

March 19, 2020  
Columbia College - General Studies Committee on Instruction

***For the consideration of the President and Provost of Columbia University:***

Recommendations for alternative academic policies in light of the COVID-19 outbreak

In light of the tremendous disruption experienced by our students, faculty, and staff due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 outbreak in New York City and worldwide, the CC-GS Committee on Instruction (COI) recommends the following alternative academic policies be applied for the Spring 2020 term:

- **The COI recommends that spring break be extended by one week to allow faculty and students additional time to adapt to the current situation.**
  - Faculty are unfamiliar with teaching online, and they need more time not only to learn how to use Zoom and other online tools, but more importantly to develop effective strategies for crafting content that supports students' learning online. Faculty are also trying to establish new work environments at home, many while caring for children who are no longer going to schools during the day or for elderly relatives who are susceptible to the current virus.
  - Many undergraduate students are being forced to move off campus this week, and all of our students must now find alternative locations in which to engage in online academic work. Some students are dealing with situations that would be unimaginable even a few months ago: we know of students who are being quarantined upon their return home; some students may feel pressure to take on a job to help with financial hardships; some students have family and/or friends who are ill with the virus.
  - In sum, our students and faculty are currently experiencing a psychological and social burden brought on by a combination of a sudden eviction from their residences, a complete change in their academic structure, and a global pandemic that continues to spread quickly and to disrupt all aspects of our lives. We require more time to adjust to this new reality.
- **The COI recommends that all courses currently offered in Spring 2020 be graded on a pass/fail basis, with no exceptions.** This recommendation is based on the following considerations:
  - Students have not been adequately prepared to perform in an exclusively online environment, and they do not have sufficient training and experience to know what academic excellence looks like in an online course.
  - Now that most undergraduate students have been required to return to their homes or other locations, many of our students are in different time zones and cannot participate in course meetings at the regularly scheduled EST meeting times, especially when they are likely to be sharing confined spaces with others. Some students also lack the technology and/or private space necessary to participate effectively in remote classes. Even if these students are given access to recordings of class sessions or other course materials, they will be at a disadvantage and may likely feel unable to perform at a level of excellence.

- Students and faculty can no longer be assumed to have equal access to course materials—whether texts on reserve, or laboratory spaces, or art works displayed on classroom A/V equipment, or live performances in class or in NYC, or library materials—or to academic support in the form of office hours, help rooms, tutoring, study groups, and an immersive academic experience. Furthermore, and as noted above, students will be experiencing varying social conditions in terms of their access to medical care, housing, food, social support, and familial challenges that may impact their ability to fully engage in their studies. For students who already were living in precarious conditions, it is expected the COVID-19 crisis will only exacerbate this situation.
- Faculty are unaccustomed to teaching in an online environment and are experimenting with different pedagogical approaches needed for effective online learning even as the semester moves toward its conclusion. Faculty are also inexperienced in assessing student learning online, and are experiencing the strain of preparing class sessions and materials for students who are in different time zones or who are experiencing other challenges to being fully engaged in their coursework.
- The committee considered extending the current policies regarding the use of the pass/d/fail option (for example, extending the deadline by which students elect the pass/d/fail option for a class, allowing faculty to decide that an individual course will be graded only on pass/fail, or allowing DUS the flexibility to apply a class with a “P” to fulfill a requirement). However, each of these options put the responsibility of choice on the students and/or faculty and could create very different experiences from one student to another and one faculty member to another. Students should not feel pressured to opt for evaluative grades out of concern that a “P” would imply a weaker performance; nor should they feel pressured to opt for a “P” because they are disadvantaged in the class by difficult circumstances brought on by this emergency situation.
- **Given the level of uncertainty that students and faculty are facing in their personal circumstances, the inequities that they are encountering in their academic environment, and the unfamiliarity that they have with online learning, the COI feels strongly that the academic community would best be served if all courses are evaluated on a pass/fail basis with no exceptions. While some students and faculty may feel that the usual awarding of letter grades would be desirable for individual reasons, the imperative in this time of global crisis is to do what is best for the entire academic community so that the playing field is leveled for all.**
- The COI recommends that student transcripts containing the Spring 2020 term contain a clearly-worded notation of the circumstances of this semester. The COI also recommends that Columbia make a clear statement to all graduate and professional schools, and to the broader academic community, of this decision and of our rationale, so that others know how to interpret the grades of “P” given in this semester. The COI feels that this is an opportunity for Columbia to take a leadership role in rolling out this policy as a role model for others to follow.

- **The COI recommends that faculty take measures in their online instruction to ensure that students who cannot participate at the time of the regularly scheduled class meeting are still able to receive instruction.**
  - Faculty who feel comfortable sharing their class sessions online are encouraged to use the recording function in Zoom to record lectures or discussions and to share the files with students enrolled in the course.
  - Faculty who feel it is not possible to record their classes should provide the same course content in other ways to students who are in different time zones, who are experiencing problems with technology, etc. Some strategies would include sharing slides and lecture outlines, making notetaking a regular part of class (a group of students could take notes on class discussions and distribute them to the class), or offering the class at different times of day with the permission of all students.
  
- **The COI also recommends that the following guidance be given to all teaching faculty.**
  - Faculty are encouraged to offer students the maximum level of flexibility, by modifying both the nature of the assignments that they give and the timeline in which students are expected to complete coursework. Students and faculty alike are experiencing rapid and extreme changes to their work environments, schedules, and rhythms, and they should not be expected to perform as if they were all still in a full-time residential college environment.
  - Faculty are encouraged to have explicit conversations with students about the goals of the class for the second half of the semester, so that faculty and students alike continue to be engaged with the course material. A pass/fail semester offers the opportunity for the academic community to put aside pressures associated with assigning or receiving letter grades and to focus even more on the learning process; open communication may help this experience online to be productive and beneficial for faculty and students alike.
  - Faculty are encouraged to develop types of assignments that are particularly effective in online environments, with the support of learning designers in the Center for Teaching and Learning and other resources now being shared across institutions. They can also use Zoom to allow small group work for students in different time zones, and they can consider developing more low-stakes assignments that keep students in touch with one another outside of class meeting time. Faculty may wish to make modifications to their course material, where appropriate, to help students relate their studies to the current world situation. In general, faculty should strive to maintain frequent student engagement in order to help students feel connected to their Columbia community during this period of physical separation.
  - If students become ill, or if they have responsibility for others who are ill, faculty should provide course materials and other support to help the students complete the course. Incompletes will be supported by the schools in these circumstances