

MEMORANDUM

TO: TCNJ Deans, Chairs, Faculty, Staff, and Students

FROM: Committee on Academic Programs (CAP)

RE: Extension of Spring 2020 Ungraded Option Policy

DATE: December 6, 2020

Background: There has been an increase in student concerns about the lack of an expanded Ungraded Option policy for the fall semester, given that students were required to work in a remote environment in the context of the COVID pandemic, which has presented many challenges for students and families (for example, see a [memo from Student Government](#)).

Charge: Steering asked CAP to provide a recommendation on the possibility of extending the Spring 2020 Ungraded Option policy, as written, to Fall 2020, and whether there was support for such an extension. In addition, we were asked to list any potential concerns that CAP may have about implementing the Spring 2020 Ungraded Option policy in Fall 2020 (CAP was directed to limit its discussion of concerns to the application of the policy to the current term and not to revisit the policy itself.)

Procedure: CAP sent a survey to the faculty and to academic leaders on November 30, 2020 to determine the level of support for implementing the Spring 2020 Ungraded Option policy and to ask faculty/academic leaders to list benefits and concerns about the implementation of this policy (134 survey respondents). We solicited oral testimony from the Faculty Senate, Academic Leaders, the Council of Deans, and Student Government and received additional information regarding student use of resources on campus from the TCNJ Accessibility Resource Center, Mental Health Services, Center for Student Success, and the Dean of Students. Finally, CAP reviewed data from Records and Registration on the use of the Spring 2020 Ungraded option to determine the number of students who used the policy, the number of students who elected to use the policy for more than one class, and the breakdown of the policy usage by School.

Final Recommendation and rationale: After reviewing all of the data and testimony, CAP does not recommend implementing the Spring 2020 Ungraded Option policy (as written) in Fall 2020. CAP recognizes the significant challenges that students are facing. Testimony from faculty/academic leaders/staff indicates that they too understand the stress that students are experiencing due to the global pandemic and want to help students during this difficult time. However, there was significant concern about the implementation of this policy so late in the semester. In addition, testimony revealed other concerns about the repeated use of this policy in Fall 2020. We provide a partial list of concerns, as well as an alternative recommendation that could be implemented in Fall 2020 to help students in this time of need.

Concerns about implementing the Spring 2020 Ungraded Option policy for Fall 2020:

1. A major concern is that applying the Spring 2020 policy to the Fall 2020 semester would not be a fair or equitable policy. There are a number of students who chose to withdraw from courses (at least 494 total Ws utilized by 425 undergraduates and 9 graduate students*) or to take a leave of absence earlier in the semester (there are at least 160 students) who may have opted to stay in a course if this policy was in place earlier in the semester. There may be other unforeseen ramifications for having told parents and students from the start of the semester that the ungraded option was not a possibility and then implementing the policy now.
2. This policy as written poses significant challenges for programs that have Accreditation /Certification/Clinical requirements. This will likely force some schools to opt out of the policy, thereby establishing unequal access to the policy across campus.
3. The repeated use of this policy as written is problematic for prerequisite courses and the successful progression of students in the major and may have significant negative long term effects for students. Students may not be prepared for the next course in the sequence as they progress in the major. Furthermore, the lack of preparation may lead to poor performance in future classes and lead to class withdrawals, the need to take courses outside of the regular semester, delay graduation, etc. which could lead to additional financial burden.
4. Repeated use of this policy will delay processing academic probation and/or academic dismissal statuses (which were put on hold in Spring 2020 as a result of the policy), which could again lead to a financial burden on families.
5. There was a lack of timely, specific data for the fall 2020 semester from the student body about the population of students that would use the option this semester, for what courses, what are the student needs this semester, and what effect it would offer using it this semester. In addition, we need to collect data to help ensure that we are not disadvantaging the most vulnerable students. Implementing a well crafted survey that collects more data would allow us to make a timely, informed decision. Here is an example generated by the students at Rutgers to show the need for a pass-fail option this Fall 2020 semester. [Rutgers survey data report](#).
6. Finally, CAP would like to point out that the timing of this charge made it virtually impossible to make a fair decision. Moreover, the implementation of the policy at this late stage would prove challenging for proper student advisement and for Records and Registration, in part due to faculty and staff furloughs that will take place in January. Records and Registration would only have a short three-week turn around time in January to process possibly thousands of Ungraded Option grade changes along with the additional end of term processes (e.g., degree conferral, Dean's List, Academic Standing processing). In the future Steering should give CAP and the campus community at large an appropriate amount of time to handle a charge of this magnitude and with such a large impact.

Alternative model: CAP recognizes that students are still facing significant challenges and increased stress/anxiety caused by the pandemic. There is a high need to support students during this difficult time. However, we feel strongly that any policy implemented needs to be fair and equitable for all TCNJ students. Therefore, as an alternative to extending the Spring 2020

Ungraded Option policy, we **strongly recommend extending the deadline to withdraw from courses or from the semester until January 8th, 2021** (this date was determined in consultation with Records and Registration). The Financial Aid Office confirmed there are no ramifications to extending the course and/or semester withdrawals for Fall 2020. There are no refunds for late course withdrawals or late semester withdrawals. We encourage that the student should seek advice from faculty advisors before making these important decisions. The College should also provide transparent instructions on a web page with a specific procedure for students to follow. A student could pursue the two options listed below.

1) Course withdrawal for any subset of courses: Students may withdraw from individual courses via an extension of the Fall 2020 date for the [Withdrawing from a Course](#) policy. At this time students would not be able to withdraw from courses using the self-service in PAWS as grade rosters would be open. Records and Registration would have to create an electronic form or use email for student requests of course withdrawal in this extended period.

2) Semester withdrawal from all courses: If the student wishes to withdraw from all classes for Fall 2020, they will need to fill in a form that records and registration will create for this purpose. We strongly encourage students to discuss this option with academic advisors. Please note that students that were on academic probation at the end of Spring 2020 who opt to take a semester withdrawal for Fall 2020 will not be at risk of dismissal from the college at this time.

If the college decides to allow the extension of the withdrawal policy for the Fall 2020 semester, we encourage the college to apply this policy retroactively to the Summer 2020 sessions and to apply this extended policy to Winter 2020 sessions.

Finally, CAP would like to note that given the similar nature and structure of the upcoming Winter/Spring 2021 semesters, it is critical to address this broader issue as soon as possible. Should the Steering Committee want to consider an Ungraded Option policy for forthcoming semesters, we encourage Steering to forward such a charge prior to the start of a new semester to ensure equity and to enable CAP to adequately address the concerns of the students, faculty, staff, and academic leaders.

Data from Records and Registration that factored into our decision::

1. Records and registration gave us quick estimates on the use of the Spring 2020 Ungraded Option. A total of 2156 students used the policy. Of these, 1175 students applied this to only 1 class (54%). Of the remaining 46% of students, 24% used the policy for 2 classes, 11% for 3 classes and remainder for 4 or more.
2. The Fall 2020 course withdrawal rates were similar to Fall 2019.

3. The Fall mid-semester progress report distributions were similar in Fall 2019 and Fall 2020.

**Please note that the numbers regarding the number of course withdrawals in Concern #1 does not include any approved late withdrawals that are still being processed, therefore this number is likely to increase.*