Student Code Academic Policies Task Force Report

January 24, 2022

In late September 2021, a Task Force was convened by Provost Cangellaris. The charge letter instructed the task force to review the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign *Student Code*, Article 3 – Grades and the Grading System, focusing on sections specifically impacted by and/or consulted regarding the temporary academic policy modifications; namely, 3-101; 3-104; 3-105; 3-110; 3-309; 3-311; 3-508; and 3-703. The task force was asked to review and provide reference to the student codes or analogous policy documents of other peer institutions that exhibit best practices and inform recommendations, then determine key questions for drawing data to better understand impact and ramifications of specific elements of the policies as written in our campus' *Code* and as they relate in comparison to the temporary policies that the university enacted for the Spring, 2020; Fall, 2020; and/or Spring, 2021 semesters. Using an equity-centered approach, the provost charged the group to consider issues such as clarity of the policies for students and instructors, accessibility of information, and accuracy of the Code with respect to institutional values, ultimately submitting a final report with recommendations to the provost.

Task Force Membership List:

Faculty/Staff
Jenny Amos (she/her), Department of Bioengineering, Senate Educational Policy Committee, chair
Kimberly Alexander-Brown, Office of Minority Student Affairs
Daniel Almanza, Division of General Studies
Stephen Bryan, Office of the Dean of Students, Conference on Conduct Governance
Katie Clark, College of Media, Council of Undergraduate Deans
Jenni Crum, The Career Center
Lee Deville, Department of Mathematics
Michelle Ellis, College of Education
Ivan Favila, The Grainger College of Engineering
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Meghan Hazen (she/her), Office of the Registrar
Kristine McCoskey, Scholar Support Programs
Allison McKinney, Graduate College
Linda Moorhouse (she/her), School of Music, Senate Executive Committee
Sandra Rodriguez-Zas, Department of Animal Sciences
Brian Siemann, Disability Resources and Educational Services

Ross Wantland (he/him), Office of Vice Chancellor for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
Kathy Martensen (she/her), Office of the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs and Provost, ex-officio

<u>Students</u>
Alexandra Nevarez, undergraduate student, Academic Affairs Committee, Illinois Student Government
Josh Small (he/him), undergraduate student, Speaker Pro Tempore, Illinois Student Government
James Rhyne, undergraduate student, Provost's Undergraduate Student Advisory Board
Ashley Winters (he/him), undergraduate student, Financial Affairs Committee, Illinois Student Government; Senate Educational Policy Committee
Frances Barkley, graduate student, Students Advising Graduate Education
Lonna Edwards, graduate student, Students Advising Graduate Education
Elizabeth Matresse, graduate student, Students Advising Graduate Education

Summary of Task Force Work

The committee met four times as a group to collectively work and share findings. These meetings took place on November 2, 2021, November 10, 2021, and November 30, 2021, and January 13, 2022.

During the meetings, the task force conducted the following work:
1. Read and reviewed current policy as written in the *Student Code* and the modifications made during pandemic
2. Gathered peer institutions' policies for comparison
3. Reviewed early findings to better understand the impacts of the policy modifications
4. Identified stakeholders and generated topics for input for listening sessions with these stakeholders
5. Synthesized findings across stakeholder groups to form recommendations.

Below the results of each task are detailed.

Review of Current Policies and Changes Made During the Pandemic

In Spring 2020, Fall 2020, and Spring 2021, the university's academic policies were modified with approval of the Academic Senate in response to the pandemic. These changes were different each of the three semesters.

For Spring 2021, the following policy modifications went into effect on February 10, 2021:
- The deadline to drop a course without a grade of "W" ("withdrawal") and, for undergraduates, to use the Grade Replacement Policy was extended to the last day of instruction for each respective part of term (Friday, March 19 for first eight-week

courses; Wednesday, May 5 for second eight-week courses and for full-semester courses; and the last day of instruction for nonstandard courses).

- Pass COVID/No Pass COVID (PZ/NZ) grade modes were created and made available, replacing the Credit/No Credit grade mode for that particular semester. NZ equates to a failing grade and no course credit is earned. Neither PZ nor NZ grades impacted students' grade point averages. The PZ/NZ mode was not available to students in the College of Law's programs or those enrolled in MD or DVM programs, and grades of F that were the result of an academic integrity violation sanction were not eligible for the PZ/NZ option. Courses in which "Pass" was earned were applicable toward major, minor, and general education requirements.
- Although not stated in the modifications, after significant discussion amongst the Council of Undergraduate Deans, the decision was made to "sweep" failing grades (other than those that were the result of a sanction for an academic integrity infraction) on undergraduate students' records. In other words, Fs were automatically replaced with NZs thereby not impacting the students' GPA for the undergraduate student population.

For Fall 2020, the following policy modifications went into effect on November 23, 2020:
- The deadline to drop a course without a grade of "W" and, for undergraduates, to use the Grade Replacement Policy was extended to December 18, 2020, for all full semester, second eight-week, and non-standard courses with an end date after December 1, 2020.
- The deadline to elect Credit/No Credit was extended to January 5, 2021. Election of Credit/No Credit for courses in that semester did not count toward the applicable minimums stated in the Code, Section 3-105. Courses in which students earned credit were applicable toward major, minor, and general education requirements. Credit/No Credit was not available to DVM, JD, or MD students.
- Although not stated in the modifications, after significant discussion amongst the Council of Undergraduate Deans, the decision was made to "sweep" failing grades (other than those that were the result of a sanction for an academic integrity infraction) on undergraduate students' records. In other words, Fs were automatically replaced with No Credits thereby not impacting the students' GPA for the undergraduate student population.

For Spring 2020, the following policy modifications went into effect on March 24, 2020:
- The deadline to drop full-semester courses was extended to April 30, 2020.
- The deadline to elect Credit/No Credit for full-semester and for second eight-week courses was extended to April 30, 2020. Courses in which Credit was earned fulfilled major, minor, and general education requirements, and there was no limit on the number of courses for which students could elect Credit/No Credit.
- Pass/No Pass (PA/NP) grade modes were created and made available for a small number of courses. Instructors of such courses needed to demonstrate to their department head that the sudden move to online necessitated a significant change to their assessment strategy to the extent that the modification makes it difficult to fairly assign letter grades. For courses approved by the department, all students were

assessed using the PA/NP grade mode and criteria; it was not something students could individually select or opt out of. In other words, this mode shift was done at the course level rather than the student level.

- Students in the College of Law, Carle Illinois College of Medicine, and College of Veterinary Medicine were excluded from all Spring 2020 temporary academic policy modifications.

Review of Big 10 Institutional Policies (Non-Covid)

Course Drop Policies
For the most part, the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign's course drop policy could be considered more generous than other institutions due to the mid-course drop deadline. The majority of Big 10 institutions allow for a shorter add/drop period, generally the first five to ten days of class, wherein students may drop a course through the registration system and do not receive a W notation on the transcript. All Big 10 institutions, including the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, offer students the opportunity to drop a course after the deadline with college or advisor approval and a W noted on the transcript. The institutions with the earliest deadlines also offer a "drop with W" period where no approval is required, and a W is noted on the transcript. There are no institutions allowing students to drop a course without approval in the last few weeks of the semester.

Credit/No Credit Policies
The majority of Big 10 institutions award credit for grades of a C- or C and higher. In nearly all cases, this credit cannot be used to meet major, minor, or general education requirements. Two institutions, Indiana and Maryland, will award credit for any passing grade, but failing grades appear as Fs and are included in the GPA. All institutions limit the number of courses that may be graded as credit/no credit. Also, students at several institutions must meet minimum eligibility requirements, such as minimum GPAs or minimum numbers of earned hours, before electing the credit/no credit option.

Review of Existing Reports that Addressed Impact of Policies

Several reports related to COVID-related policy changes in the Spring 2020, Fall 2020, and Spring 2021 semester were reviewed by the Task Force. Below is a summary of findings from these reports.

Spring 2020 and Fall 2020 academic policy modifications were made after the original drop deadline in both terms. This almost certainly impacted drop behavior in those terms. Additionally, it cannot be assumed that every course drop was due to poor performance. History has shown that students often register for more hours than they intend to keep and then drop their least favorite course. This likely continued to happen during COVID.

Grades of D complicated comparisons between COVID-modified policies and the standing policies in the *Code*. The difference between CR/NC and Pass/No Pass (PZ/NZ) is significant

because of the way D grades were treated. Grades of D+, D, and D- do not earn credit under CR/NC but did under Pass/No Pass (PZ/NZ). We also do not know why a significant number of students chose to retain Ds and Fs under the COVID-modified policies, but the general opinion is students were either unaware of the options or didn't understand them.

It appears that students were more likely to take advantage of CR/NC or Pass/No Pass (PZ/NZ) grading options than to drop a course because they could protect their GPA while still earning credit hours and meeting requirements.

Stakeholder Engagement Through Listening Sessions

A number of members of the committee hosted 'listening sessions' to gather information for the group related to the charge. The following groups were engaged:

- Campus academic advisors
- Illinois Promise staff
- Illinois Student and Scholar Services (ISSS) staff
- College of Media advisors and students
- Provost's Undergraduate Student Advisory Board members
- Division of General Studies (DGS) Academic Advisors
- The Grainger College of Engineering Academic Advisors
- Office of Student Financial Aid staff
- Fine and Applied Arts James Scholars
- Engineering Student Council (on behalf of Engineering Registered Organizations)

The following questions were asked to each stakeholder group type:

Students
- Impact of COVID changes in policy
- How did the change in deadlines impact your decision to take advantage of the drop deadline extension or credit/no credit policy?
- What factors went into why you elected to change your grade mode after the end of the term? What would have helped you make the decision prior to the end of the term?
- Did the option to take courses CR/NC or Pass/No Pass (PZ/NZ) promote behavior that was non-academic (e.g., taking on additional work/internship)?
- Who did you have conversations with (professors, advisors, friends, etc.) when deciding to elect a class (or classes) as CR/NC?
- How did Credit/No Credit election impact students' applications to graduate or professional school? From the student and from the graduate program perspectives.
- How did Credit/No Credit election impact students' ICT process?
- Are you aware of the petition process for extenuating circumstances?
- How did extending the drop deadline influence your decision?

Faculty/Academic Staff/Advisors

- Impact of COVID changes in policy
- Should major courses and gen eds continue to be eligible and have the credit go towards the requirement when using Credit/No Credit?
- Should credit/no credit continue to be an option for probationary students?
  - (related) Should exploration of academic coursework have a different grade mode other than CR/NC?
- Should major courses and gen eds continue to be eligible and have the credit go towards the requirement when using Credit/No Credit?
- How is this impact mediated by demographics (i.e., gender, race, college, major, living on or entirely remote, etc.)?
- How has credit/ no credit during Spring 2021 affected students' learning in the future. (Ex: If a student did not as strong in a prerequisite course)
- How did Credit/No Credit election impact students' applications to graduate or professional school? From the student and from the graduate program perspectives.

Student and Support Services
- Impact of COVID changes in policy
- Should credit/no credit continue to be an option for probationary students?
  - (related) Should exploration of academic coursework have a different grade mode other than CR/NC?
- How is this impact mediated by demographics (i.e., gender, race, college, major, living on or entirely remote, etc.)?
- How has credit/ no credit during Spring 2021 affected students' learning in the future. (Ex: If a student did not as strong in a prerequisite course)
- How did Credit/No Credit election impact students' applications to graduate or professional school? From the student and from the graduate program perspectives.

Overview of Findings from Listening Sessions

Many of the findings from listening sessions centered around the use of Credit/No Credit and the timeline for academic decisions, such as Credit/No Credit and drop decisions.

There are differences between the intended use and actual use of Credit/No Credit and Pass/No Pass (PZ/NZ) policies used during COVID-19.
- The Credit/No Credit policies were originally put in place to allow exploration and lower the GPA risk in taking additional courses outside of one's area of study and there are typically restrictions on what courses are allowed and why, for instance major courses, campus level requirements (i.e. RHET, language, etc.) may not be taken as Credit/No Credit. Courses that were allowed to be elected as Credit/No Credit were expanded during COVID-19, as students who elected this grade mode option and earned credit could apply the credit toward completion of major, minor, and general education requirements.
- Even prior to the pandemic study of the use of Credit/No Credit, students were not using the policy in the way it was intended. Many students use the policy to save their GPA or

to prioritize certain courses/grades. Part of this is due to a lack of clear policies on when Credit/No Credit can be used and differences across majors and colleges on when these options are allowed, with colleges having differing views on whether students can use Credit/No Credit options when on probation.

- Feedback was received on the differences between Credit/No Credit and Pass/No Pass (PZ/NZ) in terms of the grades that are eligible for credit in each policy and the impact of those on programs. As summarized above, Credit/No Credit allows for credit of grades C- or better, whereas Pass/No Pass (PZ/NZ) allowed for credit for grades of D- or higher. Since the Credit/No Credit option is intended to support exploration and because many majors have limitations on courses requiring grades of C- or higher, the simpler version of passing as a grade of D- or higher for credit seems to fit. This would eliminate confusion as to when a Credit/No Credit can be used since the credit would not be sufficient for requirement fulfillment when a C- or higher is necessary.
- The opinions for Credit/No Credit or Pass/No Pass (PZ/NZ) do not affect international students or those on government financial aid as much as dropping a course would affect their visa or aid status.

The extended timeline for use of Credit/No Credit and drop options suggested need for changes for drop deadlines and agency of students in the drop process.

- The current policy for dropping a course has two deadlines for dropping without a "W" on the transcript: 1) a self-service option where a student may add or drop any course during the first ten instructional days of a semester and 2) a student may drop a course during the first half of the course, sometimes through self-service and sometimes under guidance from an advisor. During the COVID policy modifications, the period to drop without a "W" was extended to the end of the term.
- With the extended deadline for declaring Credit/No Credit, Pass/No Pass (PZ/NZ), and drop without a "W," it appears students were more likely to take advantage of CR/NC or Pass/No Pass (PZ/NZ) grading options than to drop a course because they could protect their GPA while still earning credit hours and meeting requirements.
- The extended timeline reduced stress on students and gave them flexibility and choice in their semester. Additionally, the lengthened timeline allowed students to make more informed decisions after midterms and multiple assignments were graded.

Recommendations of the Task Force

The Task Force recommends modifying the current course drop period to create two drop subperiods: (1) student drops on their own without a W on transcript and (2) student drops on their own with a W on transcript. We suggest the Offices of the Registrar and the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs and Provost suggest the deadlines for these drop subperiods to the Senate Educational Policy Committee. This committee would then vet the proposal and bring it before the full Senate to officially set.

Currently, students who elect the Credit/No Credit grading option must earn a C- or better in the course in order to receive credit. We recommend changing the minimum required grade to earn credit to a D-. While this should not be an issue in most instances for undergraduate students

since they cannot elect the option for required courses, there may be negative ramifications for graduate and/or professional students, and we therefore recommend further discussion involving the Graduate College and wider representation from graduate and professional students and the faculty and staff who work primarily with graduate and/or professional students before implementing this change.

We recommend changing the Credit/No Credit policy to allow students on academic probation to elect the Credit/No Credit grading option for a maximum of one course per semester. Students in good academic standing should continue to be allowed to elect the Credit/No Credit grading option for a maximum of two courses per semester.

We recommend continuing the current policy around the application of courses taken for Credit/No Credit toward specific requirements. This policy prevents students from electing the Credit/No Credit option for courses meeting major, minor, or General Education requirements. Additionally, we suggest the Council of Undergraduate Deans (CoUD) discuss current practices around this limitation to ensure the policy is consistently applied across all colleges.

Finally, we recommend the creation of a group to review the campus grade replacement policy in Section 3-309. Examination of that policy was outside of the scope of this task force's charge, but we do think feedback from stakeholders and the task force members themselves points to a need for review.