

# Graduate Student Perspectives on Fall 2020 Grading Options

July 6, 2020

---

Prepared by ASA President Becca Black and the Graduate Student Council Student Solutions Group - Academic Policy wing

[gsc-ssg-academic-policy@mit.edu](mailto:gsc-ssg-academic-policy@mit.edu)

## I. Objectives

The Academic Policy Student Solutions Group was tasked by the Graduate Student Council to evaluate the grading options for the fall semester presented by the Academic Policies and Regulations Team (APART). This report contains opinions of students voiced at the July 1st GSC General Council Meeting, in meetings of the Academic Policy SSG, and in comments on a survey sent to all graduate students. The purpose of this report is not to come to a consensus on which option graduate students would prefer for the fall semester, but to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of each model and consider in what ways they could be implemented successfully.

## II. Executive summary

Depending on students' departments, degree requirements, personal situation, and career goals, their preferences and opinions of academic systems vary wildly. In general, **letter grades** were perceived as being valuable for providing motivation for engagement with classes and learning outcomes, as well as being crucial for some students' career progression, particularly in shorter programs. However, operating under a system of letter grades instead of a pass/no record system causes much more stress and exacerbates existing inequalities in students' living and learning situations. **Alternate grades** accommodate for these challenges and present a more equal playing field, allowing students who are disadvantaged for health, family, financial, or other personal reasons to not be penalized compared to their peers who may have a better situation. This system was the most favored in our survey of the graduate student community, with **71%** of respondents approving of its use compared to **25%** for letter grades. The drawbacks to this system include a lack of motivation to perform or learn to the same level, and some confusion already experienced in the spring over how alternative grades interface with departmental degree requirements. **Student opt-in models** allow students to select what they need for their situation, but may signal a choice of alternative grades as representing lower grades. The timing of when the students' choices must be made plays into this messaging, but has drawbacks whether early or late in the semester. Grading options involving **instructor opt-in** would allow instructors to design classes with their own personal situations or type of class in mind, but cause issues with selection of classes and the potential for decisions to be made without proper understanding of or sympathy for the situation students may be in.

## III. Considerations for any grading system

No matter which grading system is chosen, issues of equity, access, and privilege will still exist across the entire graduate student population. We strongly recommend that, no matter which system is implemented, MIT offices with expertise on student issues such as the Office of Minority Education, Institute Community and Equity Office, the Office of Graduate Education, the Division of Student Life, Disability Access Services and Student Mental Health and Counseling be consulted on the disproportionate impact that coursework will have on some students. Guidance from all of these offices should be distributed to departmental leadership and instructors to make sure that no matter what grading system is chosen, it is implemented in the most equitable way possible.

International students in particular face disproportional challenges, such as the July 6 ICE policy forcing international students at online-only institutions to either transfer or leave the country. MIT must act to ensure that international students' status is protected and they have the same access to their education as their peers.

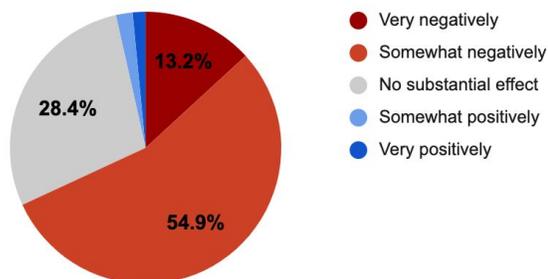
The virtual nature of instruction and evaluation allows for examination of what methods of teaching may be appropriate for students, independent of the grading system. If there are concerns over student motivation and engagement, MIT should assess its pedagogical methods and strive to implement innovative and creative ways to teach and incentivize students so that courses are engaging for students, no matter the grading system used. Project and team-based classes may motivate students to put in more effort than classes structured purely around lectures and exams in this virtual environment. Basing classes around projects instead of exams may also reduce stress in general, and would provide not only class-specific knowledge, but improvement in soft skills: the ability to execute teamwork in a virtual setting is a valuable skill to have. Class syllabi should also be created understanding the stresses and time constraints students are experiencing right now, particularly with the uncertainties surrounding personal issues and research ramp-up in the fall.

The grading system chosen will not only affect the students taking the class, but the teaching assistants for the classes as well. TAs will face the same COVID-related challenges as their students, and the implementation of any grading system must be evaluated for its potential impact on TAs. TAing is already a major source of stress for students across the Institute, with large workloads and little control over what they are asked to perform. We foresee situations where the workload of adjusting to a new grading or teaching system is imposed on TAs, on top of stresses about ramping up back to work. Some possible grading schemes may also impose a greater amount of work on the TA, depending how they are implemented. We encourage faculty to respect their TAs' time and personal situations, and support the creation of a confidential method for TAs to report excessive expectations or burdens imposed by a class, possibly through the Office of Graduate Education.

#### IV. Letter Grades: A, B, C, D, F

The arguments for keeping the standard letter grading system center around motivation for classes and the value of letter grades on a transcript. Many students and TAs reported that after switching to a pass/no record system for the spring semester, the engagement in their classes dropped significantly, leading to a worse understanding of the material. While many feel that grades have less impact on career prospects in graduate school than during an undergraduate education, they still can be critical for a student to be competitive moving forward in some career paths or degree programs, and for some, a pass/no record transcript would hold less value. Some graduate degree courses at MIT require a certain GPA in specific classes or across all classes, and the question of how PE/NE grades would be considered in regards to these requirements caused confusion and stress for some students, who are worried about what a second semester of PE/NE classes would do to their degree progression.

To what extent/in which direction do you think your unique living and working environment this fall will impact your grades?



One of the most commonly raised objections to letter grades is the added stress of being under a letter grade system, particularly during a pandemic. There will be distinct inequalities between students, with some in situations where they cannot perform at their usual level, whether due to their health, work environment, time zone, financial stresses, family obligations, or other personal situations. The inset figure displays results from our survey of 466 students across all five schools: 68.1% of

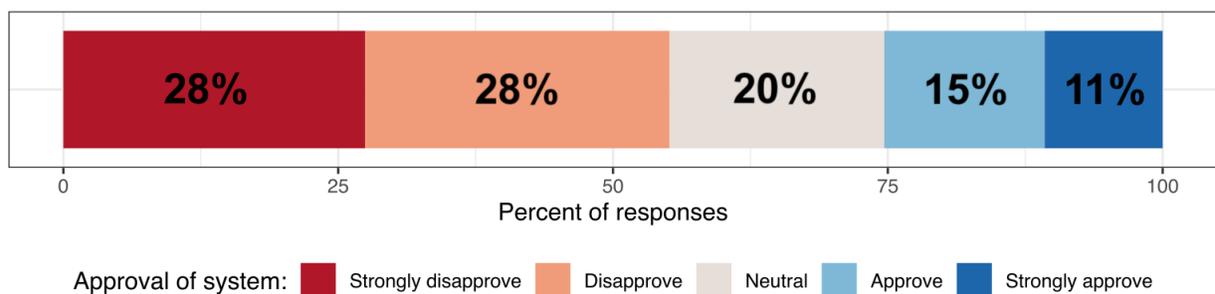
respondents reported that their living and working environment would somewhat or substantially negatively impact their grades this fall. In a letter grade system imposed on a situation like this, a higher letter grade might not only represent better academic performance, but also the unique advantages of certain students, while others are held back not because of their aptitude, but their current environmental disadvantages. Standard letter grades may not be appropriate during a time when classes are not being held in a standard format, unless careful thought goes into shaping the courses and expectations of students. The option of recording no record instead of a grade of D or F was considered to impart less stress on an option that involved grading, but for many this option felt effectively the same as standard letter grades, particularly with how some courses are run, and could lead to grade inflation or complications in reporting grades to external funding sources.

The quality of remote teaching cannot compare to the quality of in-person classes, leading to concerns over how appropriate a more strict grading system would be for a mostly remote semester. Letter grades may be more appropriate for in-person classes, where students are brought together and on a more equal footing. If letter grades are chosen, we recommend careful consideration about how classes are structured and how letter grades will affect students, both personally and for their careers. We feel that it would be inappropriate to continue using traditional pedagogical methods such as structuring classes around exams; as noted above, students will have fundamentally different environments in which to take exams virtually, and basing a large proportion of students' grades on exams would disproportionately affect students already disadvantaged during this pandemic.

Basing classes on projects or papers that span a broader length of time and encourage communication and critical thinking would be a much more viable option, though there are concerns that some professors would stick to traditional methods and not be open to pedagogical changes. Potential cheating on virtual exams is being widely discussed across the academic community, and we are concerned about unnecessary or invasive surveillance measures put on students during already stressful times, or more work being leveraged on TAs who themselves may be under greater stress during this time. There is also concern over the increased workload of evaluating projects as opposed to exams being given disproportionately to TAs, where individual TAs responsible for grading sections of a class may lead to biases and inconsistency. Overall, a system of letter grades was generally considered to create more work for TAs than alternate grades, where there would be more pressure and a higher amount of effort needed to evaluate work for a letter grade compared to a passing grade.

*Responses from student survey on letter grades:*

**Standard Letter Grades**



## **V. Alternate Grades (PE = equivalent of A, B, or C, NE = equivalent of D or F, no record on official transcript, IE = incomplete due to disruption)**

The alternate grades system acknowledges the announced Significant Disruption for AY 2020 and the differential impacts of the pandemic on the MIT student and faculty population. Some of the main advantages of a continued alternate grades system include additional flexibility and lower stress during a global pandemic as part of the student population, not just at MIT but in the Boston metropolitan area, returns and spends time together in close quarters. Future spikes in COVID-19 cases could spread quickly through the student population and would affect their ability to learn and perform in class. The volume of students who contract the virus, or whose family members contract the virus, and need extensions and exemptions could be better handled with the alternate grades system, wherein students may be better able to prioritize wearing masks, social distancing, and practicing proper hygiene without the added stress of letter grades.

Furthermore, not all students will be allowed to return to the MIT campus or even the country, and may have limited or poor internet connectivity where they will live during the fall semester. They may face additional sources of stress that may not be noticeable on the MIT campus, such as family dynamics, regional conflicts, food or financial insecurity, lack of an adequate workspace, and lack of access to resources that classmates and faculty members may have. In-person classes allow students to directly ask faculty members and TAs about class material and homework assignments. As many classes will be online, unless faculty members or TAs hold formally scheduled weekly office hours, students must hope that faculty members or TAs will respond to their emails. Students benefit from freely discussing problem sets with other students, but such sessions would be limited by social distancing on campus and different time zones off campus. Some TAs and faculty members may be caregivers or parents, and have less time to dedicate to fairly assessing student work. This would be especially true in the absence of daycare or with limited access to daycare. Even though daycare and other facilities may be reopening during the summer, they may be forced to close if COVID-19 cases spike in Massachusetts again.

Under the alternate grades system, faculty members have the opportunity to redesign their courses and make assignments and assessments more project-based. This redesign has the potential to provide a more organic environment for students to learn and apply their knowledge. Students may be more willing to take risks in these projects and explore new ideas, as opposed to aiming and optimizing their work, retreading familiar ideas, for a high letter grade. If MIT applied the alternate grades system, it would set a standard that letter grades are not necessary for careers; the projects generated under a lower stress alternate grades system could provide better preparation for careers, and material to use in applications and interviews.

Some of the main disadvantages of a continued alternate grades system include the lack of incentive for students to put full effort into coursework, and the lack of incentive for professors to put full effort into providing quality feedback. With the experience of taking or teaching online classes in the second half of the spring semester, however, students and professors may be better prepared to get the most out of classes in the fall. In addition, many classes (especially in the SHASS category) give valuable qualitative feedback on necessary skills, such that the lack of letter grades may not reduce student motivation to perform at a similar level as under a letter grades system. Some classes include, or are built on group projects, in which it is common for a minority portion of the group to do the majority of the work. The lack of a letter grades system may result in larger differences than usual in work standards and motivation among group members. However, this could be avoided to some extent by professors allowing students

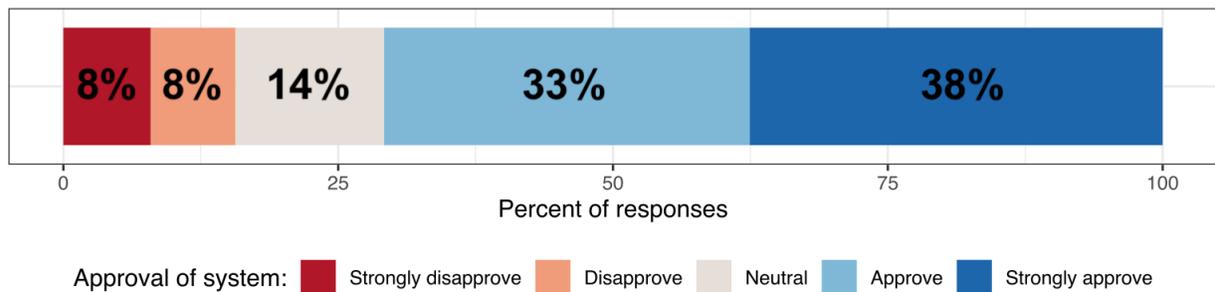
to see their equivalent letter grade during the semester, motivating some students to perform better for their own personal sense of accomplishment.

Another possible disadvantage is that students in one-year programs may not be able to report a GPA or a full slate of grades on their transcript in job applications. Masters and doctoral students may be only able to report grades from one or two semesters, as opposed to the full number of expected semesters. Other institutions may decide to use letter grades or an opt-in system, potentially introducing competition and friction when applying for internships, jobs, and graduate school. Students may feel they need to compensate for the lack of letter grades in other areas, and may not be in a position to take on additional activities to distinguish themselves from students receiving letter grades. In general, however, many institutions are understanding of the pandemic and should be expected to accept another semester of an alternate grades system during this significant disruption.

In addition, some departments have specific grade requirements to complete a degree or as part of a doctoral qualifying exam. This could include receiving a minimum grade in core classes or maintaining a minimum GPA. Departments would need to decide how to alter these requirements under an alternate grades system. For example, they may require professors to declare a student has “mastered” the subject to replace specific grade requirements, and relax, lift, or alter minimum GPA requirements.

*Responses from student survey on alternate grades:*

#### Alternative Grades



## VI. Opt-In Models

### A. Instructor opt-in (instructor chooses whether the class will be letter grade or alternative grades at some point before registration day)

This method would allow for different types of classes to have different grading systems, which might be appropriate for classes that can meet in person or are being taught with different structures, and allows for instructors to design their classes in a way that takes their own personal environmental stresses into account. However, many students expressed concerns over their instructors making choices without properly understanding or having sympathy for the difficulties their students face.

This grading system may also result in unintended consequences to course enrollment, as students may select classes purely for their grading structure instead of course content. Some units have required classes that students have to take for their degree progression, and feeling forced to operate under a certain grading system imposed by the professor could result in

complications over enrollment or tension between students and their professors. Some faculty members may feel pressure from their department or colleagues to opt into one system or the other, and choose the option that is less optimal given their personal circumstances and altered online course design. Differences on a course-by-course basis may also result in unequal and unfair burdens across different TA assignments, particularly in courses where TAs are given large amounts of work with little transparency or communication.

**B. Student opt-in (either alternative or letter grades are the default, and students can opt-in at some point during the semester)**

The options of using letter grades or alternative grades as default share many of the same advantages and disadvantages. Many students appreciated the flexibility this method offers: this option does allow for students to select a grading system that best matches their individual learning and home environment, as well as what their learning and career goals are. Being able to choose per class could also allow students to prioritize their effort to classes that may be required for their degree progression or more impactful to their career.

However, there are serious concerns over the potential messaging of opting in or out of a PE/NE system: if a student is doing well in a class, there is a strong incentive for them to choose the letter grade, which may signal a grade of PE as being a lower grade, effectively making a PE grade a B or C. This would cause significant social and personal pressure, particularly if students choosing to remain on alternate grades feel that they will be perceived as performing worse than their peers. This could exacerbate existing disparities between students, where those in advantaged situations may choose letter grades and those with more challenges may not feel comfortable doing so.

The timing of when the student choice would have to be made is critical to the success of this method, but also poses its own challenges. A potential solution to the issue of alternate grades signaling worse performance could be to put the deadline for choice of grading method to be earlier in the semester, so it could not reflect a student choosing to 'cover up' a lower grade, and limits the stress over having to choose a system to a shorter amount of time. Students working together in groups might also face difficulties if a team member changes their grading system and the amount of effort they put into the class in parallel. However, students' situations may change during the semester, as the pandemic will continue through the fall, so it may not be appropriate to force students to stick with a choice made early on if their situation changes drastically. Allowing students to opt in after they see their grades would provide the most flexibility.

Between the two methods, the working group feels that it is more advisable to use alternative grades as the default instead of letter grades, as that is the lowest barrier to student success and signals to professors to design their classes with that structure in mind, instead of starting with a potentially more rigorous syllabus designed around letter grades.

Whichever method would be used, there would likely be increased stress not just on students making the decision of grading option, but on the TAs responsible for the classes. Managing two systems of grading, or having the knowledge that different students opted for different grading systems, throughout the semester could put an undue burden on TAs and make their workload much more stressful. TAs may also feel obligated to spend more time evaluating students with

the letter grade system than the alternate grade system, resulting in biases for how they dedicate their time to assisting their students.

**C. Dual opt-in (the default system is normal letter grades; however, an instructor may announce prior to registration day that a class will use alternate grades (PE/NE/IE), and if the instructor decides on normal letter grading, a student may elect alternate grading)**

This grading system carries with it all of the disadvantages of both the instructor and student opt-in systems, while not providing much extra value to balance that out. Many students felt this system would be overly complicated and confusing, creating tension between students and faculty and adding on all the previously mentioned stresses concerning student choice. This preserves the ability of instructors to design their classes in a method appropriate for their situation, but their expectations may not then match what students hope to get out of the class or what students may need depending on their own situation. Transcripts could also be more complicated to explain in future applications, as the grading system used would be a combination of both instructor and student preference.

*Responses from student survey on opt-in options:*

