Analysis of Possible Academic Accommodations for the Spring 2020 Term

A Report from the Yale College Committee on Teaching and Learning (CTL)
March 31, 2020

Summary
Two possible grading schemes have received wide attention as possible responses to the circumstances Yale College faces as its students complete the last five weeks of the spring term through distance learning:

1. Universal Pass/No Record (UPN)
2. Optional Credit/D/F, the policy currently in effect (Cr/D/F)

CTL worked with the Yale College Council (YCC) to survey students, and with the Poorvu Center to survey faculty, about their preferences for these or other grading systems. In this report, we explain the UPN and Optional Cr/D/F policies as they exist now, their pros and cons, and a series of modifications of these policies suggested by survey respondents that might make either more palatable to more members of the Yale community.

The YCC, in consultation with CTL, prepared a separate analysis of the student survey data, which we endorse. The YCC has also prepared its own analysis of the pros and cons of different grading schemes. We recommend all faculty members read the two YCC documents, which are available in the Box folder of materials for the April 2, 2020 faculty meeting.

This report presents analysis of the survey of faculty and of the CTL’s own analysis of different grading schemes. The survey data show that faculty and students diverge in their views of the options presented to them. While 69% of students favor UPN, only 28% of faculty favor this option; 43% of faculty favor Optional CR/D/F; and the remainder of faculty say "either is fine" or prefer other options. We reviewed hundreds of narrative responses from faculty and thousands of narrative responses from students. Many argued passionately for UPN or Optional Cr/D/F, showing that highly polarized camps have formed in favor of each option. However, there were also many students and faculty who suggested modifications to the basic UPN or Optional Cr/D/F policies that could move either option toward a middle ground between the two extremes.

We hope this report will frame the discussion over grading options to be held by the Yale faculty and help move toward a final resolution of this issue.
Brief Statement of the Situation:
Eight weeks out of the thirteen-week spring 2020 term had been completed when, on March 10, 2020, during spring recess, students were told not to return to Yale and to continue the term through online distance learning. On March 20, 2020, President Salovey and Dean Chun announced that a new grading scheme would be implemented, now known as “Optional Cr/D/F.” On March 28, 2020, Dean Chun informed the faculty that, although this issue would not be decided by vote, further discussion of grading with the Yale College faculty would take place at the April 2 Yale College Faculty Meeting. This report is intended to inform that discussion.

Optional Cr/D/F
Several details of the Optional Cr/D/F policy have been misunderstood both by faculty and students, so we summarize here the rules currently in place:

Any and all courses this term may be taken Cr/D/F and will not count against the usual limitations for Cr/D/F courses allowed in a term (two), nor against the limitations allowed toward the bachelor’s degree (four)

Any course taken under the Cr/D/F option this term may be used toward distributional or major requirements, including the senior essay. The Cr/D/F option may also be used towards the graduate portion of coursework towards a dual degree

Students have until the last day of finals (May 6, 2020) to select the Cr/D/F option. This means all assignments/assessments will be complete before an option must be selected

Students also have until the last day of finals to withdraw from a course. If a student chooses to withdraw from a course, no mark of W nor any record of the course will appear on the transcript. However, students who need a mark of W on their record to reflect full-time enrollment will be able to receive it

Students may request a grade of Pass if they are unable to complete further work but have completed sufficient work to warrant a non-failing grade, as determined in consultation with their course instructor

This term’s grades will not be factored into the calculation of general honors, distinction in the major, or other awards

Universal Pass/No Record
There are many possible variants of the Universal Pass/No Record policy, but the following is the version presented to students in the YCC/CTL survey:

Students receive a P (Pass) on their transcript for every class in which they would (under traditional scaling) receive a letter grade between A-D; any courses for which they receive a grade of F would be removed from their transcript
Surveys of Student and Faculty Opinion on Grading Policy

Over this past week, CTL worked with the YCC to survey students, and with the Poorvu Center to survey faculty, as to their preferences for Optional Cr/D/F, Universal Pass/No Record, or other grading systems.

Student Survey
This survey was run March 26-28, as the first week of distance learning was completed. CTL endorses the separate document showing the YCC’s analysis of the student survey data. We summarize here just a few features:

1. Participation was remarkable, with 4,544 students responding.

2. Student preferences were:

   - Universal Pass/No Record: 68.7%
   - Optional Credit/D/F: 23.3%
   - Other: 4.4%
   - No preference: 3.6%

3. In addition to the numerical data analyzed in the YCC report, the survey resulted in thousands of narrative responses that members of the CTL read. While most responses were polarized toward either UPN or Optional Cr/D/F, some suggested variants intended to combine aspects of each.

Faculty Survey
This survey was run March 27-29, just after the first week of distance learning was completed.

1. 340 faculty completed the survey.

2. Faculty preferences were:

   - Universal Pass/No Record: 28.2%
   - Optional Credit/D/F: 42.9%
   - Other: 15.0%
   - "Either is fine": 13.8%

3. There were hundreds of narrative responses; CTL members read them all. The results were also shared with the Dean's office and others in the Yale administration. Please know in advance of the April 2 Yale College Faculty Meeting that your voices have been heard in this matter.

As was the case for the student survey, most responses were polarized toward UPN or Optional Cr/D/F but, again, there were many responses suggesting variants intended to combine aspects of each.

CTL Analysis of the Surveys
The full YCC report on the student survey details the number of students who, because of situations they currently find themselves in, report many and varied types of barriers to learning. The more than one hundred pages of narrative responses from students contain many
heartbreaking stories of students in truly difficult circumstances. While the often very personal narratives from the student survey have not been shared with the Yale College Faculty Meeting, we expect many of you are aware of such circumstances.

The numbers suggest a divergence of opinion among students, the majority of whom favor UPN, and the faculty, the plurality of whom favor Optional Cr/D/F.

A common argument in favor of UPN is a concern for equity, now that students vary in their ability to access to electronic resources and in the health and financial challenges that they face. The YCC analysis of the student survey data show that students who favor UPN are as much as twice as likely to experience financial insecurity, intense home responsibilities, or sick loved ones. Student organizations, such as the Asian American Students Alliance, Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan de Yale, the Association of Native Americans at Yale, and the Black Student Alliance at Yale, have argued that such challenges are especially salient for first-generation/low-income (FGLI) and other groups of students, and for this reason they have endorsed the UPN option. On the other hand, it should be noted that some FGLI students expressed their preference for the Optional Cr/D/F option and signaled that they are unhappy that others are trying to speak for them. These students want the option to earn letter grades to show the academic progress they are making as they adjust to Yale.

CTL members are concerned that what seems reasonable to many this week may no longer be reasonable several weeks from now, if increasing numbers of faculty and students become unable to teach and learn due to illness. Some members of CTL participated in our discussions while ill, and this was a grim preview of what may be to come.

**CTL Analysis of Universal Pass/No Record versus Optional Credit/D/Fail**

The YCC report summarizes a list of pros and cons for each grading system and we refer readers to it.

Each of the two grading-system options included in surveys to faculty and students is thought to be better for different sets of students. The UPN system is thought to be more equitable for students who are disadvantaged by the many current circumstances that may not allow them to compete for grades on an equal basis, while UPN would hinder students who want to be able to earn the reward of good grades, even if they have to overcome adversity to do so. The Optional Cr/D/F system is thought to have the reverse implications: worse for students who are disadvantaged by the current circumstances, and better for students whose circumstances allow them to focus on academics and earn top grades.

Just as Yale students and faculty as a whole are divided, so the members of the CTL are divided on which of the two options might be best. Some committee members feel that their values compel them to prioritize the needs of disadvantaged students and, thus, to favor UPN. Others prioritize the issue of choice and argue that the Optional Cr/D/F system would allow such choice and benefit more students. As we are a divided committee, so in this report we do not recommend one or the other of these two options to the faculty.

What we DO offer are more options. Few CTL members actually favor either of the two options as given in the student and faculty surveys but, rather, favor various modified versions of the same. We outline, below, modifications of UPN and Optional Cr/D/F based on suggestions found in the narrative responses from the student and faculty surveys. These modifications are designed to move each of these options toward the other in an attempt to achieve some of the goals of each. We suggest that faculty weigh these additional options in further discussions.
Modification of Universal Pass/No Record Designed to Remedy Criticisms

The following modification of UPN was suggested by a number of faculty and further developed in discussion by CTL:

Universal Pass/No Record with Narrative Commendations

Students receive a P on their transcript for every class in which they (under traditional scaling) receive a grade of A-D; no courses in which they receive a grade of F are recorded on the transcript. In addition, instructors are directed to provide narrative commendations to students who have done outstanding work (students who, perhaps, would have received an A or A-, if letter grading had been available).

Argument for this proposal:

It provides a reward to students who do outstanding work in a course. This could help motivate students to keep learning. Students who worry that grades of "Pass" will scuttle future prospects can access the narrative commendations with an appended explanatory note from Yale as evidence of their outstanding work under exceptional circumstances. In addition, all student transcripts will carry marks of "Pass," and letter grades including "D" or "F" will not occur, thereby insuring more equity than would be the situation under Optional Cr/D/F. Narrative commendations would not appear on transcripts and, unlike grades, would remain outside normal expectations of evaluation.

Objections to this proposal and rebuttals to objections

Objection 1. Narrative commendations are not practical, particularly in large courses.

Rebuttal. Narrative commendations may be submitted via the existing End of Term Report mechanism (such commendations are stored centrally). Instructors of large-enrollment courses could simply paste in similar text for all students doing outstanding work, if they found it too much to personalize each commendation. Although beyond the scope of what can be accomplished this term, in the longer term the Registrar's Office can reconfigure computer systems to allow students to access these text commendations, along with an appended explanatory note from Yale, for use with scholarship, graduate school, and job applications.

Objection 2. Adding any type of grade or commendation dilutes the point of a universal system, which is to provide equity for students disadvantaged by the current situation.

Rebuttal. Yes, narrative commendations dilute equity to some extent, but they also at least partly address the concerns of students who advocate for Optional Cr/D/F that UPN does not allow grade distinctions among students.

Objection 3. Narrative commendations do not make up for the boost in GPA desired by some students would select letter grades under Optional Cr/D/F

Rebuttal. Yes, this would be sacrificed as part of this compromise.
Modifications of Optional Credit/D/Fail Designed to Remedy Criticisms

CTL discussed a number of suggestions from students and faculty that, used individually or in combination, could address the concerns over equity expressed by advocates of Universal Pass/No Record.

Make Cr/D/F an opt-out system.
All courses would default to Cr/D/F, and students would need to opt out in order to receive a letter grade. While this may seem merely cosmetic, it has the rhetorical value of indicating an institutional preference while making possible an alternative. It can be expected that many students would leave the default and fewer students would opt out. This institutional policy might alleviate concerns about Harvard Medical School and other organizations that have moved to accept marks of Credit or Pass only when there is a universal policy. Most advocates of Optional Cr/D/F on CTL prefer the opt-out system as a way to support the value of equity.

Retroactive decision-making
This idea comes from the YCC report: "Students should, even shortly after the semester is over, be able to withdraw from a course without a W and/or revert from Cr/D/F to Letter Grades (and vice-versa) after seeing their performance." Retroactive decision-making would lower student anxiety over grading at a time when anxiety over many other issues is high. A weaker version of this option would have Yale give instructors explicit guidance to tell students their expected grades prior to the May 6 deadline for selecting a grading option or withdrawing from a course. We note that policies that attempt to direct faculty behavior are unlikely to be universally implemented.

Students’ final grade should not be lower than the grade they had earned prior to spring recess
Many students and faculty submitted this suggestion. Instructors would be directed that, for courses with sufficient graded assessments prior to spring break: 1) students would be told the grade they had earned prior to spring recess; 2) the final grade would not be any lower, provided they remained actively engaged in the course; and 3) excellent work during the last five weeks of the term could be used to raise a student’s grade.

Negotiate with Harvard Medical School to accept marks of "Credit," even in optional systems
Yale should work with Harvard Medical School and institutions that, like HMS, have announced they will not accept grades of "Pass" or "Cr" unless they are the result of fully universal grading systems. The Harvard Medical School policy is not helpful.

Reassure students that Yale will put its full support behind students who select Cr/D/F
Students are concerned about a possible stigma attached to marks of "Cr", and that marks of Cr will jeopardize their scholarship support. Yale should reassure students that: 1) their transcripts will carry a clear statement that Yale expects spring 2020 marks of Cr to be accepted without prejudice; and 2) Yale will provide strong support to students seeking scholarship renewal or applying to institutions that require letter grades.
Committee on Teaching and Learning Members, Spring 2020

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
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<tr>
<td>Michael Koelle, chair</td>
<td>Professor of Molecular Biophysics &amp; Biochemistry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surjit Chandhoke, secretary</td>
<td>Dean of Trumbull College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arielle Baskin-Sommers</td>
<td>Assistant Professor of Psychology and of Psychiatry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucas Bender</td>
<td>Assistant Professor of East Asian Languages and Literatures and of Humanities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexandre Debs</td>
<td>Associate Professor of Political Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christine DiMeglio</td>
<td>Senior Lecturer in Chemistry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer Frederick</td>
<td>Executive Director, Yale Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>John Hall</td>
<td>Senior Lecturer, Mathematics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anin Luo '20</td>
<td>Student, Timothy Dwight College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guna Mandava '21</td>
<td>Student, Benjamin Franklin College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shonna Marshall</td>
<td>Deputy University Registrar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pam Schirmeister</td>
<td>Dean of Undergraduate Education and Senior Associate Dean, Yale College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risa Sodi</td>
<td>Assistant Dean of Academic Affairs, Director of Advising and Special Programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily Svensen</td>
<td>Director, Office of Institutional Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole Zhen ’22</td>
<td>Student, Silliman College</td>
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