



Ensuring Fairness in Unprecedented Times: Grading Our Nation's Students

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For high school and college students across the country, getting through the end of the school year has gotten very complicated. The spread of the Covid-19 coronavirus, and the widespread closure of public places in response, has turned our education system on its head. For some, this means the cancellation or postponement of beloved rituals like the prom, spring break, and commencement. For even more, it has meant a change to radically different ways of teaching, learning, and assessment.

Perhaps the most prominent of these changes is the sudden, widespread adoption of digital instruction. Face-to-face instruction has moved to an online learning environment necessitated by the coronavirus pandemic. As a result, several higher education institutions are considering major shifts in their policies, such as moving from letter grades to a pass/fail system. Below we discuss some of the issues that should be considered in making these changes, which may have far reaching implications for students and the educational system.

Ultimately, the purpose of effective education is for instructors to teach with the best pedagogical practices, to provide feedback on students' performance through effective assessment practices, and for students to take the steps necessary to learn and attain the course objectives under the guidance of their instructor while demonstrating their learning through the course assessments.

While we all try to adapt to a strange new world, we must begin a dialogue about how education for students can be delivered effectively and, even more importantly, equitably. The world of remote learning is one in which inequality in access to necessary tools like a laptop, internet, bandwidth, and a data plan represents a clear threat to our dedication to equal educational opportunity for all. What's more, policies around grading and assessment of student learning become even more important, as without attention to the implications of these changes we may unfairly disadvantage some students and benefit others. A prominent example concerns an issue that may seem simplistic at first glance—the use of pass/fail grading being implemented in courses that initially used letter grades. As colleges and universities decide how to assess their students during these unprecedented times and circumstances, it is important for administrators to consider the advantages and disadvantages of the pass/fail grading system.

In this new environment where nearly 100% of the nation's high school and college students have unexpectedly moved to remote learning, with most having their courses delivered online, the option of pass/fail grading may help alleviate anxiety of this unexpected change where both instructors and students are in "triage" mode in making the transition to online learning very quickly. In this instance, a student can fulfill their academic obligations without impacting their GPA, which may ultimately be what employers and graduate schools value most. But it's also helpful

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for students who put in a lot of time for part of a semester and are worried about losing their good work due to pandemic circumstances such as being sick, losing a job, finding a place to stay, taking care of family, homeschooling, etc.

Another factor—though not necessarily an advantage or disadvantage—is that students only have to put in enough effort to cross the passing threshold and can otherwise invest less in the course, particularly if the original design of the course was based on letter grades. This can be very helpful in enabling students to complete the course, while simultaneously allowing students more time to deal with other relevant and important issues in their lives without realizing a “penalty” to the GPA. Under current conditions, this can represent a humane practice. Noting, however, this only works if students were doing well in the first part of the course. Effectively, this would give them, in some ways, credit for what they have already learned and did instead of taking that away from them due to a global pandemic.

The fundamental limitation of a pass/fail system is that it hinders the ability of institutions to discriminate between the different academic achievement levels (A's, B's, C's, etc.) of individual students, rendering admission and hiring decisions more difficult for graduate schools and employers as they have less information in making selection decisions. This approach particularly makes it difficult to distribute academic distinctions like passing a course with honors or particular merit in many graduate programs. This is important to high school students for scholarships and admissions to their college of choice; and for university students for transfer credit policies; scholarship criteria; employment offers and internships; or admission to graduate, medical, or law school, as just some of the examples.

At the core of pass/fail debates lies the issue of fairness, which in this context entails simply ensuring that all students have the same benefits and opportunities based on the grading system given their academic performance. In the pass/fail system, students who work harder and achieve more are not recognized or distinguished by their performance. Not only does this undermine the fairness of the system, as students with radical differences in effort and performance receive the same grades, it further reduces the incentive for students to work hard and achieve their learning goals. However, it can also be used as an effective strategy in a time of crisis or in other disaster situations to help retain students.

Additionally, a major concern of fairness rests on the assumption that all students have the same opportunities and support to excel in the class. With the sudden adoption of online teaching having been unplanned, student performance will clearly be affected by many issues other than the course content and instruction. Performance is likely to be affected by:

1. availability and/or knowledge of the use of online equipment, including unequal access from homes or communities with insufficient access to broadband internet;
2. in-person support services that students would have utilized (library, writing center, expensive or specialized software available in computer labs, etc.) that may be less accessible to them at this time;
3. (in)stability of the environments that students are going home to, with many homes not conducive to online learning as effective as the college environment;
4. affective and emotional stability of the students and their families, which may be affected by the trauma of the coronavirus impacting their local community;
5. ability of the faculty member to deliver on the learning outcomes, assessment, and content of the course; and

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6. a range of other variables that come with significant changes in our lives during a time of crisis.

Under these circumstances, letter grades may be based at least in part on factors other than teaching and learning which would imply less fairness for students, particularly when making finer distinctions in performance between students.

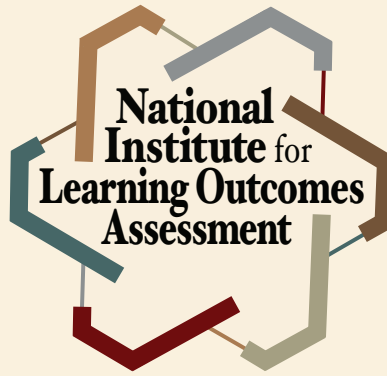
Some opponents of pass/fail systems have also noted how these systems may encourage students to strive for the minimum requirement as opposed to striving for the best, as there is little formal incentive/motivation to perform any better than just good enough to pass. For any given difficult assignment, a student might decide that working hard is simply not worth their effort given the protection of a pass/fail system. Even more problematic are the ways in which some pass/fail systems are implemented. Pass/fail systems for which there are no or vague standards for performance across learning outcomes and where there is little opportunity for robust feedback may create false assurances to those students who are in the marginally pass range.

From a learning perspective, not having adequate information about what is required and/or has or has not been mastered makes it difficult for students to regulate learning behavior necessary to successfully navigate new material. When it comes to grading, pass/fail systems to which there are ambiguous standards for performance introduce greater subjectivity into grading which calls into question score meaning and interpretation.

We are now in unprecedented times where policy makers and administrators will need to review their grading policies, admission requirements, and other relevant issues within the context of this sudden shift to this online learning environment. While students and teachers/faculty adjust to a dramatically different learning environment, we all need to acclimate to the new “report card,” given that pass/fail and other alternative grading methods may be adopted. We believe that parents, students, employers, and academics will need to adjust to this time of mounting environmental uncertainty for students. It may be that this grading strategy helps focus students’ attention on what matters most—learning, as opposed to more instrumental concerns like worrying about grades.

While we have discussed the implications of different grading systems as an issue that needs to be addressed within institutions, the larger educational system will need to consider the use of grades under differing systems, especially given the movement of students across institutions. That is, the larger educational system will also need to take into account these potential changes, not just individual institutions. The outcomes of many of these problems are important for policy discussions and planning of educational programs within an institution as well as across institutions. Whatever new developments we see in grading or other issues that have arisen as a result of this national emergency, we have an opportunity to think through what types of behavior and assumptions we want to signal in our policies and what type of education we will be able to provide in this time of a national emergency. We will then make the appropriate decisions within our contexts to enable faculty to meet their fundamental duty: to treat our students fairly and to support their learning through whatever means available.

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