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Student Body Leaders: To Ensure Equity Accept Pass/Fail Grades Without Conditions

April 15, 2020 | :

by Lois Elfman



Student body presidents of more than a 100 colleges on Wednesday urged graduate schools and potential employers not to penalize undergraduates who have opted to, or were required to, accept pass/fail grades in their courses, instead of letter grades, after instruction moved online on almost all campuses due to the coronavirus pandemic.

They also said GPA cutoffs should be removed or lightened, standardized test score thresholds should be lowered and job offers must not be rescinded based on spring semester grades.

The student leaders said the shutdown of campuses has caused a huge upheaval in many students' lives, especially in the learning environments for historically marginalized and low-income undergraduates. And schools and potential employees must take this into consideration.

Leaders of student bodies at as many as 132 institutions issued a letter (<https://covid19letters.wixsite.com/americanuniversities/pass-fail>) saying universities' graduate programs and companies' hiring managers should not make any admission or employment decisions based on undergraduates' spring 2020 performance. They urged academic bodies, such as the Association of American Universities, to also spread this message. The signatories to the letter represent more than two million students from public and private institutions across the country.

"We need to ensure that we are extending empathy during this difficult time, and reducing academic stress for students during this period of uncertainty," said Ranen Miao, student body president at Washington University in St. Louis, in a press statement about the letter.

Student leaders said graduate schools and employees need to be proactive rather than reactive in their admissions and hiring processes in this time of pandemic.

"Adopt policies that will ensure equity and accessibility in really critical admissions and hiring processes moving forward," is the letter's message, said William Zhou, a senior and president of the undergraduate council of students at Brown University, to *Diverse*.

The student leaders' letter details the ripple effects of campus shutdowns.

For one, the transition to online learning is not seamless, they said. Some professors have little, if any, experience teaching online courses. Also, courses designed to take place in a classroom now lack the interaction between students, professors and teaching assistants.

"Some courses [such as laboratories] ... it's very difficult or in some cases impossible to replicate the same type of learning online," said Zhou.

Then there's physical displacement, which causes stress and has placed many students in environments not conducive to learning, said the student leaders. This includes lack of access to a secure internet connection and often no quiet space for students to study at home. Some students have also had to take on additional responsibilities, such as childcare for siblings.

"Another challenge with having remote courses has been with students in so many different environments, you run into circumstances like unstable Wi-Fi," said Zhou, who is with family in California. "Others may be in international locations where they aren't able to attend classes live, which brings the question, 'Are classes recorded and how is participation reviewed?'"

Students at chronically underfunded minority-serving institutions, like historically Black universities and colleges (HBCUs), will bear the brunt of the sudden change in circumstances.

"I feel HBCUs are going to be impacted most by the coronavirus," said Nia Page, student government association president at Spelman College. "Although the letter doesn't specifically mention HBCUs, it talks about things that are really important to Black students: mental health and making sure we have a clear future for graduate school."



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William Zhou



(<https://s3.amazonaws.com/images-diverse/uploads/2020/04/15183638/Nia-Page-1.jpg>)
Nia Page

Page said it's important that people understand the issues that impact HBCUs, many of which are underresourced.

"A large number of Pell Grant students attend HBCUs ... and the coronavirus especially impacts people who are from lower socioeconomic statuses," said Page, a graduating senior. "Being study body president, students have reached out to me directly with the issues they're experiencing."

Page said some students with children are now without childcare and have lost their jobs. Finding time and space to study is daunting. Some Spelman students have gone home to negative environments. Spelman has allowed some students with nowhere to go to remain on campus, but she noted other HBCUs are not able to offer that option.

"It's really hard to continue learning while they're in situations that are not really good for learning," she said.

Not all colleges have been able to make their full range of on-campus services available online.

"A great thing about being on a university campus is students have equal access to things like writing centers, libraries, quiet spaces for studying and tutors," said Zhou.

Graduate school admission officers and employers must also consider the physical and mental toll the pandemic has caused. For instance, some students have been personally affected by COVID-19, either being infected or caring for a loved one who is infected or has died.

Zhou said Brown University students have been able to access counseling and psychological services, but other institutions have run into issues with telehealth services when psychotherapists are limited to the state within which the therapists are licensed.

The student collective has issued a second letter regarding counseling services and mental health support for students. This letter has been sent to various state medical boards hoping to expand the reach for licensed therapists.

"By calling for some of these really critical changes, we can ensure that students will be supported and have the ability to prioritize their health and well being during this unprecedented pandemic," said Zhou.

He hopes academic and professional organizations heed and support the correctives the two letters advocate.

"The hope is these organizations will either endorse the letter or work within their constituents to make public statements around how they plan to address grading policies specifically and admissions evaluations in light of COVID-19," said Zhou.

"We hope that many of these associations and councils will follow in the footsteps and leadership of schools like Stanford Med, Harvard Med and the UC system that have all put out public statements stating very clearly they will accept pass-fail grades with no condition."

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