

Petition for A/NC or Double A Grading for Spring Quarter

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If you would like to add your name to this petition, please fill out this form:

<https://forms.gle/RJnWZsk5KWcQ8wU7>

If you are a student that would like to share how the current COVID-19 situation and the current S/NC grading basis will affect them, fill out this form: <https://forms.gle/TYGpMF1x592DiJLz9>

Introduction

On March 27th, the Faculty Senate voted 36-15 in favor of mandating a Universal Satisfactory/No Credit grading system¹ for the coming Spring Quarter in a move, it argued, that would prioritize academic equity and address the disruption caused by the ongoing COVID-19 epidemic. The body, however, voted in favor of the mandate over two other options – one of which was overwhelmingly supported by the Stanford student body.

ASSU Executives Erica Scott and Isaiah Drummond spoke during the meeting to advocate for an A+/Universal A/No Credit option, a measure decided upon by the ASSU following overwhelming student support for a A/No Credit (A/NC) grading system in a university-distributed survey. **Roughly 65% of respondents voted for such a system as their first choice**, in comparison to roughly 25% support for the next most popular option.

That the Faculty Senate would vote so overwhelmingly against a proposal with such strong student support is extremely troubling. Students will be bearing the brunt of this decision, yet were given less than a day to voice their concerns. Having faculty so readily dismiss student perspectives out of “discomfort” —especially in a decision that has profound impacts on their academic careers — is insulting, disrespectful, and disappointing.

¹Stanford Daily, <https://www.stanforddaily.com/2020/03/26/spring-classes-to-be-graded-on-satisfactory-no-credit-scale-faculty-senate-decides/>

Our Response

Now, more than ever, we must rethink what it means to be equitable in our community. The majority of the undergraduate population is now spread out across the country and world, in vastly different environments, facing unprecedented challenges in the face of this pandemic. The stability and support provided on Stanford campus — internet access, quiet spaces, reliable food sources, social community, etc. — are no longer available to all students. **With the likelihood that this pandemic will intensify in the coming months, the reality that no one can anticipate what will change in the future, and our broadening definition of community, the university must fundamentally change how it thinks about equity.**

As communication from ASSU Executives notes, online courses "[exacerbate] the inequities that students experience away from campus, and those who are most affected by the COVID-19 crisis may face serious barriers to academic success during Spring Quarter." Faced with the reality of vastly different learning environments for students spread out around the globe, **the university must calibrate its academic experience with ample consideration of the needs of its most vulnerable subpopulations.** It must provide a buffer against uncertainty, assume the best of its students, and lead with compassion. This pursuit, however, should not be mutually exclusive with ensuring that students have the opportunity to improve their standing for future endeavors. The two options most popular in the Faculty Senate — a universal S/NC system and an optional C/NC system — have their failures on these respective fronts.

While a mandatory S/NC grading policy may have appeal due to its uniformity, it hurts students who will be denied the chance to better their post-graduation prospects because of the lost opportunity to improve their grades. For instance, students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds typically need more time to adjust to Stanford than their privileged peers, but are able to achieve a stronger academic standing in the latter part of their Stanford careers. A mandatory S/NC policy would rob these students of the opportunity to achieve academic successes representative of their talent and ability, rather than relying on work completed under the often-overwhelming pressure of Stanford's rigorous, unfamiliar environment.

Additionally, the optional S/NC system would exacerbate the differences in academic outcomes between students who have differing levels of socio-economic privilege. Due to sudden and forced relocation, housing insecurity, and mental and physical distress caused by the changes that students have had to face due to the onset of COVID-19, students who have the privilege to opt-in to a graded system will generally be more financially, mentally and socio-economically stable. This dynamic will fundamentally disadvantage students moving forward, especially in post-graduate opportunities where they are compared to their likely more

privileged peers, who could take courses for a grade. Most medical schools, for example, have signaled that they would accept S/NC grades only if the policy is enforced universally. **An optional S/NC grading standard would extremely disadvantage students who need to take courses S/NC.** The concerns of inequity would only be further shifted to become the burden of those who most need support in these dire times.

An A/NC option would remedy these issues by granting students the ability to continue building upon or improving their GPA—which many of them need to get into graduate school programs, maintain scholarships, or various other programs outlined below. An A/NC grading system would acknowledge that students are operating in vastly different home environments, while providing a solution for students who may need grades for future employment or applications. **In short, an A/NC grading system (or some iteration of it) for spring quarter is by far the most equitable and compassionate solution for students for students facing extraordinary circumstances.** With the likelihood that this epidemic will worsen before it improves and that many students will continue to face exceptional non-academic challenges in their day-to-day lives, providing such a buffer would be the most compassionate measure for students facing unprecedented circumstances, one that would not go unappreciated across the student body.

We recognize, however, that the majority of the faculty senate disregarded the A/NC option in the March 27th meeting. As such, we see the A/A-/NC option as a reasonable compromise. This grading policy would allow professors to reward work without having to divert much from their judgment. Students will be able to earn credit and satisfy graduation requirements, but can also be duly rewarded for producing exceptional work in the midst of a global health crisis. The ability to earn an A/A- ensures that students have the opportunity to improve their GPA, but are not significantly penalized if the work they complete in the current disruptive environment is below their regular standard. **The A/A-/NC option addresses the base concern for equity the faculty senate espouses, without robbing students of the opportunity to improve their academic standing if they desire to do so.** Since students will have to deal with the consequences of the grading option that is chosen, their concerns must be prioritized when any decision is being made. No reasonable arguments against this option validate a disregard for the pressing student concerns that have been highlighted.

The notion that equity is achievable through a uniform decision which limits students' ability to better their academic standing, is destructive; the complexity of this situation deserves policies that extend past the solution passed by the faculty senate. We believe equity is achieved by implementing policies that uplift those whose ability to perform has been negatively impacted by their current and ever-changing circumstances, environments, mental/emotional states, resources and accessibility. It is important to recognize that this policy has the potential to affect the future success of every student who will be taking spring courses at

Stanford in 2020. The current policy, and the alternatives most favored by the faculty senate both fail to provide and prioritize academic support for the most underprivileged students in our community.

We, as the Community of Stanford University, hereby state:

Our frustration that the student representatives during the Faculty Senate discussion were not able to share their thoughts and those of their constituents;

Our disappointment in our votes —overwhelmingly in support of the A/NC option —not being taken into account after being asked to submit our thoughts and ideas;

Our concern for the integrity of the coming quarter(s) and students' efforts if a mandatory S/NC grading basis for all courses is upheld;

Our recognition of all disadvantaged students who are not supported by the S/NC option;

Our experience under these extenuating circumstances must be taken into account on the structuring of the grading process. The S/NC scale not only ignores equity but actively harms our students;

Our worry that, without the option to receive a letter grade, opportunities reliant on academic performance will be in jeopardy due to, not only Stanford administration's underestimation of the negative impact that COVID-19 has had on its students, but the inability of other institutions to mutually evaluate the detrimental effects of our present circumstances.

Impact on Student Lives

We worry that enacting a mandatory S/NC grading system for the spring quarter will have the following ramifications:

- Making it harder to pass: Raising the threshold from a D- to C- for the S credit makes a course harder to pass, in a moment when all students are under incredible pressure and living in uncertainty. This further harms the students that are most at risk, those who already deal with hardship and are now living under almost impossible circumstances.
- Negative impacts of a lack of opportunity to improve GPA for spring quarter that would arise if the S/NC option is chosen:
 - Fellowships with strict requirements (against the S notation)

- Potential loss of scholarships with stringent grade requirements
 - Jobs requiring a GPA threshold and looking negatively upon so many S/NC notations under core requirements
 - Honors proposals that take applicant grades into account
- This decision has the potential to impact future academic quarters at Stanford, not just the spring. Therefore it is imperative this choice be made with more credence given to the input of the student body.
- Students are still paying **full tuition** for a quarter that is lower both in quality by being online with new technology and in what will actually show up on our transcripts since this won't count towards our GPA. This affects students in the following ways:
 - More students might take leaves of absence
 - Plummeting levels of motivation amongst students
 - Higher rate of dissatisfaction with Stanford University, especially those later in their careers slated to become dissatisfied Stanford Alumni
- Students going through these academic changes will find themselves compared not only to students of this generation, but potentially of future generations. A notation on one's transcript may not make the difference in being awarded a fellowship, applying to graduate school, etc.
- This decision could impact future quarters' grading basis, as coronavirus might impact not just spring quarter.

Central Demands

With regard to how student voices were disregarded in this conversation, we demand:

1. That this conversation be **immediately reopened**, allowing students to advocate for themselves in a more fair manner.
 - a. In accordance with Faculty Senate guidelines, as soon as this petition reaches 500 signatures, we demand this petition be added to their agenda and a meeting be held **as soon as possible** in which students have slated time to voice our concerns
2. That student representatives in faculty/administrative spaces are allowed more time to discuss and advocate for themselves and their constituents, now and in the future.
3. That when the student body is asked to vote upon/present options, the vote of the overwhelming majority of the student population then be thoroughly and seriously considered in the decision-making process.

Students should be given an opportunity to earn letter grades for the spring quarter in either of the following options...²

1. A/NC: This option, although struck down by the Faculty Senate, would provide the most equitable form of grading. As highlighted above, many students are at risk from losing future and current opportunities without the benefits of an actual letter grade. Furthermore, many students will be at an extreme disadvantage to achieve academically due to innumerable circumstances that have already changed and others that we cannot predict. These students should not miss out on the chance to earn a high grade because of circumstances outside of their control.
2. A/A-/NC: This option, an amended version of the above, would also provide an opportunity for students to improve their GPAs without creating a gradient where students in better socioeconomic circumstances are far more likely to have significantly better outcomes. We believe this is an acceptable compromise, which accounts for the

² Note: Each “NC” should also be considered with a “null” option instead of no credit. Students are going through a literal pandemic and conditions will most likely worsen. If a student fails a class, would be unfair for this failure to appear on a student’s transcript. A pandemic should not cause a student’s future to be uncertain. Furthermore, the following proposals are not excuses for professors to unreasonably challenge their students to “earn” their A’s. Any effort made on behalf of students, specifically those that are disadvantaged in any way, to achieve academically this upcoming quarter should be lauded and respected.

needs of students without uniformly assigning As to all students who have successfully passed their courses.

Concluding Statement

To ensure fair and equitable practice for students, the faculty must measure its decisions through standards set by the IDEAL Initiative — a system the university has both created and committed itself to upholding.

The IDEAL website speaks to the value of student activism and community input, noting that “Stanford has benefited from the input and advocacy of community members” in seeking to create an inclusive environment. Throughout this decision process, the Faculty Senate has given little space for student input and disregarded the perspectives that it has received. Few faculty even consulted their own students about their perspectives prior to the meeting. For an institution so ready to celebrate the diversity of its student body and tout its community engagement, these actions are ironic and hypocritical. If the University is truly committed to its own goal of creating an inclusive community, it must reflect that commitment here.

Further, under the IDEAL initiative, the central goals listed are to ensure:

- that diversity of thought, experience and approach is represented in all sectors of our education and research enterprise;
- that all members of the campus community feel they belong and are supported regardless of their background, identity, or affiliations; and
- that all members of the campus community have broad access to the opportunities and benefits of Stanford.

The proposed systems — A/NC and A/A-/NC — are more inline with these goals than both the universal S/NC grading system and the optional S/NC grading system. A universal S/NC system would rob students of the opportunity to gain “broad access to the opportunities and benefits of Stanford” since it would hurt students whose future success hinges on having a GPA high enough to get into the right graduate or medical school program. An optional S/NC system would disproportionately harm students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and exacerbate inequalities that are already prevalent amongst students in academia.

On the other hand, the two proposed options neither rob students of the opportunity to better their academic outcomes, nor create a gradient where students from higher socio-economic strata with better access to resources have significantly better outcomes than worse off students.

We ask that you compassionately take the arguments presented above into account, and with newfound understanding of the difficulties that Stanford students are now facing due to the outbreak, reconsider your decision.

Signatures

Faculty Signatories

Student Signatories

Cameron Woods, Class of 2020
Zackery Bangs, Class of 2022
Gabby Crooks, Class of 2023
Nik Wesson, Class of 2023
Bella Cooper, Class of 2020
Sharon Du, Class of 2022
Anima Shrestha, Class of 2020
Leilani Mendoza, Class of 2022
Taylor Wright, Class of 2021
Ghufran Alkhamis, Class of 2020
Noah DeWald, Class of 2021
Eva Reyes, Class of 2020
Sean Michael, Class of 2023
Claire Denshaw, Class of 2021
Miro Vujicevic, Class of 2020
Tatiana White, Class of 2023
Abigail Graber, Class of 2022
Sophia Andrikopoulos, Class of 2021
Katie Jonsson, Class of 2021
Rachel Portillo, Class of 2021
Jacob Greene, Class of 2021
Ruth Ling, Class of 2022
Caleb Kelley, Class of 2022
Anchit Narain, Class of 2020
Joyce Huang, Class of 2021
Alexandra Taylor, Class of 2020
Kate Watkins, Class of 2020
Gabrielle Torrance, Class of 2020
Andrew Labott, Class of 2020

Amber Yang, Class of 2021
Kathryn Anderson, Class of 2020
Adonis Pugh, Class of 2021
Azhia Harris, Class of 2020
Nazli Ugur Koyluoglu, Class of 2022
Sami Raihane, Class of 2022
Sophie Dixon, Class of 2022
Jordi Montana-Lopez, Class of 2020
Willow Bowen, Class of 2022
Alexandra Crew, Class of 2020
Ryan Johnson, Class of 2021
Alice Artica, Class of 2022
Anna Greene, Class of 2021
Zaeda Blotner, Class of 2021
Bethlehem Engeda, Class of 2023
Blessing Edem, Class of 2020
Nina Randolph, Class of 2020
Mamadou Diallo, Class of 2020
Jabreea Johnson, Class of 2021
Ahmed Mohamed Ahmed, Class of 2021
Ezra Yoseph, Class of 2021
Taiwo Odunowo, Class of 2022
Madison Ambroise, Class of 2023