2020-2021 | Bulletin and Academic Policies

Academic policies are set by the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and the academic administration of individual schools within the Arts and Sciences. Students in the School of General Studies are expected to familiarize themselves with GS policies. Students seeking clarity on academic policies relevant to or beyond those stated on the GS website should consult with their respective GS advisors.

Fall 2020 Academic Updates

Overview

Faculty are actively engaged in preparations that will ensure the richest academic experience possible, in keeping with Columbia’s standards of excellence. We are enhancing the remote learning strategies that were used at Columbia in the spring, and this will be a continuing priority throughout the duration of the summer.

Courses will be taught in-person, online, and in hybrid formats. Across all these modalities, the Columbia faculty will offer GS students a curriculum in the coming year that is engaging and responsive to your needs and interests.

Academic Calendar

Courses for the coming academic year will be spread across three semesters of equal length, allowing greater flexibility for faculty and students. To accomplish this, some classes originally planned for fall or spring will be moved to the summer term, and students will be able to make progress toward their degree during every term, including completing major, Core, and premedical certificate requirements.

The dates for the terms are as follows:

- Fall Term (September 8 - December 23)
- Spring Term (January 11 - April 26)
- Summer Term (Summer A: May 3 - June 18, Summer B: June 28-Aug. 16)
- Commencement scheduled for the last week of April

Course offerings can be found in the Bulletin (http://bulletin.columbia.edu/general-studies/), in the online Directory of Courses (http://www.columbia.edu/cu/bulletin/uwb/), in Vergil (https://vergil.registrar.columbia.edu/), and on department and program websites. Information about the format of each course (online, hybrid, or in-person) is also available in these resources.

Remote Learning

All Fall 2020 undergraduate courses (UN1xxx-UN3xxx) will be taught remotely. Graduate level courses (GU4xxx -GR9xxx) will be taught in a variety of modalities: online, hybrid, or in-person. Undergraduate students living in residence on campus or in commuting distance to campus are eligible to participate in the in-person elements of GU4xxx courses that will be taught in-person or in the hybrid mode. This guidance also applies to undergraduates who are given special permission to enroll in graduate-level courses at the GR5xxx level or higher.

Immersive Courses

Each of the Fall and Spring semesters has been further divided into two equal parts—Part A and Part B, with some departments and programs offering half-term immersive courses that students have the option to take in addition to their semester-long courses. The goal of these immersive classes is to allow for a depth of engagement and learning over a shorter and more intensive period of time. There is no requirement that you enroll in an immersive course, but it may be an option you wish to explore.

Shopping Period

In a typical semester, students have an opportunity at the beginning of each semester to visit classes for which they are not registered to help students decide if they would like to enroll. For Fall 2020, the shopping period will be online for all classes. Students can navigate to the Courseworks site for any course they would like to visit via Vergil. Through Courseworks, students will be able to find the Zoom links for courses they wish to visit.

Grading

This past Spring required a sudden shift to remote learning, in which faculty and students had to transition with no notice, and in this context, the Committee on Instruction made the decision to move all grading to pass/fail. Normal grading practices are in effect for the coming academic year.

The Core

The two year-long Core courses—Contemporary Civilization and Literature Humanities—will each continue to be offered in the usual Fall-then-Spring sequence. Most of the one-term Core courses—Art Humanities, University Writing, Music Humanities, and Frontiers of Science—will be offered in Fall, Spring, and Summer. Core classes will not be offered in an immersive (half-term) format.

New Courses

An unusual number of new courses will also be available in the coming year. Faculty are working to design innovative courses that respond to our unprecedented historical moment, and you will see new course offerings on topical issues in public health, social justice, electoral politics, and more. Over the course of the year, we will be highlighting new course offerings through the GS newsletters and social media.

Spring 2020 Revised Academic Policies

In light of the circumstances caused by COVID-19 during the Spring 2020 semester, the Columbia College - School of General Studies Committee on Instruction has revised certain academic policies.

Therefore, as of March 24, 2020, the School of General Studies has temporarily revised the following academic policies for the duration of the Spring 2020 semester. For questions regarding these policies, please see the frequently asked question section (p.) below.

Mandatory pass/fail system of grading

Spring 2020 will be a mandatory pass/fail term—i.e., all final grades for Spring 2020 will be either “pass” or “fail.” While working within this new grading system, we remain committed to engaging our students and guiding their learning. Faculty should therefore continue to measure student progress in their courses and to provide evaluative feedback on all course requirements, in order to help students gauge the success of their understanding and application of course material. Faculty, individually and in consultation with colleagues in their departments or...
programs, should consider and communicate to students their criteria for the grade of “pass” and for the grade of “fail” in this grading system.

Faculty are encouraged to consider various ways to provide clear guidance to students about their level of achievement of course learning goals. For example, some faculty may wish to assign grades on individual assignments in order to reflect the level of mastery a student has shown (although faculty should keep in mind that a final grade will not be awarded on the student’s transcript), while other faculty may wish to move to narrative feedback only in order to convey the level of mastery achieved. In any case, faculty are encouraged to keep their own personal records of student progress, so that they are prepared to write detailed letters of recommendation in the future for students who may need faculty support for applications to graduate school, professional schools, competitive opportunities, etc.

[Note: Some graduate schools and professional schools have already stated that they will accept grades of “pass” in Spring 2020 from schools who have declared a mandatory pass/fail system this semester, and that they will also consider students’ cumulative GPAs with the current disruption in mind. We hope that even more schools will soon follow suit. So your letters of recommendation will be read in this larger context as well.]

To reiterate earlier guidance: Faculty are encouraged to have explicit conversations with students about the goals of their classes for the second half of the semester, so that faculty and students alike continue to be engaged with the course material. A pass/fail semester offers the opportunity for the academic community to put aside pressures associated with assigning or receiving letter grades and to focus even more on the learning process; open communication may help this experience online to be productive and beneficial for faculty and students alike.

Remote learning and providing course instruction in the most equitable ways possible

Many of our students are now living in very different conditions from those in which they began the semester. Some students are in different time zones; some students have technological challenges in connecting to online courses; some students have work schedules or sleep schedules that are now at odds with course meeting times; some students are caring for young children whose schools are closed. It is incumbent on every faculty member to make their instruction and their course materials available to all enrolled students.

Faculty are asked to expand their instruction as necessary so that students who face such challenges can participate more fully in our online instruction. Faculty can consider the following strategies, among others:

- Recording class sessions through Zoom and providing the recording files to students in the course for asynchronous viewing (strongly recommended);
- Conducting class sessions two times per day (especially in the case of seminars in which participation in discussion is expected);
- Developing small group projects that allow all students to be engaged with other students (particularly those who may be in close time zones), the results of which can be brought into full class sessions;
- Posting course materials on Courseworks;
- Giving oral exams instead of written exams, where practicable;
- Asking for student volunteers, or creating group projects that ask students, to take and post robust class notes (see the “[CC]” function in Zoom); and
- Offering additional office hours and/or individual conferences.

To repeat earlier guidance to the faculty:

Given these extraordinary circumstances, we have the flexibility to alter our expectations of contact hours and workload hours, as long as we fulfill the overall expected course hours and that we have achieved reasonable learning goals in our courses. We must complete all courses, even if we can do so only by changing the learning goals for a class radically. In other words, we have to determine what learning looks like in the time of a global pandemic so that we are serving our students as well as possible while adjusting our shared expectations of what constitutes reasonable content and a reasonable timeline.

Faculty are strongly urged to show flexibility to their students and to reconsider their course requirements in light of our new instructional environment. Students may feel ill-equipped to contribute to class discussion if they are unable to attend class sessions or must participate at odd hours. Therefore, class participation, in particular, may need to be redefined for students to include such things as posting on class discussion boards, contribute to class chats, working in small student groups on projects, and more. In general, faculty should strive to maintain frequent student engagement in order to help students feel connected to their Columbia community during this period of physical separation.

If students become ill, or if they have responsibility for others who are ill, faculty should be aware that, even in mild cases, the COVID-19 virus can produce severe symptoms, and people who fall ill from the virus may be incapacitated for multiple weeks. So faculty are asked to be flexible with students in such cases and should provide course materials and other support to help the students complete the course. Incompletes will be supported by the schools in these circumstances.

As an academic community, we want to support our students’ progress toward the successful completion of this semester and toward the next stage of their studies or careers, so we will want to consider all possible ways we can show flexibility to affirm academic achievement before assuming that an incomplete or other postponement of work is approved. But of course, extenuating circumstances will be taken into account, and faculty are encouraged to consult with students’ advising deans to determine the best course for difficult situations.

Evaluating Senior Theses

The senior thesis represents a tremendous academic achievement for some of our graduating seniors. Therefore, although the final grade for a senior thesis course must be either “pass” or “fail,” the Columbia College - School of General Studies Committee on Instruction recommends that any faculty member who is advising a senior thesis provides a robust evaluative summary of the level of achievement, which can be shared both with the student and with the sponsoring academic unit. This evaluative summary should reflect in specific narrative terms whether the faculty advisor recommends the student for relevant graduation honors and prizes; academic units will then be able to take into account the achievement of the senior thesis when determining departmental honors.

The Columbia College - School of General Studies Committee on Instruction recommends that faculty do not give letter grades to the thesis itself, since that thesis grade will not translate to a final grade for a thesis course. Faculty are encouraged, though, to keep records for themselves of the thesis evaluation, so that they are prepared to write
detailed letters of recommendation in the future for students who may need faculty support for applications to graduate school, professional schools, competitive opportunities, etc.

Awarding Honors, Awards, and Prizes

During this time when all students are working under unusual duress, it is more important than ever that we recognize, whenever possible, the talent and perseverance of our students through the awarding of honors, awards, and prizes that permanently commemorate their academic achievements. Given the unusual exigencies of this term, the Columbia College - School of General Studies Committee on Instruction offers the following guidance for graduation honors for Spring 2020.

To allow faculty to have more access to academic work that they are evaluating for honors, awards, and prizes, the announcement of most honors, awards, and prizes will be delayed until mid- to late May. School administrators will communicate revised deadlines for soliciting faculty evaluations accordingly.

Valedictorian and Salutatorian: Valedictorians and Salutatorians for both CC and GS will be selected according to standard school policy and process.

Academic Prizes and Awards: Recipients of academic prizes and awards will be selected according to standard school or department processes.

Dean’s List: Because we have moved to a mandatory Pass/Fail grading system for the term, and the awarding of Dean’s List is based solely on GPA, Dean’s List will not be awarded for the Spring 2020 term.

Latin Honors: Latin Honors will be awarded according to standard school policy, with the understanding that grades for Spring 2020 will not be taken into account in calculating Latin Honors.

Phi Beta Kappa: Phi Beta Kappa will be awarded according to standard school policy, in which grades and faculty evaluations are considered for each eligible student. The national Phi Beta Kappa Society has confirmed that students can be elected to Phi Beta Kappa even in the absence of an in-person induction ceremony.

Departmental Honors: Under normal circumstances, departmental honors are awarded to no more than 10% of graduating seniors. In acknowledgement of the challenges and resilience of our students this semester, academic units may extend departmental honors to up to 20% of graduating seniors.

Frequently Asked Questions About the Spring 2020 P/F Grading Policy

Is it possible to request an exception to pass/fail grading for spring 2020?
No. Given the level of uncertainty that students and faculty are facing in their personal circumstances, the inequities that they are encountering in their academic environment, and the unfamiliarity that they have with online learning, the University feels strongly that the academic community would best be served if all courses are evaluated on a pass/fail basis with no exceptions. While some students and faculty may feel that the usual awarding of letter grades would be desirable for individual reasons, the imperative in this time of global crisis is to do what is best for the entire academic community so that the playing field is leveled for all.

Is it possible to uncover a letter grade after the semester ends (as with P/D/F grading in normal semesters)?
No. There will be only two grades awarded this term: P and F. Thus, there will be no letter grades to uncover.

Without letter grades, is there any way to document extraordinarily strong performance in a class this semester?
Faculty have been encouraged to be attentive to student progress and to keep extensive records of student work as they calculate a P or F grade. This includes assignment-level grades and narrative feedback on thesis projects. Faculty should be able to communicate specifics about the merit of student work through letters of recommendation and other forms of communication with employers, as well as graduate and professional schools.

Can a student use a P grade this semester to count for the Core Curriculum?
Yes.

Can a student use a P grade this semester to count for major / concentration requirements?
Yes.

How will P/F grading impact a student’s GPA?
P grades do not impact GPA at all. F grades will negatively impact your cumulative GPA.

Some students don’t like the P/F grading system and/or online instruction. Is it possible to drop a class or withdraw from the semester and receive a tuition refund?
Columbia has not wavered in its commitment to completing the term, and the faculty are working hard to ensure they can provide the best possible learning opportunities for students this semester. Since all classes continue, the university is not changing its policies with regard to withdrawals and refunds. Students are able to withdraw from a class or from the semester, but tuition will not be refunded.

How will academic standing be assessed for students currently on probation?
Students on academic probation who pass all their classes will be removed from probation.

I would like to retroactively cover a grade from a past semester. How does the change to P/F grading for spring 2020 impact grading policy in general?
Grading policy has not changed. Students can, as always, submit petitions to the GS Committee on Academic Standing if they believe they have faced extenuating circumstances that would warrant an exception to policy for a prior term. Please note that such exceptions are exceedingly rare, and petitions are no more likely to be approved based on the spring 2020 grading policy change.

How should students think about the P/F grading policy with respect to medical school / law school / graduate school admissions?
A transcript notation will be included for spring 2020 indicating that P/F grading was instituted as a universal policy, and we expect graduate and professional programs to take that into account in their admissions processes. Columbia and Harvard Medical School have both confirmed that they will accept P grades for pre-med classes taken in spring 2020 at institutions that only awarded P/F grades for that semester. We expect other schools to join them.
Will the P/F grading policy be noted on transcripts?
The Columbia Registrar will include the following note on all impacted student transcripts: “Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, mandatory Pass/Fail grading was in effect for all students for the spring 2020 semester.”