Updated Change in Deadline for Letter Grade Option in S/F and S/E Policy for Spring 2020

We are writing with an update to the change in grading policy for Spring 2020. This is the latest of several messages on this topic, but it is important that we get this issue right for students and faculty. We write today following further reflection and communications from students and faculty within AS&E and the College.

First, we will start with the most important news. The new deadline for undergraduate and graduate students to opt into a letter grade will be April 29, which is the last day of classes in Spring 2020. As before, students should submit their request for the letter grade option via this form; faculty will receive a list of students and their grading basis in the days after that deadline.

Second, we would like to explain why we established the default pass-fail (S/F or S/E) option and chose to adjust the deadline for the letter grade option. As you might imagine, the decision to establish the default pass-fail was made in the midst of a lot of uncertainty and with no clear standard to apply. This is reflected in the wide range of different responses by colleges and universities across the country. However, while many things were and remain in flux, we are certain of some things about our educational mission at the graduate and undergraduate levels. We know that we attract and admit students who have a strong sense of their educational goals, and we know that we sometimes need to provide supports to students to overcome various barriers in achieving those goals. We also know that we need to allow students to direct their own learning, to determine their own best path forward, and that this involves allowing students to make their own choices. We understand that making decisions can be very hard, especially in times of uncertainty, but we are also confident that our students are best positioned in knowledge and ability to decide the best course for themselves. This is represented in many aspects of our curriculum and we firmly believe holds even in the time of COVID-19.

Our decision reflects this strong belief in our students’ ability to best decide for themselves. We understand that it would simplify matters if we instituted an S/F- or S/E-only option, Universal Pass system, or a “Double A” grading system. It might soothe some immediate concerns about access to internet and technology, working conditions at home or elsewhere, and the ability to learn material in a new teaching format. A number of students have advocated for these options. At the same time, the Dean’s Office has heard a similar number of requests to retain some aspect of the letter grade option, whether it relates to concern about graduate or professional school applications, belief in their ability to succeed in the course in the new environment, or as a general principle. We know that there is some truth in all of these perspectives and that reasonable people can disagree on the best option. We also know that this situation may not be the same situation several weeks from now, and that the student support for various options may change. It’s this shifting environment, along with our strong belief in our students, that makes us confident in the flexibility provided by this policy.

The adjustment of the deadline for the letter grade option reflects a continuing awareness that students are balancing multiple priorities and expectations in their academic and personal lives. Giving students to the end of classes allows students to have a clear sense of their command of course material and of their current course grade before deciding on the letter grade option. Some students have argued for a deadline after finals or course grades have been produced, indicating that this provides even more information in a difficult situation. While we agree that this situation is indeed difficult, we believe that
the new deadline gives students sufficient information to ensure that their final grade (whether S/F or S/E, or letter) accurately and fairly represents their level of effort and accomplishment in the course. We want to support students while also taking seriously our responsibility to accurately represent those accomplishments.

We also want to stress that this will be the last change to the deadline. While we want to be flexible in these changing circumstances, we also acknowledge the stress that each change causes for students and faculty. We know that there will continue to be different viewpoints on appropriate deadline dates and approaches, but we hope that the explanation above helps in understanding our final position on this issue.

As before, we appreciate your dedication in adapting to the evolving situation with COVID-19. We know that this continues to be a challenging time for everyone.

All best,

Jeff Runner
Dean of the College

Nick Vamivakas
Dean of Graduate Education and Postdoctoral Affairs in ASE

--

Jeffrey Runner, PhD
Dean of the College
Arts, Sciences & Engineering
Professor of Linguistics and Brain & Cognitive Sciences
317 Lattimore Hall
PO Box 270401
Rochester, NY 14627-0401
585-273-5001
Jeffrey.Runner@rochester.edu
he/him/his