

Columbia College – General Studies Committee on Instruction
Guidance to instructors of undergraduate students

as of March 24, 2020

In response to questions from faculty and students, the CC-GS Committee on Instruction now offers the following guidance to instructors of undergraduate students:

Guidance on adjusting to the mandatory pass/fail system of grading

Columbia University has made the institutional decision that Spring 2020 will be a mandatory pass/fail term -- *i.e.*, all final grades for Spring 2020 will be either “pass” or “fail.” **While working within this new grading system, we remain committed to engaging our students and guiding their learning.** Faculty should therefore continue to measure student progress in their courses and to provide evaluative feedback on all course requirements, in order to help students gauge the success of their understanding and application of course material. Faculty, individually and in consultation with colleagues in their departments or programs, should consider and communicate to students their criteria for the grade of “pass” and for the grade of “fail” in this grading system.

Faculty are encouraged to consider various ways to provide clear guidance to students about their level of achievement of course learning goals. For example, some faculty may wish to assign grades on individual assignments in order to reflect the level of mastery a student has shown (although faculty should keep in mind that a final grade will not be awarded on the student’s transcript), while other faculty may wish to move to narrative feedback only in order to convey the level of mastery achieved. In any case, faculty are encouraged to keep their own personal records of student progress, so that they are prepared to write detailed letters of recommendation in the future for students who may need faculty support for applications to graduate school, professional schools, competitive opportunities, etc.

[Note: Some graduate schools and professional schools have already stated that they will accept grades of “pass” in Spring 2020 from schools who have declared a mandatory pass/fail system this semester, and that they will also consider students’ cumulative GPAs with the current disruption in mind. We hope that even more schools will soon follow suit. So your letters of recommendation will be read in this larger context as well.]

To reiterate earlier guidance: **Faculty are encouraged to have explicit conversations with students about the goals of their classes 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.

Guidance on providing course instruction in the most equitable ways possible

Many of our students are now living in very different conditions from those in which they began the semester. Some students are in different time zones; some students have technological challenges in connecting to online courses; some students have work schedules or sleep schedules that are now at odds with course meeting times; some students are caring for young children whose schools are closed. It is incumbent on every faculty member to make their instruction and their course materials available to all enrolled students.

Faculty are asked to poll their students before the next class meeting, in order to collect information about their students’ current conditions, especially those that might influence the ability to participate fully in class sessions delivered online at their regular times (e.g., due to time zones, access to broadband internet). A sample class poll developed by faculty who oversee the “Frontiers of Science” course (a course currently being taken by over 500 students) can be found [here](#). Faculty can also survey students through a Courseworks (Canvas) function.

Faculty are asked to expand their instruction as necessary so that students who face such challenges can participate more fully in our online instruction. Faculty can consider the following strategies, among others:

- Recording class sessions through Zoom and providing the recording files to students in the course for asynchronous viewing (***strongly recommended***);
- Conducting class sessions two times per day (especially in the case of seminars in which participation in discussion is expected);
- Developing small group projects that allow all students to be engaged with other students (particularly those who may be in close time zones), the results of which can be brought into full class sessions;
- Posting course materials on Courseworks;
- Giving oral exams instead of written exams, where practicable;
- Asking for student volunteers, or creating group projects that ask students, to take and post robust class notes (see the “[CC]” function in Zoom); and
- Offering additional office hours and/or individual conferences.

Our colleagues at the Center for Teaching and Learning have developed [additional guidance for ways to conduct asynchronous learning](#), and their learning designers would be happy to consult with faculty individually about ways to reach students most effectively.

To repeat earlier guidance to the faculty:

Given these extraordinary circumstances, we have the flexibility to alter our expectations of contact hours and workload hours, as long as we fulfill the overall expected course hours and that we have achieved reasonable learning goals in our courses. We must complete all courses, even if we can do so only by changing the learning goals for a class radically. In other words, we have to determine what learning looks like in the time of a global pandemic so that we are serving our students as well as possible while adjusting our shared expectations of what constitutes reasonable content and a reasonable timeline.

Faculty are strongly urged to show flexibility to their students and to reconsider their course requirements in light of our new instructional environment. Students may feel ill-equipped to contribute to class discussion if they are unable to attend class sessions or must participate at odd hours. **Therefore, class participation, in particular, may need to be redefined** for students to include such things as posting on class discussion boards, contribute to class chats, working in small student groups on projects, and more. 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 be aware that, even in mild cases, the COVID-19 virus can produce severe symptoms, and people who fall ill from the virus may be incapacitated for multiple weeks. So faculty are asked to be flexible with students in such cases and should provide course materials and other support to help the students complete the course. Incompletes will be supported by the schools in these circumstances.

As an academic community, we want to support our students’ progress toward the successful completion of this semester and toward the next stage of their studies or careers, so we will want to consider all possible ways we can show flexibility to affirm academic achievement before assuming that an incomplete or other postponement of work is approved. But of course, extenuating circumstances will be taken into account, and **faculty are encouraged to consult with students’ advising deans to determine the best course for difficult situations.**

The COI wishes to express its deep appreciation for our faculty colleagues who, through their tremendous efforts, are ensuring that students continue to have access to the remarkable opportunity that is a Columbia undergraduate education.