March 24, 2020

Dear DSU members,

The Dalhousie Student Union is urgently calling on the Dalhousie Senate to respond to the needs of students during the unprecedented circumstances caused by COVID-19.

On Tuesday, March 17, the Dalhousie Senate Planning and Governance Committee approved an initial set of measures to modify academic programming in light of COVID-19. These measures are a first step, but do not go far enough to address the academic concerns and needs of students.

In response, the DSU has submitted a document titled Dalhousie Student Union Recommendations for COVID-19-Related Academic Adjustments to the Senate. This document urges the University to address and minimize the negative effects of the current circumstances on students’ academic pursuits, records, and future careers. Our recommendations were developed in response to concerns we have heard from students and informed by measures put in place over the past week at a number of other universities.

Let us be clear: it is within the Senate’s power to make all of these changes, and to truly work in the best interest of students. We must hold our administration accountable to the needs of students in this unprecedented time.

The DSU is calling on the University to implement the following measures:

A. Transition to alternative grading

Universities across North America, including the University of Alberta, have been responding to students’ needs and academic strain by implementing or expanding Pass/Fail grading options for the semester. Dalhousie must follow suit by immediately doing the following:

1. Temporarily suspend section D.1. of the Grading Policy to allow for a Pass/Fail option for all undergraduate and graduate courses for the 2020 winter semester, at the discretion of the student.
2. Allow students to switch from letter grades to Pass/Fail grades up to May 30, 2020, with no limit on the amount of courses for which a student may select this option.
3. For courses in which students elect to use the pass/fail grading system, apply a grade of “P” (Pass) for all students who would have earned A, B, C, or D (D excluded in programs which require a C to pass); “F” (Inadequate) for students who would have earned an F (or a D in programs in which a C is required to pass).
4. Exclude the Winter 2020 term in assessments of academic standing, particularly where a student would cease to be considered in Good Academic Standing on the basis of grades received during this semester.
B. Extend withdrawal and audit/credit adjustment deadlines

Students should not be academically penalized for the major disruptions to learning caused by COVID-19. Dalhousie must join schools across North America, including the University of Toronto, in extending these deadlines by implementing the following measures:

5. Extend the deadline to drop classes without a “W” to April 24, 2020 for all programs
6. Extend the deadline to change classes from credit to audit (or vice-versa) to April 24, 2020 for all programs

C. Adjust final examinations and assessments

Online learning and examinations disadvantage students, particularly those without access to a computer or internet at home, and students who will be travelling home to other countries and provinces and will be in different time zones. Graduate students are facing additional difficulties in completing work, including difficulty finding third readers under these circumstances. We call on the University to follow example of Northwestern University in implementing the following:

7. Work with department heads to assess feasibility of making all undergraduate final examinations and assessments optional
8. Consult with graduate programs to explore alternatives to final assessments and examinations, and adjust deadlines based on student feedback
9. In the case that students opt out of final examinations or assessments, assign grades based on coursework completed throughout the term

D. Add permanent external transcript notes for all students

In recognition of severe disruptions to learning during this semester, the DSU calls on the university to:

10. Add a note to all official transcripts of students enrolled in classes during the 2020 Winter term outlining modifications to instruction, assessment, and examinations that were made during the semester in response to COVID-19
11. Craft this note in consultation with the DSU and the Dalhousie Faculty Association

E. Consult the DSU on all future changes to academics related to COVID-19

The DSU is calling on the University to listen to student voices by doing the following:

12. Include a DSU representative on all committees, working groups, task forces, or other bodies advising on changes to academic regulations
13. Promptly and thoroughly communicate all updates around COVID-19 and changes to academics to the DSU
In the coming days, we will continue to communicate with the University, to stand up for students, and to ensure that the needs of DSU members be met in this disruptive, complex, and difficult time.

If you have feedback or input on these recommendations, please reach out to Vice President Academic and External Hasan Sinan (dsuvpae@dal.ca) or speak to your Council representative. We are strongest when we work together to support those struggling, and these recommendations are only one piece of the DSU’s response to COVID-19 and related public health measures. For ongoing updates, please visit our dedicated web page at dsu.ca/covid-19.

In solidarity,

The DSU Executive

Aisha Abawajy (President)
Calista Hills (Vice President, Internal)
Isa Wright (Vice President, Finance and Operations)
Hasan Sinan (Vice President, Academic and External)
Ruby Coles (Vice President, Student Life)