

Pass/Fail Grading



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Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

SFU has committed to Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, but unfortunately this is not reflected in grading practices during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Marginalized communities are disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, and SFU must consider this when enacting policies. BIPOC, low-income, and disabled students face significant barriers this semester, including lack of internet access, economic and housing instability, and lack of access to care, resources, or accommodations.

Enacting a more compassionate grading framework would acknowledge SFU's commitment to EDI and ensure our most marginalized students are not forgotten.

With the transition to online classes, many disabled students have been left behind¹. Accommodations do not always translate well to a virtual learning environment, which ends up being reflected in a students' grades. Additionally, adverse circumstances can be unpredictable and sudden. Considering the Centre for Accessible Learning only accepts new students up until week 10 of the semester, students are often left without adequate accommodations after this time. Even when students do have access to accommodations (which is not guaranteed), there are additional barriers to receiving these accommodations, like filling out forms and providing proof of a disability.

The pandemic is not accurately reflecting students' capacity to learn. There are so many extenuating factors which have limited the way we perform, and students should not be punished for the current situation we find ourselves in. Our grades are not a reflection of our abilities, but the circumstances we find ourselves in.

Health and well-being

The health consequences of this pandemic are far-reaching, deeply worrying, and compound the need for a more equitable grading framework at SFU.

Seeing as the shift to remote instruction is still relatively new, professors and students alike are still adapting to the virtual learning environment. Students should not be punished and should not have to compromise their mental health during this pandemic. Compassion and understanding **must** be prioritized here, and the Pass/Fail grading framework can alleviate some of the stress students are feeling right now.

¹ <https://bcedaccess.com/2020/07/22/children-with-disabilities-excluded-from-school-during-covid-19/> (this is for K-12 students, but K-12 students also often get more support and funding than post-secondary students, who are often left on their own. Source: lived experience)

Impacts of COVID-19 on mental health

An increasing number of studies throughout British Columbia have demonstrated just how far-reaching the mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are. These studies show that younger Canadians report higher rates of depression, anxiety, loneliness, and poor social support. What's even more concerning is that suicidal ideation has increased around 50%, and 40% of Canadians needing mental healthcare are not receiving the support they need². Suicidal ideation has also increased especially among Indigenous people, disabled people, and people who identify as LGBTQ+³. Indigenous peoples are also disproportionately experiencing colonialism-related harm, like unsafe housing, lack of access to clean water, and extreme food insecurity, all of which contribute to increased risk in mental health⁴. This reaffirms the need for SFU to consider the effects of COVID-19 on marginalized communities, and rededicate ourselves to EDI.

At SFU, 48.9% of SFSS' survey respondents reported that they are experiencing mental health issues due to COVID-19, with many commenting that they were already experiencing mental health challenges that have worsened over the last two months. Students that had recovered from or were previously managing mental health illnesses such as anxiety, depression, obsessive compulsive disorder, and eating disorders are now finding themselves in precarious positions. Furthermore, 17.6% of students reported that instructors have conducted themselves in a way that is not considerate of student health and well-being⁵.

It is crucial to note that a Pass/Fail grading framework would reduce some of the many stressors that students are facing right now. Many students have stated how difficult it is to focus on their academics when their mental health is so impacted by the effects of COVID-19. An increasing number of students are feeling burnt out, having to stay at home (which may not be a good study environment) all the time. According to an SFSS COVID-19 survey, 64.5% of students do not have a study space free from noise and distractions, making it difficult to study⁶.

The rise of COVID-19 cases have also had a profound impact on students' mental health. Not only are we expected to focus on academics, we are expected not to have

² <https://www.uvic.ca/news/topics/2020+knowledge-mental-health-impacts+news>

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<https://news.ubc.ca/2020/06/25/covid-19-survey-highlights-growing-suicide-and-mental-health-risks-across-various-groups/>

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<https://www.sfu.ca/sfunews/stories/2020/11/report-predicts-increased-youth-mental-health-struggles-related-.html>

⁵ <https://sfss.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/COVID-19-Survey-Report-4-1.pdf>

⁶ <https://sfss.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/COVID-19-Survey-Report-4-1.pdf>

the increasing number of COVID-19 cases (and deaths) impact our mental health and impede on our ability to study.

Seasonal depression has also compounded the negative effects of COVID-19. Combined with the onset of exams (some of which are proctored, thus adding more stress on students), it is no question why some students would feel depressed, anxious, and burnt out.

Impacts of COVID-19 on physical health

Students in different time zones are also feeling the effects of COVID-19. With mandatory synchronous course components, students often have to stay awake at abnormal hours, which impacts both their physical and mental health.

Students who share a work environment with others may also find their academic workload taking a toll on their physical health. For example, students who are unable to complete coursework during the day (due to having to work or inability to focus due to distractions) are forced to compromise their sleep schedule in order to focus on academics.

Seeing as previous conversations with SFU Administration (in Senate and various Senate committees) have emphasized that we cannot mandate the way professors run their courses, reinstating the Pass/Fail grading framework would be a compromise in which students can evaluate their own situations and make an informed decision about their grades. If professors lack the resources to provide quality education, a Pass/Fail option will ensure students are not punished.

Barriers to mental healthcare

Oftentimes, students are unable to simply see a counsellor or psychologist. Many students work part-time to be able to afford the rising costs of tuition, which leaves little time to see a psychologist. Additionally, the cost of mental healthcare is something that some students cannot afford.

While services like My SSP are offered, students have experienced delays or inadequate services. According to an SFSS Survey, students commented that no matter the mental health services offered by SFU, without fundamental changes to the grading system, the pressure of post-secondary education will negatively impact their mental health and well-being⁷.

⁷ <https://sfss.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/COVID-19-Survey-Report-4-1.pdf>

“Pass/Fail would allow students to slack off and not learn what they need to learn for their future.”

Some people believe that having Pass/Fail grading would cause students to lose their motivation to learn. In this case, we must remember the mental health impacts of COVID-19 and how the pandemic disproportionately impacts marginalized communities.

Should we punish students because they lack the necessary supports and resources to focus on their education?

A study from Harvard found that students who took a course with Pass/Fail options did not spend less time on the course. In fact, these students took the course just as seriously as those in the letter-graded version of the course, as long as the same expectations are set for both groups of students⁸. Pass/Fail grading has also been shown to reduce competition, support collaboration, and foster intrinsic motivation, which is key to self-regulated, lifelong learning^{9,10}. This study, and many others^{11,12,13}, demonstrate the benefits of moving towards a Pass/Fail grading framework, especially during these uncertain times.

SFU needs to prioritize the health of its students. We must remember to be understanding and compassionate during these stressful times, and not punish students who are disproportionately affected by the pandemic just because we fear some students may not be able to prioritize their academics.

Grade inflation and accreditation

A common argument against implementing the Pass/Fail grading framework is that it would inflate grades and make an SFU degree lose its value. Some programs, like mechatronic systems engineering, are also accredited and would be impacted by Pass/Fail grading.

⁸ https://cs.harvard.edu/malan/publications/Toward_an_Ungraded_CS50.pdf

⁹

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/40690117_Pass-fail_grading_Laying_the_foundation_for_self-regulated_learning

¹⁰ <https://www.scirp.org/journal/paperinformation.aspx?paperid=74099>

¹¹

<https://www.edsurge.com/news/2020-05-21-grades-fail-at-motivating-students-intrinsic-motivation-works-better>

¹² <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1469787418819728>

¹³ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0025619611612500>

Other institutions with compassionate grading frameworks

It is clear that many other universities have prioritized their students' health and well-being over institutional constructs. Prestigious universities such as Stanford¹⁴, Princeton¹⁵, Massachusetts Institute of Technology¹⁶, and Brown¹⁷ have all implemented more compassionate grading frameworks like Pass/Fail. A variety of Canadian universities have also done this, including but not limited to Carleton University¹⁸, University of Calgary¹⁹, Concordia University²⁰, Bishop's University²¹, and University of Manitoba²².

These institutions all share a commitment to prioritizing the well-being of their students and recognizing the inequities inherent to online learning. In response to the academic and personal turmoil that students are encountering this semester, these institutions have shown that this crisis-sensitive grading framework must be implemented to safeguard the academic, emotional, spiritual, and physical health of our community.

Accreditation

Some programs, like engineering, have expressed concerns relating to the Pass/Fail grading framework's effects on accreditation. However, Engineers Canada (Canadian Engineering Accreditation Board (CEAB), which offers accreditation for SFU Engineering) has explicitly stated that **“such [Pass/Fail grading] changes will not adversely affect the programs' accreditation status” because “the health and safety of students, faculty, and staff are of great importance to [Engineers Canada] and [they] are supportive of institutions taking reasonable measures to balance safety and academic continuity²³.”**

Additionally, [as per the studies mentioned above](#), a Pass/Fail grading framework would encourage collaboration and teamwork, skills that are valued in the workplace. Many

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<https://www.stanforddaily.com/2020/07/30/faculty-senate-approves-optional-credit-no-credit-grading-system-for-entirety-of-academic-year/>

¹⁵ <https://fall2020.princeton.edu/info/undergraduate-students/faqs>

¹⁶ <https://registrar.mit.edu/covid-19/grading/fall-2020>

¹⁷ <https://healthy.brown.edu/academics/policies-fall-2020>

¹⁸ <https://carleton.ca/provost/2020/sat-uns-fall-2020-winter-2021/>

¹⁹ <https://www.ucalgary.ca/registrar/student-centre/grades>

²⁰ <https://www.concordia.ca/coronavirus/students/pass-disc.html>

²¹ <https://www.ubishops.ca/measures-to-support-student-success-and-relieve-stress-and-anxiety/>

²² <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/university-manitoba-alternative-grading-1.5827956>

²³

<https://engineerscanada.ca/news-and-events/news/for-regulators-march-31-2020-ceab-statement-on-covid-19>

companies that hire engineers prioritize work experience over CGPA²⁴, which is why co-op is required in the engineering program²⁵. A good engineer has to work with various types of people to solve problems and make products, using their experiences to inform their work. Grades cannot encapsulate this, and getting tested on ideas that have already been solved by other practitioners is not the only way to prepare a student for their career.

Career and graduate school implications

An important concern regarding Pass/Fail grading is its impacts on students' future careers and graduate school applications. However, these impacts can be mitigated by having a strong communications strategy and using an FAQ. This was implemented at the end of the Spring 2020 semester²⁶.

Implications for students' future careers

One may argue that Pass/Fail can work as a bandaid for emergency situations, but is ultimately unsustainable because it carries heavy implications for how education is viewed by employers. However, [as shown previously, many institutions have already implemented more compassionate grading frameworks](#), therefore normalizing it. As more and more institutions implement new grading frameworks in light of COVID-19's negative impacts on the student population, it will become normalized which mitigates some negative consequences of having Pass or Fail on a student's transcript. [Again, as previously mentioned, many companies nowadays weigh experience more heavily than grades anyway](#), and many employers would understand the circumstances (a worldwide pandemic) underlying a Pass or Fail grade. Some employers also look at CGPA only, which could be increased with the Pass/Fail grading framework to offset the negative and disproportionate impacts of COVID-19.

With the shift to a remote learning environment, some students have considered dropping out or changing out of their current major, all due to the amount of stress they are put under. To mitigate these adverse circumstances, SFU can offer Pass/Fail grading, which would encourage students to continue pursuing a degree and a career they are passionate about.

²⁴ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/j.2168-9830.2008.tb00968.x>

²⁵ <http://www.sfu.ca/coop/programs/ensc.html>

²⁶ <https://www.sfu.ca/fass/news/2020/03/covid-19-info-for-fass-students.html>

Graduate school

Some graduate schools, such as UC Berkeley, have stated they will “make admissions decisions holistically,” considering factors outside of CGPA as well as being mindful of the COVID-19 pandemic’s effects on students²⁷. In fact, UC Berkeley and many other universities have implemented new admissions criteria, making it clear that “[they] will not penalize students for the adoption of P/NP and other grading options during this unprecedented period²⁸.”

For graduate schools who may penalize a Pass/Fail grade, SFU should consider making this very clear in [the FAQ](#). Additionally, only a minority of undergraduate students at SFU go to graduate school. **Is it fair to punish students who are not planning on going to graduate school, just because some graduate schools *may* look unfavourably upon a Pass/Fail grade (which is optional and not necessary for students to take)?**

Quality of education and workload

Throughout the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been two opposing perspectives on the quality of education since moving to remote instruction. On one hand, some claim the quality of education is unchanged; on the other hand, some are saying the quality of education has vastly decreased.

Unchanged quality of education

If the quality of education has stayed the same, implementing a Pass/Fail grading framework would not have a huge effect on the majority of students. Students could continue to learn from their professors, and do not need to opt for a Pass/Fail grade. **The only impact of the Pass/Fail system would be to help students who have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in domains other than their academic life.** According to [SFU’s renewed dedication to EDI](#), it is ever more important to look out for marginalized groups who are disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning a Pass/Fail grading framework is the most equitable solution.

Decreased quality of education

Many students, TAs, and faculty members alike have expressed concerns with the decreasing quality of education since the shift to a remote learning environment. If this

²⁷ <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/04/13/how-will-passfail-affect-students-future>

²⁸ <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/04/13/how-will-passfail-affect-students-future>

is the case, a Pass/Fail grading framework would offset these adverse effects and make grading more fair for students who were unable to access the full range of support they needed.

Students

Students have many concerns regarding the decreasing quality of education since the shift to a remote learning environment.

The lack of support and communication from some professors have taken a toll on students' grades, severely limiting their understanding of course material. Although some professors still hold office hours via Zoom, some only hold them via email, which makes understanding course concepts even more difficult. **Since the SFU Senate cannot mandate what professors can and cannot do, implementing a Pass/Fail grading framework is most fair for students who are put in this adverse situation.** We must trust students to know what is best for their own situations, and not put additional stress on them to "prove" the hardships they go through.

Students have also experienced a vastly increased workload. Since the shift to online learning, some changes to courses had to be made, which resulted in more difficult exams to offset cheating, increased number of assignments or projects, and stressful proctored exams. All of this contributes to a decline in students' [mental health](#) as well as burnout.

According to the SFSS COVID-19 Survey, 45.6% of students do not have the necessary software to complete their studies since students are unable to use software available on campus computers. The survey also found that 47.9% of students experience a heavier workload with remote learning, and **12.9% of students felt unsafe, uncomfortable, or violated by an instructor's request.** 43.6% of students did not feel well-equipped to finish the semester, and 6.5% withdrew from their courses²⁹. SFU should take these survey results into consideration, and consider a more compassionate grading framework.

This is especially true in light of multiple studies stating that remote instruction cannot be compared at the same level as in-person instruction. While university test results may be similar for both online and in-person classes, students are more engaged with in-person classes³⁰. Furthermore, remote learning requires more self-discipline and self guidance, and research shows that scholarly instruction with minimal guidance is less

²⁹ <https://sfss.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/COVID-19-Survey-Report-4-1.pdf>

³⁰ <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.01278/full>

effective than teaching with strong guidance, even for students with considerable prior knowledge³¹.

Remote learning can also disadvantage students with learning disabilities. For example, online-based courses often require more reading than in-person courses, which can be more difficult for those with reading-based disabilities³². Once again we see marginalized populations are being disproportionately and adversely impacted by COVID-19.

TAs

Teaching Assistants have also noticed a decrease in support and quality of learning with the shift to remote instruction. Not only has workload dramatically increased, it has done so at a rate that the professor themselves cannot even keep up with the increasing number of assignments, projects, quizzes, and exams. This means that quizzes are often published later in the week than originally scheduled, and exam details are changed on the fly (less than 24 hours before the exam). **These sudden changes negatively affect students' ability to prepare, and hinders TAs' abilities to adequately assess their students.**

Faculty

Some faculty members have also expressed concerns with the quality of online instruction. There has been a decrease in the number of resources available, and communication regarding changes is confusing. **Instructors who are unfamiliar with remote instruction suddenly have to adapt to the online environment, which leads to many problems (glitches, unexpected technological challenges) that impact students' abilities to learn.**

All of these issues with remote instruction impact a student's ability to learn and demonstrate their knowledge, which can lead to a lower grade. This can be mitigated with the option to take a Pass/Fail grade, so students will not have to be punished for something they cannot control.

“Students know what they’re getting into now. Just take a lighter course load or take the semester off”

Unfortunately, many students do not have the luxury of taking a lighter course load or taking the semester off. Students, especially first-year students, are still unprepared for

³¹ https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1207/s15326985ep4102_1

³² <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/ss.394>

remote courses, considering each course is heavily dependent on how prepared a professor is.

WD deadline

An extended WD deadline would not address this because students will not have adequate time to assess how they are doing in the course, especially after taking a final exam (which could be worth 20%-40% of a student's grade). Additionally, having a Pass/Fail option would give students the autonomy of deciding whether to keep a letter grade or opt for Pass/Fail **after trying their best in the course**. This is especially important if students are taking a required course.

International students

International students must take a full course load to participate in co-op. Additionally, not enrolling in courses full time will affect international students when applying for a post-grad work permit³³.

Student loans

According to StudentAid BC, students “**must attend school full-time**” in order to receive funding³⁴. If students do not attend school full time one semester, they must do so the next semester and submit a new application (which acts as an additional barrier that some students may not have the time for). Additionally, students who “withdraw from school two times while receiving B.C. student financial assistance...will be denied further funding by StudentAid BC.” This means that many students cannot afford to take a lighter course load or take the semester off.

Many students also rely on student loans for their living expenses.

Indigenous band funding

Some Indigenous students receive band funding (funding from their nation). When these students are band funded, typically they have to take full course load. If they decide to take a semester off or reduce their course load, these students would risk losing this band funding. This band funding is often the only way for these students to

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<https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/publications-manuals/operational-bulletins-manuals/temporary-residents/study-permits/post-graduation-work-permit-program/eligibility.html>

³⁴ <https://studentaidbc.ca/maintain/responsibilities#continue-in-studies>

access a post-secondary education, which demonstrates, again, the [disproportionate effect that the COVID-19 pandemic has on marginalized communities](#).

Course offerings

Many courses have limited offerings throughout the year. By telling students to take a semester off or take a lighter course load, you are asking students to **disrupt their entire life plan and potentially delay their goals for a year or more**. This is simply not feasible for many students, which is why understanding students' variegated situations and showing compassion with a Pass/Fail grading system would be a viable solution.

Alternatives (WE and AE)

Some may argue we should consider alternatives such as WE or AE notation instead of Pass/Fail grading. However, these notations have additional barriers and can further disadvantage many students, especially marginalized ones.

WE (withdraw under extenuating circumstances)

Requesting a WE notation requires documentation, along with a long process (instead of going on go.sfu.ca to choose Pass/Fail by yourself).

Requesting additional documentation for a WE acts as a barrier for many students. If a student is depressed and is unable to access mental health support or get diagnosed by a psychologist (whether due to lack of time or lack of money), **they are punished for their inability to secure documentation**.

A WE can also be denied (who is to decide how much a student has suffered?), and processing WE requests can lead to admin overload. It also means a student would have to retake the course later on, which may be unfair if the reason the student wanted a WE was due to poor course design and lack of access to proper support or resources.

AE (Compassionate Pass)

An AE notation has the same issues as requesting a WE notation. Not only do students need to provide enough "proof" for someone to decide whether they deserve the AE, students also have to spend additional time undergoing the process of requesting an AE notation.

If there were less barriers and if this notation was given to anyone who requested it, it could be a viable alternative to Pass/Fail grading. However, we have a previously-established Pass/Fail grading framework from Spring 2020, so it may ease administrative load to re-establish that system instead of working on a new one.

Later semester start

The delayed start of the Spring 2021 semester does not adequately address the many issues outlined above, like students' mental health and how COVID-19 disproportionately impacts marginalized communities.

While some professors may have more time to prepare for their courses, 1 extra week does not guarantee *all* professors will optimize their courses for remote learning. Having a Pass/Fail option would be more equitable for all students to offset any effects of poor online course integration.

Cheating

A Pass/Fail grading framework may disincentivize cheating for many students.

Students may feel pressured to cheat in online learning environments because of the need to maintain a CGPA. With the Pass/Fail option, students' CGPA would not be in danger since opting for a Pass grade will not affect CGPA. **This would ease stress on students and disincentivize cheating** since their CGPA is no longer in danger of being lowered due to a bad semester.

Since CGPA is tied into everything from scholarships, bursaries, and more, a Pass/Fail helps devalue a course's grade and, as such, will reduce the desire to cheat.

If a student is caught cheating, they will be penalized for it. Pass/Fail does not have such adverse consequences, which further disincentivizes cheating. Since cheating has been shown to greatly impact curved classes, leading to honest students getting a lower grade, having Pass/Fail grading would ensure honest students are not punished.

Curved classes

Concerns about how curved classes will be affected by the Pass/Fail grading framework can be addressed the same way they were in Spring 2020—a Pass/Fail grade can be applied after the class grades have been curved.

Meaningful consultation

89.3% of SFU undergraduate students believe that SFU should consult more with students before making big decisions on topics such as grading options and instructor requirements³⁵. Additionally, over 5,600 students have signed a petition to bring back the Pass/Fail system³⁶.

All of this shows the importance of listening to students' input. Many students have been calling for a Pass/Fail grading framework, and must be meaningfully consulted.

³⁵ <https://sfss.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/COVID-19-Survey-Report-4-1.pdf>

³⁶ <https://www.change.org/p/simon-fraser-university-please-bring-back-the-pass-fail-system/>