

## Office of the Provost: Grading Default Update

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Office of the Provost



May 11, 2020

Dear Howard University Students,

On March 27, 2020, following a request from the Howard University Student Association secondary to the COVID-19 pandemic, I announced a decision that the University would transition to a Pass/Fail grade default for undergraduate students for the Spring, 2020 semester, while also providing the option for undergraduate students to retain letter grades on a course by course basis. This decision was announced following consultation with faculty, students, and staff who would implement any changes. Additionally, a town hall was conducted on March 26, 2020 to outline the issue, as well as discuss impacts to students, and decisions from other Universities locally, and nationally.

The purpose of the modification in the letter grade system was to address the additional stress and disruption that students were facing secondary to the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim was to provide flexibility to our students, while also maintaining the academic integrity of courses. However, we also have to be realistic about the administrative processes and staff support that is necessary to implement these student decisions. In addition to this accommodation for undergraduate students, the School of Law transitioned to a Credit/No Credit process, consistent with other Law Schools nationally, the School of Divinity transitioned to a Pass/Fail default with the option for students to retain letter grades, and the Graduate School transitioned to provide a Pass/Fail option to graduate students for the Spring, 2020 semester.

We were also aware that no single policy would please every student and every member of the faculty. As we interacted with other academic institutions across the country, there were literally over 100 permutations of Pass/Fail processes, deadlines, and change options that have been implemented. A survey conducted by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) indicated that while the majority of institutions across the country had made modifications in their grading system, over 27% implemented no changes at all. Some institutions went to mandatory pass/fail with no option for letter grade, others left the option to faculty on a case by case basis, and yet others created a new grade category secondary to COVID-19. Some institutions indicated deadlines for student decisions as early as April 7, 2020, and other institutions permitted modifications following submission of grades. Even so, over 5,600 Howard University undergraduate students submitted requests in consideration of their letter grade elections by the April 13, 2020 deadline. Howard University provided significant flexibility to our undergraduate students to opt for letter grades or pass/fail grades on a course by course basis by April 13, 2020. Additionally, the University protected scholarship students by indicating that moving to Pass/Fail would not jeopardize an undergraduate student's financial aid or scholarship eligibility in Spring, 2020. Recipients of institutional scholarships would maintain scholarship eligibility, and would be reviewed for renewal after the Fall, 2020 semester. Further, undergraduate student recipients of University scholarships would be eligible to receive Pass/Fail grades, where applicable. However, again, scholarship recipients were reminded that the criteria to maintain scholarship eligibility would remain in effect, and will be reassessed following the Fall, 2020 semester.

A significant concern of faculty was to maintain the academic integrity of coursework, while providing reasonable flexibility to our student. The flexibility provided, however, comes at a significant administrative burden. Allowing students the opportunity to select grade options on a course by course basis meant that the process could not be automated, and grades would have to be converted manually for over 25,000 individual grade elections. As a result, a strict deadline of April 13, 2020 was communicated to students to facilitate this process. This date was nearly three weeks after the March 27, 2020 announcement to students.

While we have received several requests to extend the pass/fail deadline, or allow students to modify their election following the submission of grades, I remind you of several of the criteria enumerated when the decision was communicated on March 27, 2020;

“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.”

<https://newsroom.howard.edu/newsroom/article/12111/office-provost-adoption-passfa>

We are aware that for some courses, a significant portion of the course grade may not have been attained prior to April 13, 2020. Additionally, some students have expressed concerns that all faculty may not have provided a status of grades prior to April 13, 2020. These individual circumstances however, do not obviate the great flexibility that was provided to students regarding grade options. While we have considered decisions made by other academic institutions, the wide variety of modifications, deadlines, and defaults highlights that each institution proceeded in a way that best suited their students, faculty, and necessary administrative processes. Additionally, as stated by a faculty

member, “any move to allow changes now following the criteria that were clearly outlined, compromises the process, and impacts the integrity of the courses and grading.

In conclusion, there will be no additional modifications in the grading system for the Spring, 2020 semester, nor extension of the deadline to declare a grade option.

Excellence in Truth and Service,

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



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