

Spring 2020: CC-GS Committee on Instruction
Guidance on end-of-term assignments and student assessments in light of the COVID-19 outbreak

As of April 8, 2020

As we look toward the end of the semester and plan for end-of-term assignments, the CC-GS Committee on Instruction offers the following guidance to support faculty and students. This guidance was developed in conjunction with Barnard College.

Clarification on mandatory pass/fail and nonevaluative notations on the transcript

The mandatory pass/fail system in place for this semester replaces the normal system of evaluative letter grades. The grade of P will take the place of the grades of A, B, C, or D, while an F will still be registered as an F. Nonevaluative notations on the transcript will still be available, such as AR (administrative referral) or R (registration credit).

Faculty are asked to bear in mind that our normal grading practices (for example, curving the grade in certain classes) assume that all students have equal access to classroom instruction and academic resources. The pass/fail system of grading was implemented because we cannot assume that all students have that equal access, and because we cannot assume that faculty can easily apply their normal grading criteria. So faculty are encouraged to think, individually and with colleagues, about what a grade of "pass" looks like in our current circumstances.

Faculty are therefore asked to be as flexible as possible with their students, particularly in cases in which students are encountering personal, social, and/or economic challenges as a result of the Covid-19 outbreak and the current global crisis.

The pass/fail grading system was put into place this semester to try to create the conditions in which our students can successfully complete this disrupted semester and progress to the next stage of their studies or careers. **If you feel that a student in your class may be unlikely to earn a “pass” as a final grade, please be in touch with the student’s advising dean as soon as possible to learn more about the student’s situation.** You can find the adviser’s name in your course roster in Courseworks (, or you can contact [the academic affairs and advising administrators at the student’s school listed on our faculty resource page](#).

Senior grades are due on May 15, and all other students' grades are due on May 21. More information about grading can be found on the [website](#) of the Office of the Registrar.

Preparation for finals and alternative assignment formats

Given that many students are working asynchronously and coping with a range of very challenging circumstances, faculty may wish to consider an adjustment to their originally planned assessment formats. Especially given the unprecedented events of this semester, end-of-term assignments can provide students with a summative experience of their learning this semester, which can be achieved by many means. Timed final exams may not be as feasible or productive as take-home (open-book and open-note) exams, papers, presentations, portfolios, and other kinds of assignments. Flexibility and

creativity are encouraged, and you may even wish to consult your students about the final assignment; in some cases, students even may be asked to help craft end-of-term assessments.

Many students have shared that they feel isolated working at a physical distance from their instructors and fellow students. Faculty are therefore strongly encouraged to create opportunities for students to study together for final assignments and exams and to design assignments that promote teamwork and collaboration whenever possible. Such group preparation can help students to consolidate their knowledge, helping to ensure that they have understood course materials and are prepared to progress in their studies next semester.

Final examinations

For many courses, final examinations will remain the preferred end-of-term assignment. All final examinations for the spring 2020 semester will be administered on-line. Given the challenges of administering final examinations asynchronously, faculty may wish to consider open-book, open-note exams.

In classes where this is not the preferred approach, there are numerous tools in Courseworks to support the administration of remote exams using the “Quiz” feature. Faculty are encouraged to consider the various approaches to online exams that take into account asynchronous exam times and that support academic integrity in an online setting:

- Give multiple versions of an exam, with variation among questions, so that students know that all students in the class are not taking the same exam at the same time;
- Program the exam so that students see only one question at a time, and so that the order of the questions is varied from student to student -- so again, students know that all students in the class are not taking the same exam at the same time;
- Program the exam so that students cannot return to a question they have already answered;
- Design the exam to avoid questions that are easy to answer in a quick online search; and
- Make an exam available for a reasonably long period of time to accommodate students in different time zones, while programming the exam to give each individual student a limited time to complete the exam once they have begun.

The Columbia Center for Teaching and Learning has [additional guidance](#) on creating online assignments and exams, and they are happy to consult with faculty individually.

Academic integrity

Academic integrity in end-of-term assignments is of the utmost importance. Both students and faculty have communicated a desire to foreground the heightened significance of academic integrity in Spring 2020, emphasizing the values that bind us as an academic community.

All faculty should seek ways to engage their classes in supporting the highest standards of academic integrity at this moment. For example, consider asking students, prior to beginning an exam, to write out the undergraduate student honor code or to compose a personal statement about academic integrity. As an example, faculty of the “Frontiers of Science” course asked all students to answer the following questions at the start of the midterm exam: “What does academic integrity mean to you? How can you show it in this exam? Why is academic integrity important right now?”

Scheduling

The [final exam schedule](#) has been published by the Office of the Registrar. Please adhere to this schedule if at all possible in order to minimize possible conflicts for students.

Senior theses

Senior theses are an important component of end-of-term assignments. The COI repeats here its earlier guidance on senior theses:

Guidance on evaluating senior theses

The senior thesis represents a tremendous academic achievement for some of our graduating seniors. Therefore, although the final grade for a senior thesis course must be either “pass” or “fail,” the COI recommends that any faculty member who is advising a senior thesis provides a robust evaluative summary of the level of achievement, which can be shared both with the student and with the sponsoring academic unit. This evaluative summary should reflect in specific narrative terms whether the faculty advisor recommends the student for relevant graduation honors and prizes; academic units will then be able to take into account the achievement of the senior thesis when determining departmental honors.

The COI recommends that faculty do not give letter grades to the thesis itself, since that thesis grade will not translate to a final grade for a thesis course. Faculty are encouraged, though, to keep records for themselves of the thesis evaluation, so that they are prepared to write detailed letters of recommendation in the future for students who may need faculty support for applications to graduate school, professional schools, competitive opportunities, etc.

Students will be reminded of the following guidance regarding final exams and other assignments:

- Students should plan ahead to ensure that they have access to the materials and support they need. To access digital versions of texts, students are advised to access the [Columbia University Libraries online portal](#).
- Students who have three exams scheduled in one day are entitled to reschedule one of the exams to another day. Students who encounter this situation should consult their advising deans about the procedures for making this request
- Students who are registered with the Office of Disability Services (ODS) and have accommodations should be in touch with ODS as needed to ensure that their accommodations are aligned with remote end-of-term assignments.

Please let us know how we can be of help to you as we conclude this most unusual semester.

Best,
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