

Office of the Provost: Adoption of Pass/Fail Option

HU Communications <ouc@howard.edu>

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To: Alfred, Marcus <marAlfred@Howard.edu>

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Office of the Provost



March 27, 2020

Dear Howard University Students,

Thank you for your patience, resilience, and commitment to your education and the ideals that have guided our institution for over 150 years. As we continue to face the COVID-19 global pandemic together, and recognize the tremendous impact that this virus has had on our students, faculty, and entire University, I am appreciative for the many members of our community who have offered a kind word, performed a selfless act, and gone out of their way to help someone in need. It is in times of crisis and discomfort where we truly reveal the truth of

who we are, and see the best in others as we aspire to become who God has intended for us to be.

Last week, I received a formal request from the Howard University Student Association (HUSA) to consider providing undergraduate students with the option to be graded on a Pass/Fail scale, as an alternative to the usual letter grades. The HUSA request also noted that there was support of the Faculty Senate Chair, Dr. Marcus Alfred. Dr. Alfred confirmed his support, as well as that of the Faculty Senate leadership regarding this request, and noted that further feedback would be sought from the Faculty Senate Council.

We are not in a “business as usual” environment. The COVID-19 crisis has resulted in students and faculty being thrust, by necessity, into a virtual and remote teaching environment implemented over Spring Break, concerns regarding access to technology for many students, challenges regarding time zone differences, as well as the very real health, life and safety concerns for students, many of whom live in areas of the country with high COVID-19 incidence.

In response to these concerns, and to obtain additional input and feedback from students, faculty and staff, a communication was disseminated to the University community on March 25, 2020 outlining the “Pros”, “Cons”, and other considerations as a Pass/Fail option for undergraduate students was reviewed. A virtual Town Hall was conducted the morning of March 26, 2020, moderated by myself, and including Dean Rubin Patterson and Dean Dana Williams, representing the undergraduate programs and the graduate/professional programs, respectively. Over 200 questions and comments were submitted by faculty and students prior to the Zoom Town Hall, and over 585 individuals participated in the Zoom video webinar session, with an additional number connecting by phone. A number of additional comments and questions were submitted following the virtual Town Hall. Each question and comment were taken into consideration in the preparation of a response to the request from HUSA.

Upon consultation with President Frederick, and following the provision of the opportunity for faculty, students, and administrators to weigh in regarding the matter, the following decision is proffered:

All undergraduate courses in the spring 2020 semester will be graded Pass/Fail, unless the student elects to receive an earned letter grade for the course. A proposed outline for implementation is provided in the following section.

Preface

Howard University is committed to the growth of the whole student—intellectually, culturally, emotionally, and socially. A Howard graduate is compassionate, civic-oriented, and devoted to improving the lives of humankind and to our corporate care of the earth. Howard students are resilient—with some consistently evidencing high academic achievement and others exhibiting high academic potential. In a moment of upheaval and crisis, the University is committed to being as flexible and agile as we hope our students are and can be. Students should be thoughtful about their decisions for grade preferences. Faculty and academic advisors should provide students with as much information as possible to help students make the best choice for their situation.

How the process would work

1. The implementation of the Pass/Fail grade default would only apply to undergraduate students (the Cathy Hughes School of Communications, the College of Arts & Sciences, the College of Engineering and Architecture, the School of Business, and the School of Education. The College of Nursing and Allied Health Sciences undergraduate students would also be eligible for the Pass/Fail default. However, due to licensing concerns, CNAHS students should await further guidance from Dean Brown).
2. In the Graduate and Professional Schools, the Pass/Fail option would be determined by the Dean of each School, upon consultation with the Provost, secondary to accreditation guidelines, licensing requirements, and the Department of Education policies.
3. **Faculty will need to record letter grades for all students as usual**, but these will be converted to Pass/Fail on the transcript by the Office of the Registrar, unless the student chooses to retain the letter grade for all courses not completed prior to March 13, 2020.
4. Students would submit their election to retain letter grading electronically to the Office of the Registrar by April 13, 2020. (The specific process will be outlined by April 1, 2020.)
5. Students would have the option of choosing to make a course Pass/Fail or a letter grade on an individual course basis. Students would be able to opt for a letter grade in one course and a Pass/Fail in another course.
6. In instances where courses have licensure concerns, the Dean or a designee would be required to validate the option for Pass/Fail and could declare that the option is not available for a specific course.
7. A “Pass” would not factor into the GPA but would count toward earned semester hours and toward curricular, matriculation, and graduation

requirements.

8. A “Fail” would factor into the GPA negatively.

9. Generally, grades of A, B, C would be considered as a “Pass”. In courses where a D is a letter grade option, the D would also be considered as a “Pass.”

10. Assignment of a “Pass” would be consistent with the current criteria for letter grades, e.g., a letter grade of A, B, C, would count as a “Pass” if such has been the case historically. In instances where a C grade or D grade has not historically counted as a “Pass” (in upper division courses in Nutritional Sciences and the First-Year Writing sequence, respectively, for example), a “Pass” would result from a grade of C or better.

11. Students would have to declare their preference to earn letter grades to the Office of the Registrar (electronic process will be outlined) no later than April 13, 2020. This would allow students time to acclimate to the online/remote instruction environment and to make an informed decision in consultation with their faculty members and/or advisors. This would also allow ample time for Deans to validate the option for Pass/Fail grade assignments.

12. Students would not be able to reverse the letter grade option once the request is submitted to the Office of the Registrar.

13. Students could not revert Pass/Fail grades to letter grades once grades have been posted.

14. Students could not earn an Incomplete Pass/Fail grade.

15. All transcripts would include a notation explaining the use of Pass/Fail for the Spring 2020 semester, and articulating the COVID-19 pandemic as a major disruption to the academic experience and cause for the grade designation.

16. Students on academic probation who do not elect to accept course grades will be continued to the next semester, since they cannot raise their GPA with Pass grades.

17. The university moving to Pass/Fail will not jeopardize an undergraduate student's financial aid or scholarship eligibility. Please note that all SAP (Satisfactory Academic Progress) guidelines from the Department of Education will be followed. Decisions regarding institutional scholarships will be deferred through the Fall, 2020 semester. Recipients of institutional scholarships will maintain scholarship eligibility, and will be reviewed for renewal after the Fall, 2020 semester.

18. The Fall 2020 semester would return to the established letter grading system for undergraduate and any graduate courses.

17. Undergraduate student recipients of University scholarships would be eligible to receive Pass/Fail grades, where applicable. However, scholarship recipients should be reminded that the criteria to maintain scholarship eligibility will remain in effect, and will be reassessed following the Fall, 2020 semester.

18. Subject to NCAA guidelines and requirements, Student Athletes would initially be eligible for the Pass/Fail default, unless we are notified otherwise by the NCAA, specific to academic eligibility. We will remain in contact with the NCAA to ensure that decisions made regarding athletes do not affect eligibility.

Access to online instruction

We are aware that a number of students, due to financial circumstances, have been challenged to access online instruction. A limited number of tablet devices will be available to ship to students in need next week. A Mandatory Student Spring Break Census survey was conducted prior to Spring Break. Of the students who responded to the survey, 58 students indicated that they did not have devices that they could utilize to participate in online instruction. We will ship devices to those students next week. We will also make the tablets available to students with a demonstrated need, secondary to a process that will be outlined by the Office of Student Affairs by early next week. We ask that as there are only a limited number of tablets, that students be considerate of any requests, so that we can assure that the most needy students are able to obtain this necessary assistance.

I want to take this opportunity to thank the many students, faculty, and administrators who provided constructive comments and suggestions in the development of this process. I also wish to thank our committed faculty who have worked diligently and arduously to convert face-to-face courses to online and remote methods, with the intent to maintain the academic rigor and quality that has exemplified a Howard University education. In this time of unprecedented crisis and disruption, it is appropriate for the University, our faculty, students and staff to display the empathy, concern, and compassion that have always been the hallmark of Howard University. As I have often stated recently, we are a resilient body of scholars, and we will successfully navigate this most recent challenge together. Thank you, and God bless.

Excellence in Truth and Service,

Anthony K. Wutoh, Ph.D, R.Ph.
Provost and Chief Academic Officer



Office of the Provost
2400 6th Street NW
Washington, DC 20059

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