

UTD: Double A Grading Policy Spring 2020

FAQs

(Adapted from [#HarvardForAll](#))

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I. What does a Double A Grading Model entail?

- A. Under a Double A system, students would receive credit for all of their courses and a grade of either “A” or “A-” on their transcript. Faculty can distribute between these two A grades at their own discretion, with no mandated distribution requirements. No student will be penalized for factors and circumstances outside of their control. Every student at UTD will receive one of these grades in all of their courses and receive credit towards their concentration, distributional requirements, and graduation. Faculty recommenders will also be instructed on best practices to address this semester in their letters for students in the upcoming years.

II. How does Double A differ from Pass/Fail?

- A. Students are currently operating under extraordinary circumstances. This should be reflected on their transcripts. A grade of “A” or “A-” along with an explanation of the context of the pandemic would buffer the potentially negative connotations of a grade of “Pass” for future employers and graduate admissions officers. Further, with a Pass/Fail system, students are still at risk of failing. Additionally, with some professional schools (i.e. medical schools) and certifications (i.e. ABET) requiring letter grades for verification, this system ensures that no student is put at a disadvantage due to an opt in pass/fail policy. Lastly, Pass/Fail is currently only permitted for concentration requirements by some departments. Double A would be standardized across the University and all courses, regardless of concentration, and will still satisfy any distributional and concentration requirements they were previously allotted to.

III. How does Double A differ from Universal Pass?

- A. While Universal Pass would enable educational equity by allowing all students to pass courses universally across the University, and would still include annotated transcripts and faculty recommender guidelines, it may pose concerns for students who require grades for this semester or who could benefit from a grade towards their GPA. Some students require graded courses for scholarship eligibility, ending academic probation, graduate schools, professional certifications, and more. Some students also planned courses to obtain certain GPA thresholds due to previous hardships. While we are lobbying administration to adjust probation thresholds, Double A goes one step further by giving students grades while remaining equitable.

IV. Why is this more equitable than giving students the option to take classes Pass/Fail?

- A. The optional route discriminates against students who are struggling while outside of UTD. If UTD allows options between a Pass/Fail and a letter grade, this creates a stigma around choosing Pass/Fail. When employers or graduate schools compare students, students who chose the Pass/Fail option could be perceived as less deserving of the position than those who opted into receiving a letter grade. This is a false choice for many, with the most disadvantaged not having the option to get a high letter grade due to hardships caused by a global pandemic. That stigma will fall on lines of socioeconomic status, disability, mental health concerns, race, sexual orientation, documentation status, and other familial circumstances. Students without internet access, stable housing, or food security may be forced to choose Pass/Fail because of their unique situation. Alternatively, students who don't have the ability to stay academically afloat during this crisis may still feel pressured to display a letter grade that is not representative of their full potential for fear of the stigma associated with Pass/Fail. This will again result in students being penalized academically for circumstances beyond their control. This option is not one of equal opportunity or understanding.

V. How will Double A affect earning of distributional and concentration requirements?

- A. Under a Double A policy, all courses, as a distribution of standard letter-grades, will satisfy any distributional, major, and graduation requirements to which they were previously allotted.

VI. How will students be driven to complete coursework for the semester under a Double A policy?

- A. UTD students care about their coursework. The Double A system would encourage them to work hard without fear of being academically punished because of factors beyond their control. Being able to complete coursework during a global pandemic is a statement of academic excellence in itself.
- B. Additionally, the students who are likely to fail under Pass/Fail are not lazy students, but those whose home lives, resources and other circumstances while at home prevent them from studying effectively. So functionally, moving to Double A is the same as Pass/Fail except that it equitably helps those who are most disadvantaged by the pandemic.

VII. If students do not have the necessary technological/internet access, wouldn't a better solution be for UTD to pay for all students to have access? Aren't some internet providers subsidizing low-income students?

- A. Firstly, it is very important to note and acknowledge that many students do not have internet access to complete their coursework and to study for their exams. Many students are putting themselves and their families at risk, even if they are not under strict quarantine or shelter at this time, by traveling miles to their nearest internet café or public library, against CDC recommendations of social distancing, for the sole purpose of being able to attend class. Many cities have closed public libraries and facilities, making many of the public internet options nonexistent.
- B. Secondly, the problems low-income and international students face stem from much more than just a lack of technological access. Many low-income students will now have to take care of younger siblings because of public school closings. Additionally, many students lack a quiet space to study in when they live in multigenerational housing and with public libraries closing. Time differences also play a major role in academic success, an obstacle particularly challenging for international students who returned home, as well as students stuck abroad. If a student has to stay awake until 3 AM every Monday-Thursday just to attend class, they will be exhausted, and unable to learn as well as they would be able to under normal campus conditions. Mental health concerns are also exacerbated during this time due to familial reasons, social isolation, and much more, making it much more difficult for some students to work and focus. Many queer students are being sent home to environments where they are facing hardships and trauma due to their sexuality or gender identity. Thus, the only solution to provide educational equity in this situation is to enact a universal policy. The Double A policy aims to alleviate structural inequities that cannot be solved by UTD throwing money at these problems.

VIII. Many students will need the grade boost this semester when applying for graduate programs. How does a universal program account for students whose GPAs matter significantly in the face of post-undergrad opportunities?

- A. If the Double A policy is implemented as standard university policy, the inflation of grades will not be a burden that would fall on individual students. Instead, inflation would be explained by this extenuating circumstance in a potential letter from the university.
- B. Graduate schools and their students are also dealing with this crisis right now just as we are. Several graduate programs have successfully implemented similar measures for their own students. Stanford Medicine recently switched to Pass/Fail

policy because of the inequities caused by the crisis. There is no reason for graduate schools not to be flexible and cognizant of the severity of this pandemic's impact on students, and it is only fitting that their admissions policies take that into account moving forward. One could argue that displaying grades, including lower ones, should merit the same response from graduate programs, but it is also unfair and taxing on students to demand that they individually resurface and explain to graduate schools the traumas and hardships they experienced during this pandemic to legitimize their performance.

- C. As students across more and more universities push for, and successfully implement, Double A and similar universal policies, there will be even greater pressure on graduate schools to recognize this semester as one occurring under highly unusual circumstances. This will make it clear to graduate schools that whatever GPA boost that could've occurred during this semester was less pressing than students' struggles during this global crisis. We have spoken to and are in collaboration with students at Harvard, Yale, UC Berkeley, Brown, and counting on this movement.
- D. We also stand by the Double A model instead of the option to show students grades because many graduate school admissions ask for student self-reporting, which would still throw many students under the bus if they are not able to perform as well as their peers due to the circumstances of the pandemic. Eliminating the stigma through universal grading in the face of graduate admissions only works if no one can submit a fully-evaluated letter grade that would disadvantage their peers in the eyes of these institutions.
- E. Finally, it is uncertain that students, even those with access to resources like shelter and internet, will continue to do as well as they did at the beginning of this semester. While those without basic access to healthcare, food, and hygiene products are surely more vulnerable to COVID-19 and its detrimental effects, everyone is at risk in this pandemic. Many of us and our loved ones may be deeply impacted, and it is nearly impossible to predict how it will affect our lives and our academic performance.

IX. What about students worrying about letter grade professional requirements, like medical schools and ABET certification?

- A. The Double A system is a solution that ensures that all credits remain letter graded, while also guaranteeing a strong grade that demonstrates the resilience of the student body during this crisis. Furthermore, just like other graduate programs, medical schools and engineering schools have been dealing with the same problems we are during this pandemic. Medical school labs have shut down, and graduate programs all over have moved online, with some instituting alternative

grading measures themselves. Medical schools such as Stanford Med have switched over to a universal Pass/Fail grading system to account for students affected by the epidemic. Students at Harvard College reached out to Stanford Medical School and other medical schools to ask about how they will be handling this semester, and an admissions correspondent from Stanford has said that they “understand the current situation with courses as [their] courses have moved to Pass/Fail.” Yale, Stanford, Cornell, and Berkeley law schools have also switched to a similar system of credit/no credit for the semester in response to the pandemic. Graduate programs are cognizant of the disruptions that come with a crisis like this, and they are moving to address the inequities of this crisis for their students. It is clear from these examples that these institutions should and will be understanding of the circumstances that have made it necessary for us to demand a universal grading system like Double A.

- B. Other undergraduate institutions such as MIT have already implemented grading systems that eliminate regular letter grades for this semester. The increasing number of institutions moving toward universal grading measures is an incentive for medical schools, ABET and other programs to make this semester as flexible with requirements for all, as it would not be fair for them to deny entry to multiple schools’ applicant classes solely on the basis of “inflated” or universal passing grades.

X. Many students worked hard for the first half of the semester. Is it fair to them to inflate all grades?

- A. First and foremost, this is not grade inflation. Rather, it is a statement of the academic excellence achieved by all students through their strong adaptability and resilience during a global pandemic. It is important to acknowledge and praise the hard work done by students at the beginning of the semester, but we must also take into account that classes offered at UTD are structured differently. While one class may have had two writing assignments worth 60% of the final grade before the midterm, another class might have a final worth 50% of the final grade. It is unfair to have students’ uncompleted grades be scrutinized, compared, and held against them especially when the semester was uprooted so abruptly.
- B. Because of this, one of the leading reasons students will choose to have As on their transcripts is the structure of the course they are taking, rather than their actual academic achievement during the first half of this semester. As are the *acknowledgement of all students' excellence during such extenuating circumstances*, and would be the most equitable measure that our community can take in this period of difficulty.

- C. It is also important to note that the students who may not wish to present grades or will be disproportionately affected by COVID-19 also worked hard at the beginning of the semester! Adopting a ForAll policy will prevent everyone's hard work from turning into lower grades which they would not have received under normal circumstances.

XI. Why not give affected students a tuition refund and allow them to withdraw without penalty instead of adopting a universal policy?

- A. This option would once again deepen the divide between those who have the resources and freedom to fully complete remote classes online to the best of their ability, and those who do not. This obliges disadvantaged students to choose between attending to their family's economic security and physical health and staying on track academically. For low-income students, the possibility of getting a full-time job to support their families if they were to withdraw from classes this semester is slim, given the economic impact of the pandemic — many working people are already being laid off in the service industries and similar sectors.
- B. Many institutional resources and benefits are withdrawn when students take a leave from school, further removing any sort of institutional support that the university can provide for students in this challenging time.
- C. For undocumented students, maintaining in school ensures the ability to continue to receive state financial aid for the remaining years of their academic career at UTD. For DACA recipients specifically, continued enrollment in an institution of higher education is a requirement for renewing their status. For many international students, a tuition refund and the ability to withdraw is not a reasonable option as it will jeopardize their visa status.

XII. UTD is already unfair anyways. Why should this change now?

- A. We should strive to be the change we want to see. There is no reason to confine our expectations of the institutions we love to what the world has tried to force us to accept as reasonable and just. It is in times of crisis where we must come together to empower all students and ensure that the negative effects of this crisis are mitigated for all students, especially those with less resources and privilege.
- B. Education has become even more inequitable now due to the university's response to COVID-19, however necessary it was to protect public health and safety. Physically being on campus normally provides some degree of equalization, but without any access to campus assets, we cannot expect all students to produce the same quality of educational labor. The resource gap has widened, and we must act accordingly.

XIII. How would the implementation of a Double A policy affect senior theses and Distinctions?

- A. Double A would not have a direct effect on senior theses. Instead, considerations and decisions regarding senior theses and distinctions in a major subject or program will be dealt with by departments and their respective heads.

XIV. Why can we not make adjustments for students on a case-by-case basis?

- A. Any case-by-case process will ultimately leave some students behind. Students' situations will change as the semester continues, especially as COVID-19 spreads, and the situations some students are faced with at home are much too personal to be put under the kind of scrutiny a case-by-case system would require. In addition, working case-by-case places further burden on disadvantaged and under-resourced students to reach out and spend more time and energy than others on academic planning. With over 20,000 undergraduates at UTD, a case-by-case procedure is bound to be inconsistent and create inequities. This is a global crisis, which is why the true magnitude and spread of its impact cannot be judged on a case-by-case basis.

XV. Should I get a full tuition refund because I enrolled with the understanding that I would be given grades on a certain scale?

- A. Tuition concerns are valid regardless of grading system, since you did not agree to learning via online classes upon enrollment. However, the Double A system is most concerned with educational equity in the difficult and changing circumstances that we are facing. The Double A system is a solution that benefits everyone, ensuring that all students are recognized for their flexibility, adaptability, and resilience during a global crisis.