

**Faculty Senate Council Recommendations**  
Relating to the Impact of the Coronavirus Crisis  
on Tenure, Promotion & Renewal, Course Evaluations & Grading

**March 27, 2020**

**Introduction**

On March 19, 2020, the Washington University Faculty Senate Council (FSC) held an emergency session to hear updates relating to the University's reaction to the coronavirus crisis. Three issues were flagged as particularly relevant to the FSC's work and upon which FSC input would be helpful:

1. Tenure clock, promotion and renewal decisions for faculty to whom they apply;
2. The question of course evaluations, both in terms of evaluating junior faculty, and in terms of overall utility; and
3. What to do about grades for students across the various schools given the move to online instruction and the hardship they face. Specifically, should they be given the option of converting to P/F and would P/F courses count towards requirements.

A subcommittee of the FSC was convened to discuss these issues and make recommendations to the Faculty Senate Council as a whole, with a view to developing recommendations that the Schools may wish to consider. The subcommittee consisted of Derek Hoeflerlin, Timothy McBride (FSC Secretary), Vijay Ramani, Leila Sadat (FSC Chair), Douglas Schuerer, Victoria Thomas, and Linda Tsai. The subcommittee prepared a text that was forwarded to the FSC and discussed at its regular meeting of March 26, 2020. Adjustments were made to the subcommittee report to consider the input of FSC members and the Provost. The present document represents the amended recommendations, which were adopted by the FSC on March 27, 2020. The three issues and accompanying FSC recommendations are set forth below.

**I. Tenure clock, promotion & renewal decisions**

It was generally agreed that faculty coming up for tenure, contract extension, or promotion during the period affected by the coronavirus crisis, that is, at a minimum Spring 2020, should be given due consideration in terms of clock extensions, and that the Schools should act as quickly as practicable to articulate policy changes to assuage faculty concerns. Although some faculty will be able to continue their research, writing, and teaching commitments even under current conditions, many more (especially those with experimental laboratories) will not. Access to laboratories has been sharply curtailed, access to research materials—whether in libraries or otherwise—may be limited, and many faculty members will have unusually burdensome childcare or other family responsibilities in addition to teaching and research commitments. Some may become ill, and others may experience financial strain as a result of the economic shock produced by the coronavirus crisis. With travel being precluded, faculty will not be able to attend conferences or visit other institutions to disseminate their work. The transition to online teaching is also likely to come with significant challenges. For these reasons, **the Faculty Senate Council recommends that an automatic 1-year extension in the faculty tenure/promotion clock (or contractual clocks for those non-tenured faculty**

progressing towards longer-term contracts) be set as a default across the University. Faculty (both tenure-track and non-tenure-track) should have the option to opt-out of the extension if they so wish, by indicating in writing their intent to opt-out at least 1 year in advance of their original assessment year for tenure/promotion or contract renewal. In addition, faculty should not be negatively impacted in decisions involving contract renewal, promotion, and/or tenure consideration, by any assessments/comments relating to their teaching or research during Spring 2020 or during semesters affected by Washington University's alternate operations schedule. The FSC agrees with the College of Arts & Sciences that a faculty decision to decline the extension should be considered as "applying early" for tenure/promotion or contract renewal.

## **II. Course evaluations**

Course evaluations are an important assessment tool for all faculty and provide an opportunity for student feedback. At the same time, course evaluations under current conditions, with all courses being hastily converted to online platforms, may be unreliable measures of an individual's quality of instruction, and may not provide a true picture of course content and delivery. Lab and clinical courses are particularly challenging under current conditions, and even lecture courses are much more difficult to evaluate. For this reason, **the Faculty Senate Council recommends that Spring 2020 course evaluations be carried out, but that they be changed to focus more on the online experience, rather than the skill of the instructor. They can still include questions about content, topics covered, readings, how the online platform worked, etc. In particular, and relating to the first issue addressed above, course evaluations from Spring 2020 should be excluded from tenure and contract renewal files, and in general any faculty assessment procedures, as a default. Untenured faculty, and faculty coming up for promotion or contract renewal, should have the option to include this information in their evaluation packages if they so choose.**

## **III. Grading and assessment**

Students are understandably concerned about the effect of the global pandemic on their class performance and their grades. The Faculty Senate Council has received copies of petitions from students on the Danforth campus, as well as information from the Schools of Law and Medicine. The student petitions have focused upon the hardship experienced by students resulting from the pandemic. Students may or may not have access to their personal belongings and course materials, may find themselves living in precarious and difficult situations, and may face anxiety about the well-being or even survival of loved ones. They may have poor internet service and may not be able to afford or find the means to have easy access to online education delivered on Zoom or other platforms. This will be particularly true for low-income students. They may not have access to support networks they had on campus and may be facing considerable financial hardship as part-time jobs disappear. And, of course, a considerable number of students may themselves become ill.

In addition to the hardship our students face, faculty have been challenged to deliver education using online platforms that have been hastily constructed. Assignments have had to be modified, and many forms of assessment and class activities that had been part of courses prior to spring break are no longer possible using online platforms. While online education can be very successful, very few courses were designed that way *ab initio*, and in most cases, faculty have had to abruptly shift classes from in person to online delivery systems with minimal training.

Finally, there is some concern about academic integrity with the hasty shift to online education. It is much more difficult to control cheating if all exams are being administered online and off campus; and assessment may become more difficult to undertake.

In light of these considerations, other universities have already acted, as the student petitions note. Either they have opted for a *mandatory* pass/fail system for Spring 2020 or some variant of an *optional* pass/fail system for Spring 2020, allowing students the flexibility to choose the pass/fail grade at a date later than normally permissible (typically the last day of classes). Students at the Law School even asked to be able to choose *after* seeing their final exam grade, although a majority preferred a mandatory pass/fail system if that option would not be available (which was the solution ultimately adopted at the law school).

The Faculty Senate Council commends the Schools for their swift response, which will hopefully alleviate student distress. The FSC was encouraged by the dialogue within and between Schools, and with the FSC, its members and the Provost. Because the Schools acted quickly, a response from the FSC is no longer strictly necessary in terms of specific guidance. Nonetheless, the FSC felt it would be useful to set out its views as they offer a sense of the faculty sentiment across the wider university, as follows:

- 1. Either an optional pass/fail or mandatory pass/fail grading system should replace current assessment measures for Spring 2020, with the optional pass/fail system being preferable for most schools.**
- 2. Whatever assessment system is adopted should apply to all courses, including major and school requirements.**
- 3. If an optional pass/fail system is adopted, students should be allowed whether to opt into a pass/fail grade until the last day of class.**
- 4. The grading system adopted should be integrated with degree requirements (i.e. such courses should count towards requirements)**

There will undoubtedly be costs in moving from graded to a pass/fail system for Spring 2020 (for example, possible accreditation issues). The costs are slightly different depending upon whether or not there is a uniform *mandatory* pass/fail grading system imposed, which was the option adopted by Cornell Law school, or whether there is instead an *optional* pass/fail system which allows students to choose depending upon how they feel they will or have performed. Students have expressed concern about what their transcripts will look like if they choose pass/fail options, and have also expressed concern about whether or not graduate schools will accept courses that are required by them if students have a pass instead of a grade for those courses. These are legitimate concerns. Some faculty have also expressed concern that students will be less motivated if the grading system moves to pass/fail. However, this concern can be ameliorated by ensuring that revised syllabi clearly articulate the work expected for a Pass grade.

The Faculty Senate Council takes these concerns seriously. Nonetheless, in its view, considerations of compassion, equity, and academic integrity warrant a dramatic, temporary change in our grading systems. Particularly given the fact that virtually the entire country—indeed the world—has now been infected, and that our peer institutions are taking similar measures, it seems unlikely that our students (or program accreditations) will be adversely impacted by a switch from graded to pass/fail

assessments for Spring 2020. Obviously, students in comfortable situations will be better positioned for academic success than those who are struggling for one reason or another as a result of the pandemic. This consideration could militate in favor of a mandatory pass/fail solution. At the same time, there are significant differences between majors and schools, and it seems sensible to permit some flexibility within the system to accommodate those legitimate differences and concerns.