Resolution 2020-F06-1103

Progressive Grading System for Online Learning

The Undergraduate Student Government
Legislative Body
First Reading: October 19th, 2020
Second Reading/Voting: October 26th, 2020

Chief Sponsor(s): President Wasan Kumar, Representative Tegha Obire,

WHEREAS, the student body faces a number of challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, including the transition to hybrid remote and on-campus learning. The Undergraduate Student Government recognizes the strain this places on faculty, graduate teaching assistants, and students; and

WHEREAS, the transition to online (hybrid) learning occurred 7 months ago and, while the educational experience has improved, the major issues of equity, mental wellbeing, and difficulties of online learning largely remain the same. Courses from the spring and summer semesters maintain the same, if not greater, workload. Student testimonials indicate online courses have significantly increased the amount of work assigned compared to when these same courses were taught in-person. Further, external stressors, rather than decline, have only increased for the entire campus community; and

WHEREAS, the proposed Progressive Grading System for Online Learning (hereinafter “Universal Pass”) aims to create a culture of healing and equity as we all live through this pandemic together. The proposal is: All students will receive credit for courses taken during the 2020-2021 Academic Year. Students may earn a letter grade of A, B, or C from a point system at the discretion of Faculty. Additionally, this policy proposal provides that, in tandem with the Universal pass policy, students shall have the option to elect to take their courses for credit (CR) rather than for a letter grade, abiding by similar guidelines as Spring 2020;¹ and

WHEREAS, an increase in online learning disparities which include, but are not limited to, lack of access to conducive learning environments, inability to attend synchronous lectures due to work schedules affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, considerable time zone differences in the

case of international students, difficulty connecting with the instructor or other classmates, and reduced understanding and retention of material, amongst other issues that may affect students’ mental wellbeing and consequently academic performance. In fact, mental health concerns have increased precipitously.\(^2\) Depression has tripled in adults since COVID-19 altered the foundations of society.\(^3\) Additionally, the results of the 2020 presidential election and the atmosphere of uncertainty it has created are key stressors that should be taken into consideration, given the effect it may have on the academic performance of students. Students, especially first year students, are taking on their role with extreme aptness, and this Universal Pass grading system more accurately reflects that. Students are not approaching university coursework during this unprecedented time with the intention to underperform, but are working hard to adapt and be extremely flexible given this new, and in some cases difficult, online learning environment. Therefore, given these extreme circumstances supportive action is necessary, now more than ever. Universal Pass creates this safety net to support students who may otherwise be failing, whether they are dealing with the pressures of financial stress, mental health issues, taking courses while living in a different timezone, or lack access to an excellent educational environment. Beyond protection from failing, Universal Pass also allows these students the option to elect CR to help them focus on their educational and mental wellbeing. The UIC student body is composed of individuals striving to not only excel, but take advantage of the vast learning opportunities the university has to offer; and

WHEREAS, Faculty at UIC have been tasked with the extremely difficult job of moving almost all classes to a virtual format. Many faculty have struggled with online platforms, have taught blank screens or empty classrooms, and have faced numerous emails from students concerned about their grades. This proposal aims to ameliorate these COVID-19 related issues, by removing the onus of extraneous academic pressure from students. This will allow students to better learn through passion for the subject, without concerns of failing due to circumstances outside of their control. This should reduce some of the strain professors feel, as the faculty-student relationship improves, grading becomes simpler, classroom participation increases, and fewer concerned student emails are sent to professors. This also aims to reduce concerns of cheating and academic dishonesty. Rather than turning to a technological arms race, between innovative cheaters and advanced webcam AI software, we hope to reduce the pressure some students feel to justify cheating; and


WHEREAS, the administration, in the face of declining enrollment and application numbers, would also see an increase in retention of students. These students will be more accustomed to online learning, and better prepared for success. This proposal aims to be a temporary response to the crisis we find ourselves in, and it is the responsibility of the entire campus community to develop or endorse creative solutions to these pressing issues. In person learning allows for some measure of equity through equal access to campus resources, but the transition to mainly online learning furthers inequalities where equal access to equal resources may be more difficult to accomplish. Despite best efforts, the current systems are not working for everyone; and

WHEREAS, MIT, alongside other universities, are providing academic provisions and “safety nets” for the Fall 2020 semester. As of 10/23, over 3,600 signatories have signed onto a letter asking for grading policy changes at UIC for the Fall 2020 semester. Clearly, the need for change exists. The Spring 2020 grading policy changes were appreciated; and this proposal aims to build upon those changes by providing students safety and equity during the COVID-19 pandemic; and

WHEREAS, an August report by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (authored by a UIUC faculty member), which surveyed hundreds of colleges nationwide produced the following list of Do’s and Don’ts:

1. Do not forget that we are in a pandemic. Still. Do not forget that it is also an inequitable pandemic.
2. Do not cause further harm. Do not support, enable or endorse policies that perpetuate further inequities or fuel negative perceptions of students.
3. Do not ask students for their approval of a decision that has already been made. Instead, engage with them in advance to help determine a solution.
4. Do not require a higher-level of proof of learning in an online class than you would normally require in a face-to-face setting.
5. Do not forget that this is not the educational experience students wanted or expected. Nor is this a test of online education. And in case you were wondering, it still will not be “online education” in the Fall. It will continue to be a derivative of emergency remote teaching and learning.

1. Do use learning outcomes as a guide and means to design and focus educational offerings.
2. Do listen to student voices AND respond accordingly.
3. Do modify assignments and assessments in ways that are flexible, utilize low-bandwidth, and are based in the principles of equitable assessment.
4. Do be aware of and address systemic inequities.
5. Do engage in trauma-informed and healing-centered pedagogy and assessment.

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At the highest levels, Universal Pass would engage all 5 Do points and addresses all 5 Do not points. To emphasize “Do Not #3,” we, as students, are actively reaching out so as to partake in the dialogue and be a part of the conversation -- a push we have been making throughout this pandemic. It also presents UIC the opportunity to spearhead a grading policy that improves the wellbeing and success of all students, faculty, and staff; then

LET IT BE RESOLVED, that USG endorses the Universal Pass grading system as described in Paragraph 3. This proposal serves as a means to relieve some of the consequential unwarranted pressures of learning in the midst of a global pandemic, and aims to be a temporary response to promote a healthy learning environment. A list of Frequently Asked Questions may be found in Appendix A. A list of select student testimonials can be found in Appendix B. A list of select Letters of Support provided by administrators and academic advisors asked to provided critical feedback can be found in Appendix C. A growing list of colleges and universities that have adopted grading policy changes for Fall 2020 can be found in Appendix D.

LET IT BE FURTHER RESOLVED, that we recognize that there is no perfect, one-size-fits all solution to this situation, but this Universal Pass system would do the least harm, and create the greatest benefit to students, faculty, and administrators. We are open to the development of alternative, progressive grading systems to suit the unique needs of the student body in this pandemic, and are opening to developing an alternative alongside the administration; however, inaction is not an option.

Appendix A

We have provided a list of Frequently Asked Questions, both to help clarify this proposal and succinctly describe our consideration of opposing viewpoints.

1. What would Universal Pass at UIC entail?
This proposed grading system would allow all UIC students to earn a letter grade of A, B or C on their transcripts. All students would receive credit for all of the courses they take this Academic Year. Faculty may determine how best to distribute between these three letter grades at their own discretion. Students may also choose to take a course for credit, and receive a CR on their transcript. Our version of CR will follow the guidance from Spring 2020, and students will consult with their advisor to make an informed decision if they choose to elect CR. No student will be penalized for circumstances outside of their control during these extraordinary times. Students will have the option to request a transcript annotation to explain the extenuating circumstances leading to this college-wide grading distribution, if needed for

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graduate program or employment applications. Faculty recommenders will also be provided reference for best practices to include in letters for students.

2. **Will students be unmotivated to learn?**
We believe, on the contrary, that this system would increase motivation to learn. Students would no longer be motivated to study for classes by a fear of failing, but rather can learn for the love of their subject. Students are admitted to this school because of their passion and academic excellence, and therefore do care about coursework. Transitioning to Universal Pass would also shift students’ focus from the pressure to pass to allow students to focus on personal wellness, non-academic professional goals, financial wellness, and their families.

No student enrolls in university during a pandemic with the intention to slack off. Students who may fail under a Credit/No Credit system are not lazy, but rather have resources, home environments, or other situations that prevent their success. This program ensures that all students are kept afloat during these incredibly difficult times.

3. **How would this affect graduate school admissions/post-undergraduate employment?**
This universal grading system would be reflective of the difficulties students face from the pressures and stressors of this year. Those with access to resources, and those without both face the added burden of social isolation and stress from online classes. In addition, many student testimonials indicate either an actual or perceived increase in workload this fall semester. Graduate schools and employers would see letter grades indicative of a students’ success and therefore this would not negatively affect post-undergraduate opportunities. To be clear, this proposal is not an ask for grade inflation, but rather a representation of students’ ability to handle an academic workload alongside the weight of this semester. Even the most stringent of graduate schools will still consider applications from students coming from universities with universal pass/fail, without impacting their application.

4. **How would this affect ABET accreditation or other professional requirements?**
This system would retain letter grades and therefore allow UIC to maintain ABET accreditation and applicants to a narrow range of professional schools which require letter grades.

5. **How is this fair to students who worked hard to pass classes?**
This system still allows students to be high-achieving, as it retains the A, B, and C designations. It is important for us to acknowledge the work put in by students to pass classes, and this Universal Pass aims to uphold that in a just manner. UIC being a majority commuter campus always had a large floating student population. Physically being on campus allows for some measure of equity to access campus resources, but moving to mainly online learning makes these resources much more difficult to acquire. This proposal in its entirety serves as a testament to the prowess exhibited by students in adapting to these extraordinary times. No one deserves to fail because of a global pandemic.

6. **Would this allow ‘unqualified’ students to pass?**

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This concern is important, in that students may move on to more difficult classes without fully grasping the material taught in prerequisite courses. However, students will have the opportunity to see their point totals on all exams and assessments, and reflect on how they performed in the class. They will be able to use this to review difficult topics, as they move onto more advanced courses. Ultimately, no one is learning as much as they would have in a classroom and it is unfair to lock students in a cycle of failure. We understand the hesitancy around advancing students who may not seem ready, but holding back students during this pandemic cannot be the only solution to fix this. This may require a more creative approach, such as proactive forms of academic counseling or creating vast mentorship networks to help motivate students to learn as this pandemic and online learning continue for the foreseeable future.

7. **What would professors need to do?**
   Professors would need to make very little change to their current courses, except to adjust point totals to reflect their desired grade thresholds.

8. **How does this compare to Opt-in CR/NC (Spring 2020)?**
   The Spring 2020 grading policy changes were much appreciated, however this proposal aims to move a step further in providing students safety and equity during the COVID-19 pandemic. The opt-in route inherently stigmatizes students who may choose to opt-in to CR/NC. As employers and graduate schools consider potential candidates, they may look unfavorably upon those who opt-in to this system. This discriminates against students who are struggling with the extreme nature of this year, who may have been successful otherwise. Alternatively, students who feel pressured to opt-out of CR/NC to avoid this stigma will no longer be forced to make this decision. Students who are struggling to stay afloat will see an improvement in their quality of life, while still working hard to study and succeed as a student.

9. **Would this affect Financial Aid? What about Academic Probation?**
   This proposal should have no impact on a student’s eligibility for financial aid or referral to academic probation because courses will not be removed from a student’s GPA calculation. This may allow more students to retain eligibility to access financial aid and ameliorate the number of students placed on probation.

10. **Can a student still fail?**
    The purpose of this proposal is to prevent students from failing during these extraordinary circumstances, and to recognize the immense flexibility and academic prowess exhibited by the student body in adjusting to online learning and social distancing. There are situations where a student may fail a course, which would be limited to forms of academic dishonesty. However, we anticipate rates of these offenses will decline as a result of this system.

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Appendix B

Below are 10 student testimonials collected from the petition sent to UIC Administration asking for grading policy changes. A supplemental document with all testimonials collected will be provided upon request.

Mohammed Rashad

I have a question for the administration, why go back to normal grading if life has not returned to normalcy? Professors have been giving extra work just because they think we, the students are free 24/7 because of the pandemic; when that’s not the case as people still have issues during the pandemic such as Family problems, wifi connectivity, International students on another time zone etc. And other universities have implemented pass fail grading for the fall semester too such as UMichigan, UPenn, UMass Amherst, UNC etc.

Ahmmad Khalil

I have to baby sit my sister who is also online, and I am starting to lose focus every time one of my siblings asks for help for anything from food to school work. The courses are hard enough as is. Learning online is not what I am accustomed too, and I can say the same for many of my cohorts.

Juan Hernandez

It is a real struggle to readjust something that is not already simple to do as being an university student. Let alone having to come up with new ways to accommodate our timing and evolve into a new ways to do work when , let be honest professors think that just giving you tremendous amount of work will make up for the fact that there’s no commuting, completely unfair as we adjust to these unprecedented times with more work and even now having to be judge by normal standards. I want to learn but I signed up for person to person learning, in these different times we can’t be held accountable in the same normal manner.

Jennifer Cervantes

I’m not only responsible for my classes and loads of work but I am also currently responsible for my younger siblings as they do online school. On top of that I have to work and help around the house. Everything put together is overwhelming and stressful.

Jeffrey Ishmael
I cannot focus on my classes and I do not feel that I am receiving the help for my classes. I feel like I’m on driftwood and paddling with my t-shirt.

Paul Lesley

Online learning is not for me. I have struggled to stay up with assignments, manage my time and keep my mental health in balance. Usually I am an A student. I will not be returning for the spring semester if this situation continues.

Dzesika Teresko

Working full time, while managing to now pay my rent and expenses due to moving out without a roommate due to my roommate being furloughed. In addition, to working full time juggling 5 online courses, taking care of my dog and managing my own business to create an additional revenue stream for myself has become extremely impossible. I currently am nearing 40 hours of no sleep at the moment.

Steven Surmin

I'm currently battling depression and anxiety. These extreme circumstances have made even the smallest victories in personal achievement few and far between. With these issues coupled with the stress of the pandemic and presidential uncertainties, it is extremely difficult to stay focused or motivated.

Mehul Aggarwal

I am signing because I am currently in my home country and the timings are very mismatched here and I am not able to focus also due to the pandemic as its getting worse in India and the due dates are missing.

Michael Sanchez

Learning online is so different. Everything is at such a fast pace, and most classes are just a bunch of videos consisting of power-points. I’m literally watching videos on power-points, and it costs $8,000. This isn’t learning. It’s bullshit

Danielle Dortmund
I only understand every other word in zoom lectures because the WiFi cuts out. I have to work 20+ hours a week to pay for school because my old job can’t function in covid times. The professors have absurd deadlines for students because we’re at home. I have 3 group projects in 3 separate classes. All online. It’s ridiculous.

Appendix C

We have included 4 selected Letters of Support from administrators asked to critique this proposal.

"I am in support of the proposed Fall 2020 grading policy. Students are going through much more stress than they ever have before, taking online courses for the first time and some are struggling with the format and their environments they are in. Students are affected by the current pandemic, political, and economic crises along with mental health issues being caused by the stress they are under. Allowing students to opt into a universal pass/CR/NC would alleviate some of this stress and still allow them to learn the course and not have to feel the burden of possibly receiving a poor grade”

Carlos Lopez, Academic Advisor, CUPPA.

"I support this measure. I think that students are going through a lot with the pandemic and this current economic and political environment. I think a universal pass/cr/nc options will alleviate stress and facilitate genuine learning. I don't think most of our students meant to have 15 hours of online coursework per week when they became UIC students and this would be a beneficial accommodation."

Sharon Hayes, Academic Advisor, CUPPA.

“I agree with you both and I am in full support of the proposed Fall 2020 grading policy. The upheaval and stress caused by the coronavirus pandemic has threatened our students’ mental health and emotional wellbeing and I believe this would certainly help lessen some of their stresses and anxieties”

Mirtza Campbell, Academic Advisor, CUPPA.

“With a hybrid mode of instruction, there should be a hybrid grading policy”

Deb Agard, Associate Dean of Student Affairs, COP.

Appendix D

We have prepared a select list of universities who have elected to modify campus-wide grading policies for Fall 2020.
University of Massachusetts Amherst\textsuperscript{10}

Georgetown\textsuperscript{11}

MIT\textsuperscript{12}

Ohio State University\textsuperscript{13}

University of Houston\textsuperscript{14}

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill\textsuperscript{15}

President, 
Wasan Kumar

Speaker of the House, 
Daisy Stancheva

\textsuperscript{10}https://www.umass.edu/coronavirus/news/fall-2020-pass-fail-policy
\textsuperscript{11}https://www.georgetown.edu/news/grading-policy-for-fall-2020/
\textsuperscript{12}https://now.mit.edu/policies/grading-policy-for-the-fall-semester/
\textsuperscript{13}https://ehe.osu.edu/pass-no-pass-information-ehe/
\textsuperscript{14}https://uh.edu/provost/policies-resources/student/interim-undergraduate-grade-policy/
\textsuperscript{15}https://www.unc.edu/posts/2020/08/27/pass-fail-fall-2020/