

Guide to Teaching and Learning in a Pass/No Pass Course

Searle Center for Advancing Learning and Teaching

This guide is to provide guidance for instructors in enhancing and assessing student learning in a Pass/No Pass (“gradeless learning”) course.

Northwestern P/NP statement: *Northwestern has instituted a Pass/No Pass grading for undergraduates this upcoming Spring Quarter, with a passing grade designated as a D or higher, per our current policy. Instead of assigning quality (letter) grades, faculty will give either a Pass or No Pass when assigning final grades for undergraduate students in Spring Quarter classes.*

While faculty might wish to consult with their departmental colleagues about specifics, we recommend the following:

- **Assess as you normally would, providing scores/ratings and feedback for individual assignments (projects, exams, quizzes etc) throughout the quarter. We recommend that you do not have P/NP for individual assignments unless that is part of your standard practice.** We have several reasons for making this recommendation. First, students are used to having the quality of their work assessed by their instructors in this way. They are more likely to be motivated to learn and improve when they receive feedback on their work throughout the quarter, rather than as P/NP at the end. Second, it will be easier to determine whether a student has achieved a ‘pass’ in the course if individual scores and ratings are determined as usual. Lastly, students may ask you for a letter of recommendation and as an instructor, it is valuable to know how they performed throughout your course.
- **Be completely clear and transparent in your syllabus about the numerical cutoff for P/NP:** Generally, your syllabus would have a clear statement connecting the scored assessments to a letter grade that creates a common expectation between instructor and student. Replace this with a clear statement of the cutoff for P/NP, based on the letter grade translation in the Provost’s note, copied above. This way, your students will know from the beginning what is necessary to achieve a passing score. It is further recommended that you discuss your cutoff for P/NP with your colleagues in your department, to provide some consistency among your colleagues.
- **Clarify whether all work, or a subset of the work, must be completed in order to achieve a Pass.** It is certainly possible, if this is not clarified in the syllabus, that some students will only complete the minimum amount of work to achieve a passing grade. We recommend that you think carefully about your expectations around completion of all work in your course, and communicate that to your students in the syllabus and regularly throughout the quarter. If you do require that students complete all work in order to achieve a Pass, we recommend that you continue to demonstrate empathy and a concern for your students’ welfare by also including a statement to the effect of “Please let me know immediately if you are having trouble completing any of the work for this course.”

Guide to Teaching and Learning in a Pass/No Pass Course

Searle Center for Advancing Learning and Teaching

Strategies for motivating your students in a “gradeless learning” environment

A “gradeless learning” environment offers many opportunities for students to learn in a less stressful environment, and for instructors to be creative in your approach to teaching and assessment. As research has long shown, there are three main pillars of motivation, which are having a sense of competence, relatedness and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Thus, when students feel they have choice, a sense of control over their own learning, and autonomy in completion of tasks, and they feel they have the ability to do so, they will feel more intrinsically motivated to learn. Strategies that incorporate these principles include:

- ***Finding ways to give students choice.*** Simple examples include “answer 2 out of 3 questions on this take-home exam”; “Take 6 out of 8 of the assigned Canvas quizzes,” “Choose your own research topic to explore,” “Read 4 out of 5 articles and respond to two prompts of your choosing.” More complex examples might be “Choose to do a video presentation OR a written report.” Providing students with choice can give them a sense of control over their learning, particularly if they are allowed to select questions and topics that interest them
- ***Offering smaller, more frequent (“lower stakes”) assessments throughout the quarter,*** with more opportunities for formative feedback (instructor, peer, self) built in if possible. The focus on learning and improvement will help students stay on task, especially if tasks build on each other. Moreover, when students are asked to immediately apply (analyze, synthesize, evaluate) ideas and concepts, they tend to learn more deeply and retain those concepts and ideas more fully over time (thus building competence).
- ***Providing opportunities for authentic and relevant learning that allows them to relate ideas and make personal connections:*** Students are more motivated when tasks and knowledge feel relevant and authentic, and the methods to assess those tasks are authentic as well. So instead of a traditional 5-page paper, perhaps students write a policy report or memo. Helping students make connections to the material will help them stay interested in learning more.
- ***Having students work together in pairs or small teams to accomplish tasks:*** Small group work can offer students meaningful opportunities to connect with one another about the material and as human beings. Expectations for the completion and assessment of the task, as well as the expectations for accountability, must be very transparent from the outset.
- ***Directing student assignments toward authentic audiences:*** Student assignments are generally directed (for grading and assessment) solely toward the instructor. When directed toward authentic audiences, like when work is posted on public websites and blogs, presented to the class or to external clients/judges, written and published for future students in next year’s class, etc., students are more motivated, and find more value in the assignment.

For more information about assessing learning and crafting different types of rubrics, please refer to the Searle Center’s website (<https://www.northwestern.edu/searle/>) for more information.