

MEMORANDUM

TO: TCNJ Steering Committee

FROM: Committee on Academic Programs (CAP)

RE: Spring 2021 Ungraded Option Policy

DATE: March 10, 2021

Charge: For the rationale listed in CAP's memo, Steering charges CAP, first, to recommend an ungraded option policy for the Spring 2021 semester. CAP should explain clearly how its recommendation is supported by the information available to it, including, but not limited to: testimony on a related charge from the fall of 2020, academic performance data, course evaluation data, and surveys of students at TCNJ. CAP should consult with Records and Registration, Student Affairs (in particular the Dean of Students), the Center for Student Success, the Accessibility Resource Center, the Campus Diversity Council, Academic Leaders, the Dean's Council, Faculty Senate, and Student Government. CAP must submit its final recommendation to Steering no later than March 10th, 2021, one week before Steering's last meeting before the April 5th Withdraw deadline.

Rationale: CAP recognizes that TCNJ's positive planning mechanisms have been very successful. Faculty, staff and administration have made remarkable efforts in this extraordinary time. Faculty made significant adjustments to their courses to help adapt to online and Flex environments. Faculty also showed flexibility in designing assessments, grading and deadlines. Staff and administrators made significant adjustments to not only accommodate the distance-learning mode, but to overcome equity barriers where possible. Indeed, supporting data indicates that these positive changes are making a difference.

- Student course evaluations in Fall 2020 were very positive and similar to student course evaluations from Fall 2019 (with a higher response in 2020 compared to 2019, likely due to reporting software changes).
- Grade distributions and overall GPAs were similar between Fall 2019 and Fall 2020. Data was compiled in order to observe distributions by school, by demographics (race/ethnicity) and for first-semester students (first year, transfer students).
- There were some data that suggest that students may still be facing challenges in the remote environment:
 - There were more In Progress (IP) grades in Fall 2020 compared to Fall 2019 (692 vs 187 for undergraduate courses, and 733 vs 189 for graduate courses, respectively). The IPs need to be resolved and we will not know the impact of this increase in IPs for up to one year.

- The number of Fall 2020 course withdrawals, including the late withdrawals as allowed under the Fall 2020 extended withdraw date, is roughly double that of Fall 2019 (507 undergraduate students with 715 total withdrawals in Fall 2019 vs 828 undergraduate students with 1349 total withdrawals in Fall 2020; 521 graduate students with 724 total withdrawals in Fall 2019 vs 841 graduate students with 1365 total withdrawals in Fall 2020).

While these data points show that changes made have had a positive impact, students continue to face significant challenges that warrant continued compassion. For example:

- Important health stressors are still in place during Spring 2021 semester
 - Covid numbers are much higher today than in Spring 2020 (~ 35,000 cases per day in April 2020 compared to 105,000 cases per day currently nationwide- with a recent peak in January 2021 of close to 300,000 cases per day).
 - New Covid variants are complicating recovery from crisis mode
 - Vaccination distribution plans are moving slowly and College Professors and students without extenuating circumstances are still not eligible.
 - Significant consequences of infection still affect our campus community
 - Students' family members becoming ill, hospitalized and/or passing.
 - Students contracting COVID, flu and/or other viruses
 - Students taking over role of caretaker/tutor in their families
 - Students' lack of privacy and places for study
 - Economic factors affect lives in our community
 - Loss of income and/or housing
 - Food insecurity
 - Limited access to technology and infrastructure for technology
- Unprecedented stressors to our overall campus community are still with us
 - Connection to the TCNJ community - one of our greatest strengths - is still weakened.
 - First semester/year students lack strong, in-person connection to assist them, to help them bond to our greater campus community. In addition, it is more challenging to access campus services, drop-in tutoring, group study spaces, etc.
 - Students are moving between regular housing and the COVID isolation dorms endure significant disruption, which while an absolute necessity, adds insecurity for affected students.
 - Logistical stressors are still a concern.
 - Continuing technology access issues, such as internet bandwidth.
 - Lack of focused scholarly space for many of our students.
 - Challenge of students moving between flex and remote classes.

- Teaching Modes changed for Spring 2021 semester,
 - Flex mode was introduced, with some students in person and others fully remote.
 - Students may need to switch back and forth between flex and remote if they are exposed or infected with COVID or other health conditions.

Procedure: To generate a preliminary policy, CAP reviewed feedback from surveys and testimony from faculty, staff and administrators in Fall 2020, as well as from a student survey and testimony from student government. While feedback in the fall did not support implementing a broad Emergency Ungraded policy (similar to the Spring 2020 policy) perhaps due to the late request for an option where all courses could be taken Ungraded (CD/ND), strong support existed for a reasonable, compassionate response from the college. In addition, CAP researched current ungraded policies at other institutions and held extensive discussions in order to develop an equitable and reasonable preliminary emergency ungraded option policy. CAP solicited initial feedback on the preliminary policy from Student Government, Faculty Senate Executive Board, Academic Leaders, Graduate Studies Council, Accessibility Resource Center, Center for Student Success, Dean of Students, and the Campus Diversity Council.

CAP determined that one course was fair and reasonable based on:

- Data from the analysis of the spring 2020 ungraded option usage where 54% of students only selected one course for ungraded (only 11% of students elected to take 3 or more courses ungraded).
- CAP carefully considered the impact of the number of ungraded courses on students' future success. It is important for students to have a solid foundation to move forward in their majors and CAP has learned of examples of TCNJ students and students at other institutions who have faced challenges when attempting to transfer credits to other programs, to apply for professional schools, etc. when the required courses are listed as CD.

CAP determined that the deadline of April 16th was a fair and reasonable deadline to select the ungraded option because:

- This date coincides with the course withdrawal deadline and regular ungraded option deadline.
- The spring 2021 deadline for course withdrawal and the regular ungraded option was originally scheduled for April 5, 2021. This date extended to April 16, 2021 (2.5 weeks after the Mid-Semester Progress reports are due) in order to allow students extra time to consult with their professors and/or academic advisors before making decisions about their courses.

Final Recommendation: CAP used feedback from a campus-wide survey and oral testimony from faculty, students, staff and academic leaders to revise the proposed policy. There were 354

respondents (311 students and 43 faculty/staff) for the survey with 87.8% supporting the implementation of this policy. When considering only faculty/staff responses, 65.7% were in favor of implementing this policy. Of the academic leaders polled, ~66% supported the implementation of this policy. The policy was also endorsed by the key stakeholders listed above, including the Campus Diversity Council. CAP voted unanimously in support of this final recommendation. The intent of the final version of the recommended policy is to provide some flexibility to students during this challenging time without having significant negative impacts on their progress at TCNJ and their career trajectory.

Emergency Ungraded Option for Spring 2021

- Students may select one course to apply the ungraded option (with some limited exceptions listed below). This policy will apply to both graduate and undergraduate courses.
- Any student, regardless of number of completed course units or credit hours, may use this policy and designate an eligible course to apply the ungraded option (all students, and must consult their advisors prior to selecting this option).
- Students must request or rescind the Spring 2021 Ungraded Option by April 16, 2021. This is the current course withdrawal and regular ungraded option deadline.
 - Please note that going beyond this deadline will cause delays for all end of term processing for all students (i.e., final grading, semester and cum GPAs, repeat of course processing, Dean's List, and graduation check out and degree posting).
- **Exceptions:** there are two categories of exception to the use of this policy:
 1. Courses for which the ungraded option can be applied but students are required to meet a minimum grade. If a student does not meet the minimum grade then they will need to repeat the course. Courses that fall in this category may:
 - a. Require a specific minimum grade for major/program or for graduation (Find this information housed in the [undergraduate](#) and graduate bulletins and in the PAWS Academic Requirements report)
 - b. Function as a gateway course for program entrance/admission ([Change of Major Information](#))
 - c. Count as a prerequisite course (Find this information housed in the [undergraduate](#) and [graduate bulletins](#) and in the PAWS Academic Requirements report)

In this case, if a course listed in a-c above is selected, then a CD/ND grade would be recorded on the transcript. A list of the assigned letter grades will be sent to Department Chairs for review.

 - a. Chairs will remove students from succeeding classes if stated prerequisite requirement(s) are not met.
 - b. Chairs may delay program entrance until gateway standards are achieved.

1. Students (who do not meet the minimum grade requirement) must repeat the course before moving forward.
 2. Students must still meet the minimum grade requirement before they will be permitted to take the next course in the sequence, or gain entrance into the desired academic program.
2. Courses for which the ungraded option cannot be applied (letter grades must be recorded on transcript).
- a. Courses that fall into this category may include:
 - i. Courses in schools/programs with specific accreditation and/or other external requirements* (as was the case in Spring 2020 Interim Ungraded Policy)
 - ii. Capstones
 - iii. Clinicals
 - iv. Practicum, Fieldwork experiences
 - v. Internship courses with a minimum skill requirement
 - b. Schools/Departments must provide Academic Affairs and Records & Registration with a complete list of designated courses which fall under this exclusion category by (March 19, 2021)

Please refer to the full policy document for additional information.