January 29, 2015

To: Sarah Mangelsdorf, Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs

From: Jocelyn Milner, Director, Academic Planning and Institutional Research
      Michelle Young, Academic Planner, APIR

Subject: Common UW-Madison Policy on Pass/Fail for Undergraduates

Copies: University Academic Planning Council, Crossroads Committee

Attachment: Policy document

We are forwarding to you for consideration by the University Academic Planning Council policy guidelines for the use of pass/fail grades by undergraduates. If adopted, this policy would replace existing school/college policy and serve as a single policy for pass/fail that would serve undergraduates across UW-Madison.

The Crossroads Committee, a group of leaders in academic services and students services from across campus, began work on a unified campus policy for pass/fail in Fall 2011. Each school/college has policies for pass/fail that are very similar, but minor differences in how the rules apply add confusion for students who may switch from a major in one school/college to another. Student uncertainty about which pass/fail policy applied to them meant they often had to seek out an advisor or dean for clarification which is an inefficient use of time for both students and staff. All of the school/college policies took into account the student’s academic standing, placed a limit on the types of courses that could be graded pass/fail, and limited the number of courses taken on a pass/fail basis both in a single term and over the undergraduate career. The key differences among the school/college policies related to the number of courses or total credits taken on a pass/fail basis (ranging from 12 credits to 10 courses) as well as other minor differences in wording.

In 2012-13, a sub-group of the Crossroads Committee drafted a common pass/fail policy for undergraduates. In the 2013-14 academic year that policy was circulated to all the schools/colleges for review, comment, and approval. All of the schools/colleges that enroll undergraduates endorsed the plan to have a common policy and most endorsed the policy as written. Some also provided suggestions for revisions. Over the summer of 2014 we revised the draft policy to integrate feedback, and in August 2014 we circulated the policy to all the schools/colleges for another review. All but one school/college provided an endorsement by the requested date of November 1, 2014, and the remaining unit, the College of Engineering, provided feedback that has been address in the policy.

The attached policy is now ready to be considered by the University Academic Planning Council.

In anticipation of some of the questions that may come up in discussion, we have reviewed patterns of pass/fail grades. The number of students electing to take courses pass/fail is declining and represents only a small fraction of all students. Among 2013-14 bachelor’s degree recipients, 10% took a course
P/F, down from 15% in 2011-12 (Table 1). Among graduates who did take a course for P/F, approximately 95% took one or two courses and only 8 of the 2013-14 graduates took four or more courses for a P/F grade. Among students graduating in the last 3 years, 2 students took more than 8 courses P/F and 3 took more than 16 credit P/F. The percent of undergraduates enrolled in courses for P/F grades in any given semester is less than 1% of all enrolled undergraduates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Took a P/F course</th>
<th>Bachelor's Degree Recipients Percent with P/F course</th>
<th>How many students too what number of courses P/F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 Crs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-2012</td>
<td>961</td>
<td>6520</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-2013</td>
<td>816</td>
<td>6494</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-2014</td>
<td>656</td>
<td>6659</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Number of Bachelor’s Degree Recipients who Took a Course Pass/Fail (P/F)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Percent Undergraduate Enrolled</th>
<th>Total Course Enrollment</th>
<th>Total Credits Taken</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2011-2012</td>
<td>1.35%</td>
<td>382</td>
<td>991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2011-2012</td>
<td>1.91%</td>
<td>511</td>
<td>1429</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer 2012</td>
<td>0.43%</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2012-2013</td>
<td>1.03%</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>793</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2012-2013</td>
<td>1.29%</td>
<td>351</td>
<td>1112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer 2013</td>
<td>0.43%</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2013-2014</td>
<td>0.67%</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>590</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2013-2014</td>
<td>0.96%</td>
<td>264</td>
<td>852</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer 2014</td>
<td>0.27%</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Undergraduate Enrollment for Pass/Fail Grades

A simplified, campus wide policy will benefit campus positively in terms of the time spent communicating about the policy with little to no impact on student’s academic choices.

We look forward to discussing this policy with you and with the UAPC.
Policy on use of Pass/Fail Grading Option for Undergraduates
Draft Version 5.0

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Overview and Context
This policy concerns the use of the pass/fail grading option for degree-seeking undergraduate students. According to the UW-Madison grading scale, grades of S (satisfactory) and U (unsatisfactory) are the transcripted grades that are used for what is commonly known as pass/fail. [UW-Madison Faculty Senate Minutes, 15 January 1973, and 5 May 1980]

Currently each undergraduate school or college has a pass/fail policy. These policies are very similar, but they have slight differences in areas such as limiting the amount of time students can elect pass/fail based on credits versus courses or stating that a student must be in good academic standing versus citing a GPA. These differences often cause confusion among students who may be aware of a policy that actually pertains to students in a school/college other than their own; students may experience problems when they make decisions that are based on the wrong policy. Although there are minor differences among the schools/colleges the various policies all have very similar requirements and similar intended outcomes. Creating a policy that applies to all undergraduates regardless of school or college is in the best interest of students.

Pass/Fail Grading Option
This proposed common pass/fail policy only applies to degree-seeking students who are in the undergraduate (UGRD) career. It only applies to courses that use the default A-F grading scale (GRD) and that also allow students to choose to take a course on a pass/fail (PF) basis.¹

The instructor enters the letter grade earned by the students on their grade roster, and those letter grades are subsequently recorded as a pass (S) or fail (U) on the student record. A pass (S) will be recorded when a letter grade of A through C is earned. A fail (U) will be recorded when a letter grade of D or F is earned. In addition to the S or U notation, the student transcript includes the symbol # for courses that were taken on a pass/fail basis.

Neither the S nor the U is used in computing the grade point average.
Instructors are not informed that a student has elected to take the course pass/fail.  

**Student Eligibility**
Students must be in good academic standing according to their school/college in order to be eligible to request the pass/fail grading option.

Undergraduates may carry one course on a pass/fail basis per term and a maximum of 16 credits during their undergrad career. The summer sessions collectively count as a single term.

**Pass/fail can only be chosen for free elective courses**
Required courses cannot be taken on a pass/fail basis. The student’s school or college may review the request to take a course pass/fail and reject requests for non-elective work. It may be difficult for the school or college official to determine whether a course is an elective or being used to fulfill a requirement since a student’s enrollment or the way a course is being used in the specific program of study may change. Ultimately it is the student’s responsibility to be sure that the requested course is an elective. Students are strongly advised to consult with an academic advisor before taking a course pass/fail. Courses taken on a pass/fail basis will not count for non-elective requirements even if they would normally count toward such requirements.

**School or College Responsibilities**
Students are affiliated with a school or college based on their intended degree program. Students are subject to that school/college’s specific implementation of the policy with regard to the definition of good academic standing and what is considered an elective course.

Each school or college is responsible for clearly communicating to its students what the definition of “good academic standing” is and what a free elective is for their students.

In each school or college, the office responsible for academic policy exceptions is authorized to make exceptions to the pass/fail policy.

**Process for Requesting the Pass/Fail Grading Option**
Students indicate that they would like to have a course they are enrolled in graded on a pass/fail basis by completing a course change request via their Student Center (see [https://registrar.wisc.edu/course_change_request.htm](https://registrar.wisc.edu/course_change_request.htm) for detailed information). Students may submit pass/fail requests via their Student Center from the time that they enroll until midnight on the Friday at the end of the fourth week of fall and spring semesters. (For modular and summer session courses, pass/fail requests must be submitted by midnight Friday of the week in which the session is one-fourth completed).

The deadline for requesting the pass/fail grading option is posted on the Office of the Registrar website. These deadlines are based on the idea that the pass/fail option is intended to encourage students to explore educational opportunities that they might otherwise not be willing to attempt. Pass/fail is not intended as a way for students to avoid academic consequences.
Once the student has submitted their request to take a course on a pass/fail basis the request is routed via ISIS workflow to an academic dean in their school or college for approval or further communication with the student. The school/college official must approve the request before the grading option is changed to pass/fail by the Office of the Registrar.

Students can see whether a course is being graded on a pass/fail basis in their Student Center.

1 For study abroad programs operated by the College of Engineering, courses taken abroad toward an engineering major will be posted as pass/fail. This occurs automatically and is not a student option; this practice is not covered or impacted by this policy.

2 Note, however, that since the implementation of ISIS, it is possible that instructors may have access to ISIS information showing the grading basis of the course. Therefore, some instructors may discover that a student is taking the course on a pass/fail basis. Students may, of course, share this information with their instructors if they choose.