March 24, 2020

To The Attention of: Dalhousie University Senate and Subsidiary Committees

Dalhousie Student Union Recommendations for COVID-19-Related Academic Adjustments

Preamble

The rapid spread of COVID-19 has led to health measures that have significantly compromised students’ learning. The transition to online instruction, particularly done so quickly and with so little notice, impacts the student experience in numerous ways. Students are also facing increased levels of stress, anxiety and social isolation due to this virus and related social distancing practices. Whether students become infected with COVID-19 or not, these disruptions to learning are largely without precedent, and the University must employ every measure available to support students during this difficult time.

The DSU is encouraged by steps that have already been taken by various University bodies to support students during these disruptions. The recommendations laid out below represent ways that Dalhousie University can move forward in addressing the serious circumstances created by COVID-19, while minimizing the negative effects of these circumstances on students’ academic pursuits, records, and future careers.

Our recommendations are as follows.
A. Transition to alternative grading

Relevant University Policy: **Grading Policy**

D.1. The official grading system at the University is a letter-grade system. Instructors shall convert all numeric scores to letter Grades using the conversion scale that has been approved for either undergraduate or graduate Courses by Senate (see Appendix for University Grading Scales).

Given that drastic changes have been made to modes of instruction and assessment, changes must also be made to grading practices. Students would benefit from having the option of being graded on a pass/fail scale as opposed to the standard letter grade scale.

Across North America, Universities are putting measures in place to use alternate grading strategies. As of March 19, 2020, policies to either create or extend options for this type of alternative grading measures have been adopted at schools such as Northwestern University, Georgetown University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Cornell University¹. Inside Higher Ed reported on March 19, 2020 that “more than a dozen” Universities had taken these types of measures.²

On March 20, 2020, the University of Alberta became the first Canadian school to join them, and University of Calgary followed suit on March 22.³

In light of this growing trend and the significant impacts to Dalhousie students that the COVID-19 disruptions have had, and in the interest of student well-being, the DSU recommends that the senate

³ https://www.ualberta.ca/covid-19-updates/03/2020-03-20-academic-updates.html; https://www.ucalgary.ca/news/final-grades-winter-2020-term?mk_tok=eyJpIjoiT1daalpqTmplV1EyTW1OaSIsInQiOiJNd3pCNW1STWdFbkNClzRQN1Rqem8xRFDU0FLZWZubldcL1pRZGNjWWpPRJIBMnlyVWJ6VbIvZKamuWdLTDExRiYtqV2lFO3djSk1oOG52K1BOVE5OTTFbWNNUWdcL1d12zhjVXJXODFVeDFzZkNKVVVQVmxiekFhdjRmVHZWaHlZzk9kQyJ9
allow students to switch from letter grades to pass/fail grading for as many of their courses as they choose.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The DSU calls on the university to:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>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).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
B. Extend withdrawal and audit/credit adjustment deadlines

Relevant University Policy: **2019/2020 Academic Calendar**

5.1 Course Changes

*It is recognized that some students may wish to make changes in programs already arranged. Course changes will normally be completed during the first two weeks of courses. (For Summer term information, see the Summer School Schedule.) The last dates for adding and deleting courses are published in the schedule of Academic Course Add/Drop Dates of this calendar. Course changes should be made on the Web at www.dal.ca/online*

*Please note that dropping or changing courses may affect your eligibility for student aid.*

5.2 Withdrawal

*Non-attendance does not, in itself, constitute withdrawal. Withdrawals are effective when a student withdraws from courses on the Web at www.dal.ca/online or written notification is received at the Registrar’s Office.*

*In the Faculty of Health students who wish to withdraw from the university must obtain written approval from the appropriate school or college and submit the appropriate forms to the Registrar. Students should not discontinue attendance at any course until their withdrawal has been approved.*

*Students withdrawing voluntarily from the University should consult the individual faculty regulations and the Fees section of this Calendar.*

*When the work of a student becomes unsatisfactory, or a student’s attendance is irregular without sufficient reason, the faculty concerned may require withdrawal from one or more courses, or withdrawal from the Faculty. If a student is required to withdraw from a Faculty such a student may apply to another Faculty. However, in assessing the application, previous performance will be taken into consideration.*
Relevant University Policy: **Academic Dates 2020/2021**

**Last Day to Drop without **W**” & Last Day to Change from Audit to Credit and Vice Versa:**

- **X/Y Full Year Class**: October 31, 2019
- **Winter Term 2020 UG and GR Full Term Class**: January 31, 2020
- **4th-year Nursing Winter Term**: January 27, 2020

Students must have the option to withdraw from classes in light of the significant disruptions related to COVID-19. Students should not be academically penalized with a “W” for these withdrawals, as they are related to circumstances beyond the students’ control and do not reflect on the individual’s ability, academic standing, potential, or any other such factors.

Similarly, students should have the option of changing from audit to credit (and vice versa) extended along with the deadline to withdraw, in light of these exceptional and unprecedented circumstances.

Both of these measures have been put in place at major institutions across North America. In Canada, the University of Toronto announced on March 19, 2020 that they would extend the deadlines to withdraw from classes and to switch classes from Credit to No Credit, and vice versa, until the end of term.⁴ The University of Alberta made a similar announcement on March 20, 2020.⁵ Dalhousie University should follow the lead of these other universities taking action to support students.

**The DSU calls on the University to:**

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

---

⁴ [https://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/covid19-artsci-student-faqs](https://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/covid19-artsci-student-faqs)
⁵ [https://www.ualberta.ca/covid-19/students/updates/2020-03-20-student-updates.html](https://www.ualberta.ca/covid-19/students/updates/2020-03-20-student-updates.html)
C. Adjust final examinations and assessments

Given the current uncertainties about not only health but travel and academic success in an online learning environment, the University should follow the example set by Northwestern University and make all undergraduate final examinations and assessments optional.6

Students have repeatedly raised the issues that come along with online learning and examinations. Not least, difficulties will be faced by students without access to a computer or internet at home, and students who will be travelling home in light of this public health crisis and therefore will be in different time zones. Graduate students are facing additional difficulties in completing work, including difficulty finding third readers under these circumstances.

Certain faculty members have already voluntarily implemented this measure, or even cancelled finals exams and assessments outright. This measure will accommodate the varied learning needs of students.

The DSU calls on the university to:

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, mandate faculty to assign grades based on coursework completed throughout the term

---

D. Add permanent external transcript notes for all students

The disruptions to learning that have been caused by COVID-19, and the measures being taken to mitigate these disruptions, are largely unprecedented. As students go on to other universities, professional programs, colleges, internships, and employment, they must have these disruptions and measures reflected in official transcripts.

Dalhousie University already uses transcript notes as a way to communicate unusual circumstances around a student’s academic record, and this is a simple step that will greatly benefit future Dalhousie alumni in their careers and educational pursuits. This measure is also in place at a growing number of universities in North America, including Northwestern University and the University of Alberta.7

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 recognizes the need to act quickly and decisively in the interests of students as the situation surrounding this virus continues to develop. With this said, further changes to instruction, assessment, or any academic guidelines should be made in consultation with students. As the official representative of Dalhousie Student, the DSU is simply asking to be included in conversations that affect our members.

The DSU calls on the University to:

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
Conclusion

In this time of confusion, worry, and unprecedented changes to academics, Dalhousie Students must be supported in their learning. As the representative voice of students, the DSU calls on the Senate to implement the recommendations throughout this report in the interest of responding to students’ needs and fulfilling the academic mission of the University.

We look forward to working with you to meet the needs of the campus community throughout the COVID-19 outbreak.

Sincerely,

The Dalhousie Student Union Executive

The Dalhousie Student Union Senate Caucus
Summary of Recommendations

The DSU calls on the University to:

A. Transition to alternative grading
   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
   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
   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
   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
   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