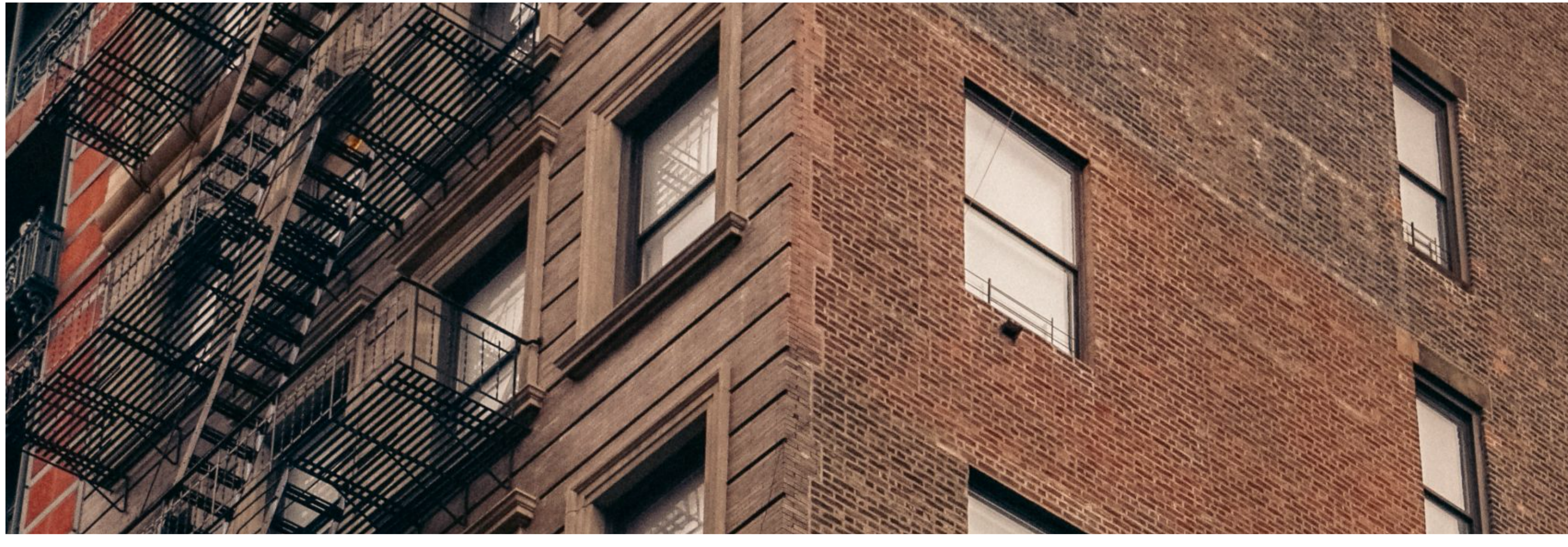# Understanding the Pass+/Pass/No Pass Option and Supporting Students

Understanding the Pass+/Pass/No Pass Option and Supporting Students

👤 Terri Johnson ▾   📅 December 3, 2020   🗁 Inclusive Excellence   Online/Hybrid Learning   Pedagogy

Editor's Note: As noted in an email from the Provost, students have the ability to opt into P+/P/NP grading for one undergraduate course per quarter for Academic Year 2020-21. The Fall Quarter 2020 Grade Mode Selection channel should be available for students on PioneerWeb. Please visit the Office of the Registrar's FAQ for more information.

By Valentina Iturbe-LaGrave, Ph.D., Director for Inclusive Teaching Practices, and Tom Romero, II JD., Ph.D., Associate Provost for IE Research & Curriculum Initiatives

The COVID-19 pandemic has warranted extraordinary grading policy changes across institutions of Higher Education in the United States. From UC-Berkeley, Harvard, MIT, and Georgetown to Middlebury College and Baylor University, academic leaders and accreditation authorities understand that college students are experiencing unforeseen challenges.

DU has adopted a one-time, Pass+/Pass/No Pass option for the Spring 2020 academic quarter. This option aligns with a rapidly growing trend while enacting equitable and inclusive educational praxis during an unprecedented academic situation. For context, a recent EDUCAUSE Review QuickPoll of 312 universities[1] noted that 77% of surveyed institutions had implemented Pass/Fail and Credit/No Credit options, 9% are considering flexible grading options, and 14% have not adapted grading and assessment policies.

As the situation unfolds, it has become evident that the burdens posed by the pandemic are borne differentially and inequitably, depending on students' circumstances. The many challenges of diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education have been exacerbated for many college students in the shift to online learning. For example, there have already been multiple documented incidents of individuals disrupting "Zoom" classrooms across the country by posting racist and other disturbing content that impairs learning while corroding students' wellbeing. More recently, data have emerged, demonstrating that the pandemic is negatively impacting communities of color here in Colorado and throughout much of the nation in much higher proportions.

Flexible grading and assessment options are in the best interest of diverse student communities because they recognize (1) the trauma experienced by our most vulnerable students, (2) the fluidity of a situation in which every students' circumstances can rapidly change, and (3) the unprecedented academic challenges students face as they learn from home. The following research-based content is intended to support all DU faculty in contextualizing the benefits of the extraordinary Pass+/Pass/No Pass evaluation option during this pandemic.

Student Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic:

- Illness experienced by themselves, family members, and loved ones
- Home environments that don't support a learning mindset
- Privacy issues related to real-time video/Zoom presence
- Anxiety
- Social isolation
- Depression
- Financial and food insecurity
- Challenges in accessing medical or counseling services
- Internet connectivity issues (i.e. no high-speed internet or unstable access)
- Out-of-date computers
- Challenges in adapting to online learning
- Increased pressures on time and study conditions due to family responsibilities or living arrangements
- Varying time-zones not aligned with synchronous instruction schedules]
- General angst about the economy
- General angst about Covid-19
- Being far from home
- No access to social network/support system

Benefits of Pass/Fail Evaluation:

- Reduced stress
- Reduced anxiety
- Reduced depression
- Enhanced wellbeing: physical, emotional, mental or spiritual health
- Increased learning focus
- Autonomy-supported learning climate
- Increased student engagement in learning activities
- Enhanced learning environment
- Promotion of intrinsic motivation leading to increased deep processing
- De-emphasized extrinsic measures of success (grades)
- Elimination of social stigma associated with low tiered grading
- Increased peer-to-peer collaboration

Pass/Fail Evaluation and Academic Performance:

- A multi-year study at the University of Virginia medical school documented how the pass/fail program enhanced well-being of students and elevated their satisfaction *while they sustained solid academic performance* (Bloodgood, Short, Jackson & Martindale, 2009).
- Colorado State University (CSU) researchers Novak, Paguyo, and Siller (2015) conducted a propensity score matching analysis to compare persistence rates of engineering students who participated in a pass/fail program versus engineering students who opted to receive traditional grades. After collecting and analyzing data from a three-year period, the CSU researchers found that *75.4% of pass/fail students persisted in comparison to 65.2% of students who stayed in the traditional grading system.*
- The potential for pass/fail initiatives to support our students in the short-term brings long-term implications to DU as we look to enrollment and persistence rates beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Potentially enhanced learning environments associated with pass/fail grading do not create an important decrement in academic performance (White & Fantone 2010). Flexible grading and assessment options are a timely, equitable and empathetic alternative to support students in a rapidly changing global health crisis.

Understanding Pass+/Pass/No Pass:

- Familiarize yourself with the new grading option, and remember that traditional grades are still necessary on course assignments, projects and tests to calculate the final grade upon which to define use of P+/P/NP.

  - **Pass Plus (P+)** is defined as institutional credit with a grade of C- or higher.
  - **Pass (P)** is defined as institutional credit with a grade of D+, D, or D-.
  - **No Pass (NP)** is defined as no institutional credit because the grade is lower than D-.

- Remind students to familiarize themselves with this new grading policy so they are fully aware of the implications of their decision to convert letter grades to P+/P/NP.
- If a student has questions, direct them to their academic advisor, dean's office, financial aid officer or any other campus resource with whom they regularly work on registration decisions.

Other Ways of Supporting Inclusive Practice:

- Invite students to use virtual Zoom backgrounds (In zoom, select preferences >VirtualBackground, there are several built-in choices, or they can customize by adding images with the "+" button).
- Assure students that it is fine not to use video, citing bandwidth issues as a reason.
- Consider providing synchronous and asynchronous content, this will ensure continuity for students in different time-zones and for whom situations arise.
- If you are using supplemental technology such as Slack, Twitch, Google Drive, etc., remember that some of your students are likely to be more digitally literate than others, often aligned with access and privilege, so consider creating a tutorial on how to set up and use these tools. You can also look one up on Lynda.com or YouTube.
- Limit the use of jargon and acronyms.
- Acknowledge that some students are living in hot-zones and sheltering in place.
- Check-in with students regularly, it is imperative to remember that their situations can rapidly change.
- Direct students to appropriate resources when needed.

Resources:

- **Technology Issues:** If students have internet issues, they should email provost@du.edu to request help. Also: IT@DU has a Laptop Loaner Program for students, and they have even shipped them to students across the country. You can also direct students to DU Resources for Students Taking Classes Remotely.
- **Food, Housing & Economic Insecurity:** While faculty are not equipped to handle these issues, student outreach & support is. Please refer any students you identify as particularly challenged to: http://sos.du.edu.
- **TheDU food pantry:** This supplemental food source is available to anyone with a DU ID who is experiencing need. It is located at Centennial Towers, Tuesdays 2-6pm. To prioritize health and safety of staff and clients, we're using an online request form and staggered pickup times in the loading zone at 1770 South Williams. If you have high need, we encourage you to contact Hunger Free Colorado's Food Resource Hotline, or check out their COVID-19 page. Faculty, staff, and students who have questions as to how they can help can contact Chad King at chad.king@du.edu.

As we are all acutely aware, we have little control over the external world. What we can control, however, is our ability to help our students find different pathways to success. Ultimately, these extraordinary times require us as a faculty to have care and compassion as our diverse students very differently encounter and experience the global pandemic.

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[1] The poll was conducted on April 7, 2020. Respondents represented 312 institutions. The poll consisted of thirteen questions and took most respondents less than two minutes to complete. Most respondents (294) represented US institutions. Other participating countries included Australia, Canada, China (Hong Kong), Finland, Ireland, Saint Lucia, and Trinidad and Tobago. An appropriately diverse range of institution sizes and Carnegie classifications participated.

QUESTIONS? ASK DUBOT