



RECOMMENDATIONS ON PASS/D/FAIL POLICY

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Prepared for the Committee on Examinations & Standing
By the USG Academics Committee

Authored by Erika Kirgios '17 and Ramie Fathy '16

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Introduction

In November of 2014, the Undergraduate Student Government (USG) launched an online poll where students could vote between two options to select which potential USG initiative they would prefer. In the end, two of the top five options included adjusting the current P/D/F policy to allow for “reversals,” where students could instead receive their earned letter grade on their transcripts, while still having used the P/D/F credit they assigned to the course earlier. Altering P/D/F policy to allow P/D/F’s in introductory language courses also ranked highly amongst the responses, and several students, particularly engineers, reached out to the USG feeling strongly about the fact that they could not P/D/F introductory language courses.

In response, the USG Academics Committee researched the viability of such a change. We found that a similar policy is the case at our peer institution, Columbia University. Specifically, students at Columbia can elect to “reverse” their P/D/F assignment up until the ending of shopping period of the following semester. Furthermore, several of our peer institutions allow students to use a P/D/F option on introductory language courses.

To determine if such a policy would be favorable to the students, we prepared a survey to quantify the general sentiment of the student body. Before administering the survey, we met with the Committee on Examinations and Standing (COEXS) as well as the Office of Institutional Research to ensure that the questions were fair and to determine if any additional issues ought to be addressed in the survey. The members of COEXS suggested that we also include a question on an alternative P/D/F policy that would allow students to reverse a P/D/F if the P/D/F credit precludes them from fulfilling the requirements for a major, certificate, or upper level course.

With the suggested changes, the survey was administered via Qualtrics between November 24, 2015 and November 30, 2015. We received nearly 2,000 responses from students across disciplines and class years, roughly 40% of the undergraduate population. Afterward, a subset of my committee met to synthesize our data, and provide reasonable solutions to the problems we identified.

The guiding vision of these recommendations is three-fold. First, we found that students became less engaged in courses after applying the P/D/F and knowing their grades in the course would no longer matter - which runs counter to the



policy's stated purpose of "[encouraging] exploration and experimentation in curricular areas in which the student may have had little or no previous experience." Furthermore, a small but significant subset of students were prevented from choosing a certificate or major because they applied a P/D/F to an introductory class or other requirement; still others struggled to fit in courses and had less time to explore new material because they applied P/D/F's to courses that could have fulfilled departmental requirements. Finally, although there were no questions in the survey relating to changing the policy from P/D/F to pass/fail, quite a few students opted to ask for such a change in the free response section of the survey, stressing that since a D is still a pass, it would make more sense to simply divide pass/fail.

Notable findings include three-quarters of students who used at least one P/D/F reporting that they devoted less time and attention to courses after applying a P/D/F to them, and 93% of all students surveyed reporting that they would devote more time and attention to courses if they knew they could reverse the P/D/F option under a modified policy.

One fifth of respondents who had used the P/D/F option at least once reported not having chosen a major or certificate because they applied a P/D/F option to an introductory class and could not fulfill the requirements of higher level courses. 23% of respondents did not take further courses in a field because they applied a P/D/F to an earlier course.

Two-thirds of those surveyed reported that they would take an additional language course beyond the requirement if they could P/D/F it, but interestingly, the vote was split amongst BSE students, with only 47% saying that they would take an additional introductory language course if they could P/D/F it.

50% of survey takers who had used a P/D/F reported feeling that they felt disadvantaged by doing so because their grade point average may have benefitted from the course's letter grade. Finally, for both the reverse P/D/F policy which allows for a reversal of any course and for the reverse P/D/F policy which allows for reversal of only those P/D/F's which would fulfill a departmental or certificate requirement, 90% of survey takers voted that they would prefer the modification over the current policy.

It is a pleasure to present to this committee once again, and I look forward to continuing to work with you in the months to come.



Recommendations

I: Reverse P/D/F policy

The USG recommends modifying the current P/D/F policy to allow students to uncover their final letter grade in a course up until the end of shopping period of the following semester. In doing so, students would still expend one of their four allotted P/D/F options. Reversing a P/D/F would not be possible in courses designated P/D/F only. The USG further recommends that the reverse P/D/F period be extended for courses that would fulfill a requirement or departmental for majors and certificates such that students can reverse a P/D/F in an earlier course once they have officially selected their major or certificate

Background

One of the main purposes of the current P/D/F policy is to encourage exploration in areas in which the student may have little experience. It provides them with the opportunity to take a course that may not be fully in line with their skill set or may be outside of their comfort zone without needing to worry that this would adversely affect their GPA, either by taking up all of their time or because they struggle with the material. However, the current policy is not fully realizing that goal. Since students can apply a P/D/F and know that their grades no longer matter, they are likely to stop being fully invested in the course. This leads to them paying less attention, potentially skipping lecture or homework assignments - which certainly indicates that they are not fully exploring the possibilities of this new topic. This is clear in many of the free response answers students gave, including this rather blunt example: *“It made me feel like the class was unimportant, so I didn't work as hard, and didn't learn much at all.”* With the proposed change to the policy, students would be motivated to remain invested in the course material even after applying a P/D/F because they know there is the possibility of uncovering their grade later on. Our survey supports this concept, with 93% of respondents stating that they would be more fully invested in a course if they knew they could potentially reverse the P/D/F.

Many students also complained that, despite recent extensions to the P/D/F declaration deadline, they did not have enough information about their standing in the course to make an informed decision before the deadline. The majority of write-in comments were about the deadline, expressing that being able to reverse a P/D/F

would make them much more comfortable with the current deadlines. As one student wrote:

“B/c the option is (1) irreversible and (2) mandatory prior to taking the final, it makes it harder to know whether to apply the PDF option. In cases where I do choose to apply the PDF option, it causes me to dedicate less time in the course because I know that I will not be rewarded anymore with a good mark even if I work very hard.”

Furthermore, reversing a P/D/F might help student performance. According to the survey results, 50% of students who have applied a P/D/F felt disadvantaged when they later received a grade that could improve their GPA. It may be controversial or uncomfortable to discuss grade optimization as it is not a direct goal of the P/D/F policy; however, the goal of this institution is to prepare students as fully as possible for the future, and for many students, their GPA matters. Whether students are applying for a competitive job or for graduate school, medical school, law school, or any other postgraduate schooling, a higher GPA could be a boon. However, it is not just a higher GPA that could make students more impressive; in fact, showing a diverse range of achievements and abilities in their transcript would be extremely beneficial. As one student wrote in the free response section:

“I am a science major and have felt largely uncomfortable approaching heavy humanity courses. In sophomore year I decided to take Political Theory because it studied a diverse range of really incredible philosophical works from Aristotle to Madison. I felt that the course was difficult and the reading load hard to manage along with my science courses so I decided to PDF it. It gave me peace of mind, but in the end I actually did pretty well in the course. It was disappointing not to be able to show achievement in a diverse range of fields on my transcript.”

This institution aims both to shape the scholars and thinkers of the future and to prepare them as well as possible for the future. With this modification to the P/D/F policy, we are more likely to encourage true intellectual exploration and to help increase the future outcomes of students, fulfilling our goals and duties as an institution of higher learning.

Finally, and most importantly, there is a small but significant portion of students who were unable to pursue a major or certificate because they applied a P/D/F to a requirement or departmental course early on. In fact, over 20% of respondents said that they were unable to pursue a major or certificate because of the current P/D/F policy - as one student wrote in the free response section, “I’m not

getting the COS certificate because I PDF'ed 126" and another wrote, "prof told me to pdf a class but I ended up working harder and doing well in the course. I was then unable to pursue my intended major/certificate as a result." Though these stories may not pertain to a majority of Princeton undergraduates, the numbers are still high enough to be disturbing: each student in that 22% represents an individual who was unable to pursue a course of study they were passionate about because they were unable to revoke a P/D/F they applied earlier in their Princeton career.

Proposals

I: The USG proposes the implementation of a reverse P/D/F policy that allows students to reverse a P/D/F until the end of shopping period of the next semester or to reverse a P/D/F in that pertains to a major or certificate once that course of study is selected.

Ia: If the reverse P/D/F policy as a whole is not approved, the USG strongly urges the implementation of a conditional reverse P/D/F policy in which only P/D/F's in courses pertaining to majors or certificates can be reversed once they have selected their course of study.

II: Pass/Fail Policy

The USG recommends modifying the current P/D/F policy in favor of a pass/fail policy.

Background

The current P/D/F policy draws a distinction between passing with an A, B, or C and passing with a D. While the survey presented to undergraduates had no formal questions pertaining to removing the “D” option from P/D/F, nearly 50 people elected to ask for such a modification in the free response section, claiming that since a D is still a passing grade, no distinction should be drawn between a P and a D. Others claimed that the D option presented undue stress, as they sometimes struggled with the material to a degree that warranted worrying about getting a D in the course. One student claimed “*Worrying about the D really hinders the feeling of wanting to learn - the class becomes about grades instead of education.*” Another wrote: “*There is a lot of self-doubt and frustration in making an irreversible decision to take a class P/D/F based on limited information. It also seems contrary to the stress-reducing aim of the policy to keep the prospect of a D looming, when most institutions offer a simple pass/fail.*” Based on these responses, it seems as though the separation of the P and the D is not fully understood by students and causes them increased stress; considering that it is not common to our peer institutions, we find that a modification to a pass/fail policy would improve upon the status quo.

Proposals

I: The USG proposes the implementation of a pass/fail policy rather than a P/D/F policy.

Data**1. Class Year**

#	Answer		Response	%
1	2016		494	23%
2	2017		578	27%
3	2018		644	30%
4	2019		423	20%
	Total		2,139	100%

2. GPA Range

#	Answer		Response	%
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3. Number of classes taken with P/D/F option

#	Answer		Response	%
1	0		895	42%
2	1		726	34%
3	2		360	17%
4	3		132	6%
5	4		26	1%
	Total		2,139	100%

4. (Intended) Major**5. Are you pursuing an AB degree or a BSE degree?**

#	Answer		Response	%
1	AB		1,555	73%
2	BSE		584	27%
	Total		2,139	100%

6. Have you used the current P/D/F option to explore curricular areas you would not have if you could not P/D/F them?

#	Answer	Response	%
1	Yes	910	43%
2	No	1,226	57%
	Total	2,136	100%

7. Have you used the current P/D/F option to complete your general education requirements (distribution requirements)?

#	Answer	Response	%
1	Yes	959	45%
2	No	1,168	55%
	Total	2,127	100%

Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	2
Mean	1.55
Variance	0.25
Standard Deviation	0.50
Total Responses	2,127

8. Have you used the current P/D/F option for grade or GPA optimization (e.g. to maintain a higher GPA)?

#	Answer	Response	%
1	Yes	1,069	50%
2	No	1,050	50%
	Total	2,119	100%

Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	2
Mean	1.50
Variance	0.25
Standard Deviation	0.50
Total Responses	2,119

9. Have you used the current P/D/F option so that you could dedicate your time to other courses?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Yes		1,220	58%
2	No		892	42%
	Total		2,112	100%

Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	2
Mean	1.42
Variance	0.24
Standard Deviation	0.49
Total Responses	2,112

10. Has a faculty member ever asked you to inform them if you are using a P/D/F option in his or her course?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Yes		100	5%
2	No		2,002	95%
	Total		2,102	100%

Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	2
Mean	1.95
Variance	0.05
Standard Deviation	0.21
Total Responses	2,102

11. Have you found yourself struggling to fit in required classes because you applied the P/D/F policy to a course that could otherwise be used to fulfill a departmental or degree requirement?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Yes		182	17%
2	No		898	83%
	Total		1,080	100%

Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	2
Mean	1.83
Variance	0.14
Standard Deviation	0.37
Total Responses	1,080

12. Do you devote less time and attention to a course after deciding to apply a P/D/F, knowing the grade will not factor into your GPA?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Yes		1,261	61%
2	No		821	39%
	Total		2,082	100%

Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	2
Mean	1.39
Variance	0.24
Standard Deviation	0.49
Total Responses	2,082

13. Compared to the current P/D/F policy, would you prefer a reverse P/D/F policy?

#	Answer	Response	%
1	Yes, I prefer a reverse P/D/F policy	1,851	90%
2	No, I prefer the current policy	206	10%
Total		2,057	100%

Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	2
Mean	1.10
Variance	0.09
Standard Deviation	0.30
Total Responses	2,057

14. Compared to the current P/D/F policy, would you prefer a reverse P/D/F policy which allows you to reverse a P/D/F option in courses that fulfill a major or certificate requirement once you have declared?

#	Answer	Response	%
1	Yes, I prefer a reverse P/D/F policy as specified	1,859	91%
2	No, I prefer the current policy	185	9%
Total		2,044	100%

Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	2
Mean	1.09
Variance	0.08
Standard Deviation	0.29
Total Responses	2,044



15. Would you devote more time and attention to a course that you have assigned a P/D/F if you knew you had the potential to reverse the P/D/F option after receiving your final grade?

#	Answer	Response	%
1	Yes	1,887	93%
2	No	151	7%
	Total	2,038	100%

Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	2
Mean	1.07
Variance	0.07
Standard Deviation	0.26
Total Responses	2,038

16. Have you chosen not to take further courses in a field because you used a P/D/F option in an introductory class and could not use that credit to fulfill higher level courses' requirements?

#	Answer	Response	%
1	Yes	302	25%
2	No	926	75%
	Total	1,228	100%

Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	2
Mean	1.75
Variance	0.19
Standard Deviation	0.43
Total Responses	1,228

17. Have you ever felt disadvantaged by having used a P/D/F for a class whose final grade may have improved your GPA?

#	Answer	Response	%
1	Yes	648	52%
2	No	589	48%
	Total	1,237	100%



Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	2
Mean	1.48
Variance	0.25
Standard Deviation	0.50
Total Responses	1,237

18. Have you chosen not to pursue a potential major or certificate because you used a P/D/F option in an introductory class and could not use that credit to fulfill higher level courses’ requirements?

#	Answer	Response	%
1	Yes	274	22%
2	No	956	78%
	Total	1,230	100%

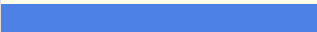

Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	2
Mean	1.78
Variance	0.17
Standard Deviation	0.42
Total Responses	1,230

19. Have you ever been in a course in which you did not have sufficient information about your standing in terms of grades, distribution, etc in time to decide whether or not using a P/D/F option was a good idea?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Yes		1,546	76%
2	No		480	24%
	Total		2,026	100%

Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	2
Mean	1.24
Variance	0.18
Standard Deviation	0.43
Total Responses	2,026

20. Would you take another language course beyond the language requirement for your program of study if you could P/D/F it?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Yes		1,353	67%
2	No		671	33%
	Total		2,024	100%

Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	2
Mean	1.33
Variance	0.22
Standard Deviation	0.47
Total Responses	2,024

21. Have you decided against enrolling in an introductory language course because you could not P/D/F it?

#	Answer	Response	%
1	Yes	811	40%
2	No	1,211	60%
	Total	2,022	100%

Statistic	Value
Min Value	1
Max Value	2
Mean	1.60
Variance	0.24
Standard Deviation	0.49
Total Responses	2,022