

MEMORANDUM

TO: Steering Committee

FROM: Committee on Academic Programs (CAP)

RE: Recommendation to Implement a Temporary Spring 2020 Ungraded Policy Option

DATE: March 18, 2020

Background:

In response to the unexpected transition to virtual learning during the Spring 2020 Academic Semester due to a global public health emergency, multiple departments and individuals have been having discussions about the best way to protect students and the integrity of the courses as we navigate online learning. Students have also petitioned the President to move towards an ungraded option. Accordingly, CAP was contacted by Steering on March 17, 2020 and asked to have informal discussions about the possibility of implementing an ungraded option for Spring 2020 courses.

Review:

CAP was able to convene a virtual meeting of the full committee on March 17, 2020. During that time, we brainstormed the pros and cons of keeping coursework letter graded, of converting entirely to an ungraded system, and to offer students the option of either. No official testimony was collected because of the time constraints for this preliminary plan; however, many informal inquiries were made to represent multiple perspectives. We determined that there are varying faculty perspectives on this issue, with some faculty strongly advocating that a blanket decision be made by the administration rather than create a situation for students where options might further complicate an already stressful semester situation. We considered the student petition to offer a grade/ungraded option that had garnered, at the time of this memo, nearly 2,000 signatures. We also considered the logistics of Records and Registration implementing our proposal, any insight available to us about how transitioning to ungraded courses is working at other institutions, and the issue of fairness and equity if the grading policy was to stay the same, move to ungraded, or offer a combination of both.

Recommendation:

Taking all of this information together, CAP recommends the reinstatement of a temporary [Spring 2020 Ungraded Option Policy](#) for the Spring 2020 semester, after which the original [Ungraded Option Policy](#) would go back into effect. **CAP's recommendation is to retain the normal system for grading as outlined in course syllabi at the start of the Spring semester as the default for students; however, the temporary policy would give all students the option to request to convert any or all of their Spring 2020 courses to the ungraded option.**

We are advising to offer the revised ungraded option as an *option* rather than as a mandate for various reasons. The most compelling is that it retains letter grades as the default grading system. By retaining letter grades as the default grading policy, it is ensuring that this semester's grades can count towards students' cumulative GPAs, could retain their ability to make the Dean's List (requires 3 graded courses

to be eligible), and could ensure that grades can appear on transcripts for coursework. These components are essential to students who are working towards higher GPAs for various reasons (including graduating with honors) and who need to document certain grades in courses for situations like applying to graduate, medical, or law school.

The proposed temporary Spring 2020 Ungraded Option Policy would allow students to request that the Office of Records and Registration designate a course as “Ungraded Option” (we propose April 24, 2020 as the revised deadline so students have time to become acquainted with their transitioned courses and so that R&R has time to process requests). A student's enrollment in a course as ungraded is not shared with the course instructor until after final grades are submitted. At the end of the semester, instructors submit regular letter grades. These grades are converted into either CD (credit) or NC (no credit) by the Office of Records and Registration. The student must earn a passing grade (D or better) to receive a CD designation. A failing grade will receive a NC designation. Such designations will not affect a student's GPA. Courses designated as CD are included among those applied toward graduation.

A course that is selected as an “Ungraded Option” in the Spring 2020 semester would still have a grade on file, although that grade will not appear on the student's transcript or be counted towards their GPA. The grade would be kept on file for situations including, but not limited to, earning a minimum grade for the course to count toward their major or minor requirements, or if grades are required to meet specific TCNJ program entrance, retention, or exit standards. All prerequisite grades for subsequent courses must still be met even if the student chooses the “Ungraded Option”.

Based on our discussion and collected evidence, it is clear that any grading decision this semester (letter grades, ungraded, or any combination) is going to present challenges and bring with it various concerns of fairness and equity that will have to be navigated collectively by the TCNJ community. We believe that our proposed plan is the best option to address some of the main obstacles presented to us; however, we recognize that this option requires clarity for it to be executed. Taking the advice of faculty feedback and to avoid the perception or feeling that the burden to choose is on the student instead of the faculty and administration, we strongly advise that this proposed situation be presented and framed exactly as the temporary policy would outline: *We are proceeding with the grading systems outlined on course syllabi at the start of the Spring 2020 semester, which in most cases means earning a letter grade for the course. However, we are temporarily instating a policy that would allow students to request that any or all of their grades be converted to an ungraded option.* Because there are important implications for each decision that we want students to feel fully informed about, we are simultaneously recommending that a [Q & A page](#) (this is an example that would need to be adjusted as needed) be used to clarify the decision, offer the steps to implement the ungraded option, and outline what deviating from the normal grading system would mean for their semester and overall transcript.

Please note that in our efforts to respond in a timely manner, there are some lingering issues that we ask other stakeholders to weigh in on if the proposal is supported. Changes to what we suggest would need to be edited within the documents. Those issues include:

- 1) What should the deadline be to convert grades to the ungraded option? We want to balance giving R&R time to process the requests with giving students the time to adjust to the new delivery of

their course. We propose either April 17 or April 24th as the deadline. April 24th is what is the current placeholder in our documents.

- 2) Should the mandatory 16 graded units needed for graduating with honors be adjusted in light of the option to move to ungraded? We do not believe this will be a universal issue, but might impact transfer students. We would value the insight of the Honors Advisory Committee.
- 3) How should repeat courses be handled? We address this point in the policy and Q&A, but there are some nuances that make this particular issue tricky. The original policy does not allow repeat courses to be taken as ungraded. Should that rule apply for this semester and how might we best communicate the details of this issue to students?
- 4) Should study abroad courses be handled differently? Since it is a global public health issue, our initial thoughts are that they should also be allowed to be taken as the ungraded option. We would value the Center for Global Engagement's expertise on this issue.

If you would like us to continue to collect informal testimony to inform those issues, we are happy to do so.