Policy on use of Pass/Fail Grading Option for Undergraduates

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Overview and Context
This policy concerns the use of the pass/fail grading option for degree-seeking undergraduate students. According to the UW-Madison grading scale, grades of S (satisfactory) and U (unsatisfactory) are the transcripted grades that are used for what is commonly known as pass/fail. [UW-Madison Faculty Senate Minutes, 15 January 1973, and 5 May 1980]

Currently each undergraduate school or college has a pass/fail policy. These policies are very similar, but they have slight differences in areas such as limiting the amount of time students can elect pass/fail based on credits versus courses or stating that a student must be in good academic standing versus citing a GPA. These differences often cause confusion among students who may be aware of a policy that actually pertains to students in a school/college other than their own; students may experience problems when they make decisions that are based on the wrong policy. Although there are minor differences among the schools/colleges the various policies all have very similar requirements and similar intended outcomes. Creating a policy that applies to all undergraduates regardless of school or college is in the best interest of students.

Pass/Fail Grading Option
This proposed common pass/fail policy only applies to degree-seeking students who are in the undergraduate (UGRD) career. It only applies to courses that use the default A-F grading scale (GRD) and that also allow students to choose to take a course on a pass/fail (PF) basis.¹

The instructor enters the letter grade earned by the students on their grade roster, and those letter grades are subsequently recorded as a pass (S) or fail (U) on the student record. A pass (S) will be recorded when a letter grade of A through C is earned. A fail (U) will be recorded when a letter grade of D or F is earned. In addition to the S or U notation, the student transcript includes the symbol # for courses that were taken on a pass/fail basis.

Neither the S nor the U is used in computing the grade point average.
Instructors are not informed that a student has elected to take the course pass/fail.  

**Student Eligibility**

Students must be in good academic standing according to their school/college in order to be eligible to request the pass/fail grading option.

Undergraduates may carry one course on a pass/fail basis per term and a maximum of 16 credits during their undergrad career. The summer sessions collectively count as a single term.

**Pass/fail can only be chosen for free elective courses**

Required courses cannot be taken on a pass/fail basis. The student’s school or college may review the request to take a course pass/fail and reject requests for non-elective work. It may be difficult for the school or college official to determine whether a course is an elective or being used to fulfill a requirement since a student’s enrollment or the way a course is being used in the specific program of study may change. Ultimately it is the student’s responsibility to be sure that the requested course is an elective. Students are strongly advised to consult with an academic advisor before taking a course pass/fail. Courses taken on a pass/fail basis will not count for non-elective requirements even if they would normally count toward such requirements.

**School or College Responsibilities**

Students are affiliated with a school or college based on their intended degree program. Students are subject to that school/college’s specific implementation of the policy with regard to the definition of good academic standing and what is considered an elective course.

Each school or college is responsible for clearly communicating to its students what the definition of “good academic standing” is and what a free elective is for their students.

In each school or college, the office responsible for academic policy exceptions is authorized to make exceptions to the pass/fail policy.

**Process for Requesting the Pass/Fail Grading Option**

Students indicate that they would like to have a course they are enrolled in graded on a pass/fail basis by completing a course change request via their Student Center (see [https://registrar.wisc.edu/course_change_request.htm](https://registrar.wisc.edu/course_change_request.htm) for detailed information). Students may submit pass/fail requests via their Student Center from the time that they enroll until midnight on the Friday at the end of the fourth week of fall and spring semesters. (For modular and summer session courses, pass/fail requests must be submitted by midnight Friday of the week in which the session is one-fourth completed).

The deadline for requesting the pass/fail grading option is posted on the Office of the Registrar website. These deadlines are based on the idea that the pass/fail option is intended to encourage students to explore educational opportunities that they might otherwise not be willing to attempt. Pass/fail is not intended as a way for students to avoid academic consequences.

Once the student has submitted their request to take a course on a pass/fail basis the request is routed via ISIS workflow to an academic dean in their school or college for approval or further
communication with the student. The school/college official must approve the request before the grading option is changed to pass/fail by the Office of the Registrar.

Students can see whether a course is being graded on a pass/fail basis in their Student Center.

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1 For study abroad programs operated by the College of Engineering, courses taken abroad toward an engineering major will be posted as pass/fail. This occurs automatically and is not a student option; this practice is not covered or impacted by this policy.

2 Note, however, that since the implementation of ISIS, it is possible that instructors may have access to ISIS information showing the grading basis of the course. Therefore, some instructors may discover that a student is taking the course on a pass/fail basis. Students may, of course, share this information with their instructors if they choose.