw what their grade was going to be and decided to move away from alternative grade mode. 2,434 students changed 6,415 grades.
Discussion:

- Several senators shared summary of feedback and preferences expressed by their colleagues in different colleges/schools. In general, respondents expressed split preference for the options 1 and 2.
- Question was raised regarding motivations for departure from traditional grading system that resumed in Summer 2020.
  - Provost Ginsberg shared that similar conversations are ongoing at other universities with some having already made decisions to provide student alternative to traditional grading system. He noted that the unprecedented circumstances have also impacted faculty who have been granted various accommodations -- extension on tenure-clock and annual evaluation. Students are similarly experiencing stresses and have requested consideration.
- Several Senators shared student experiences and expressed the need to recognize the extraordinary circumstances by providing option for alternative grading (Option 2).
- It was clarified that the proposal applies only to undergraduate students and programs. Senator suggested amending the proposal to make this explicit.
- Some senators expressed support for Option 1
  - Summer 2020 used traditional grading system and did not have an option
  - Fall 2020 is already underway with students having had adequate time to make informed decisions before beginning of the semester.
- Senator raised the need to discuss long-term implications of using alternative grading implications.
- Senator noted the need to amend the motion to restrict it in cases honor code referrals. The amendment offered was:
  "Students whose grades are impacted by an honor code referral cannot employ the alternate grading policy to adjust their transcript regarding the Honor Code referral."
  - LaShonda Anthony, Director of Office of Academic Integrity
    - The need for explicit clarity because a large number of referrals are made towards the end of the semester and final decisions on these cases are made much later.
    - Clarity on if academic departments can override honor code sanction.
- Senator noted that the faculty opinion is much more split than Spring 2020 and varies by School/College. Senator suggested potentially amending to allow each school/college to consider adoption of alternative grading system. The suggestion was deemed unworkable and unfair by registrar.
- Senator noted that Option 2 does not impose alternative grading on all. Instead, the choice is for each individual student.
- Senator noted inequality in access to adequate computing and bandwidth for our students as a strong reason to support Option 2.

Motion was made to adopt Option 2 and seconded.

Chair Davis opened discussion on adoption of Option 2 as stated.

Amendments and Discussion:
• Amendment was suggested to specify that the option only applies to undergraduate students. Following discussion on the amendment, motion was made and seconded to close discussion and vote on the amendment as follows.

   "Note that it only applies to undergraduate students."

   The motion was approved. The amendment passed by voice vote.

• Amendment was suggested to specify timeframe for making the choice. Following discussion on the amendment wording and adequacy of timeframe, motion was made and seconded to close discussion and vote on the amendment as follows.

   "Allow students to make their determination no later than first day of Spring 2021 classes."

   The motion was approved. The amendment passed by voice vote.

• Amendment was suggested to make it available retroactively to students whose Fall 2020 classes may have already concluded. Following discussion on the amendment, motion was made and seconded to close discussion and vote on the amendment as follows.

   "Be retroactively available to students for Fall 2020 classes that have already concluded."

   The motion was approved. The amendment passed by voice vote.

• Amendment was suggested to except availability of alternative grading in honor code cases. "Students whose grades are impacted by an honor code referral cannot employ the alternate grading policy to adjust their transcript regarding the Honor Code referral". The amendment passes.

   Motion was made to postpone consideration of the motion until the next meeting on Wednesday, November 4. The motion was seconded.

   Discussion: Senators expressed need for additional time to discuss and their need to tend to their classes starting at 4:30 pm.

   The motion was brought to the floor for vote. After two rounds of voting, where the first vote was a tie. The second vote -

   - 21 voted to postpone until next meeting on November 4
   - 17 opposed postponing until next meeting on November 4

   Motion to continue discussion of the of the motion on the floor passed. Chair Shannon Davis thanked all Senators for their patience.

III. Adjournment: The meeting adjourned at 4:26 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Kumar Mehta
Secretary

(See following page for motion as amended)
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Option 2: **Employ the alternative grade mode used in Spring 2020 for Fall 2020**

- Note that it applies only to undergraduate students.
- Allow students to make their own determination no later than first day of Spring 2021 classes.
- Be retroactively available to students for Fall 2020 classes that have already concluded.
- Students whose grades are impacted by an honor code referral cannot employ the alternative grading policy to adjust their transcript.

*Rationale:* Representing the student body, the Student Senate\(^2\) has requested this option; high levels of stress, anxiety, concern for overall well-being, and student’s concerns about their ability to be successful are being reported by those who work closely with our students – including members of the faculty, advisors and coaches, University Life staff, as well as others in student serving units; many other institutions are considering or have adopted an alternative grading approach. As in Spring 2020, students would again be able to choose the alternative grade mode without that decision being noted by the instructor.

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