Motion to enact a mandatory Credit/No Credit grading system for the 2020 Spring Semester

We move to enact a mandatory Credit/No Credit grading system for the Spring 2020 semester at Middlebury College. Spring 2020 grades will not count against limits on non-standard grading nor prohibitions for taking non-graded courses for major or distribution requirements, and No Credit grades will not factor into students’ academic probation status.

Rationale:

We appreciate the care and the long hours that College administrators have devoted to their work in response to an extraordinary situation. In particular, as the April 3 email indicates, its three authors have fielded many questions and appeals concerning grading policy. Still, which grading system will be in force is not their decision to make. As we all try to maintain our educational ideals under new challenges, we must also maintain our commitment to basic principles of faculty governance.

Furthermore, having weathered the transition to online instruction, we find that a binary grading system would better reflect the realities of this extraordinary semester, and has educational advantages over the hybrid model proposed by the administration.

First, we find that the administration’s proposed opt-in system is inequitable. Our students have left campus for wildly differing work environments, as confirmed by stories we’ve heard and scenes we’ve glimpsed in Zoom chats. A student sharing a bedroom or sleeping on a couch in a small crowded apartment does not have the same opportunity to produce work worthy of an A grade as the classmate in a large suburban house on several acres. We have no idea how COVID-19 will directly affect specific students and their families, but it will do so unevenly. We have lost the leveling effects, incomplete though they may be, of the residential college setting, including more equitable access to technology, to academic support resources, and to food and housing security.

Second, retaining any sort of A-D grading system falsely suggests an equivalence between this semester and previous ones. We are now operating with eleven weeks rather than twelve. Faculty with no experience teaching online have had to retrain overnight. We have had to adapt our assessment methods in the absence of in-class exams, in-person presentations and group work, and numerous assignments based around physical labs and studios. Sadly, we’ve also had to admit that the opportunities for academic dishonesty have increased, while it’s less clear what recourse we have if we suspect cheating.

Third, wherever they are on the planet, our students are under additional stress right now. While giving them “choice” may seem like a good idea, we must consider whether we are in fact introducing more stress with that choice. We’ve heard concerns, for example, about the appearance of a transcript for a student who chooses the Pass/D/Fail option for some, but not
all, of their courses this term. The “choice” proposal asks students to make guesses amid uncertainty about what their grades will be and how they will be interpreted in the future. Perhaps they have enough uncertainty right now.

Finally, faculty are not immune from stress, and right now some of it is coming from trying to maintain an A-F range assessment system under radically different conditions. What does class participation look like, for example, and how do we measure it now? The administration did the right thing by exempting this semester’s CRFs from faculty reviews, effectively relieving one point of stress for junior faculty; however, maintaining the expectation to grade students on a standard scale is another point of stress that can have particular impact on junior faculty, as they may be pressured both by students striving to maintain GPAs and by colleagues concerned about rigor and standards.

We recognize the concerns of pre-professional students who are worried about their GPA’s. We sympathize, but surely graduate schools will have to adjust their expectations, especially considering how many colleges, including Columbia, Dartmouth, MIT, Bowdoin, and Carleton, have already gone to a binary grading system. More importantly, we should not allow expectations of how medical schools will evaluate our students to drive our policy decisions.

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