



Credit/No Credit (a.k.a. Pass/Fail) in High School Coursework

Understanding Its Impact on Admissions in the Time of COVID-19

Selective admissions in the United States is primarily holistic. This is true of small liberal arts colleges from Agnes Scott to York, and it's true of large public university systems such as the University of Texas and University of California. Holistic admissions means that the application reader takes into account a broader framework beyond just grades and test scores. These admissions offices ask for essays, lists of activities, possibly letters of recommendation, and, most importantly, they take into account a student's context: what was available to the student and what was not.

Right now, we have a global pandemic with local solutions. It will be on colleges, as it's always been, to adapt to those local solutions. Whether it was the wildfires in California or hurricanes in the Southeast, colleges have long adapted to extreme situations by adjusting deadlines, resetting requirements, and considering the local circumstances of its applicants.

COVID is no different.

Why Credit/No Credit?

It is a smart local solution. In this time of change and uncertainty, it frees students to do the things that have always held considerable sway in the selective admissions process: being kind, curious, creative, thoughtful, and generous contributors to their families and communities.

Whether it's Harvard looking for applicants of character ([link](#)) or MIT wanting students engaged with the common good ([link](#)), colleges have long sought students who—above and beyond showing up in the classroom—show up in their communities. This is a moment when districts can empower students to do both.

Additionally—and perhaps primarily, it is a matter of equity. The conditions under which students are able to access their education varies even more than usual at this time whether

it's technology or support systems within the home. The same challenges hold true for their teachers, too.

What is this document anyways?

Here at Collegewise, we've had a number of school counselors and district administrators reach out to us in recent weeks to better understand the effects Credit/No Credit (also known as Pass/Fail) grading policies would play in their students' admissions processes. Our answer? Not much. We believe colleges and universities when they tell us situational changes to grading systems will not significantly alter their application reviews. It certainly may necessitate greater emphasis on senior year coursework or results from the first half of junior year, but it will not be held against a student in any way.

As you know, some educational stakeholders (including parents) have been skeptical of Credit/No Credit, so we have gathered in one place evidence from several notable universities regarding this policy.

- [Harvard University](#)

"We know that many students will only be able to present pass/fail grades or other similar marks on their transcripts this spring. They will not be disadvantaged as a result."

- [Stanford University](#)

"For those of you soon embarking on the college application process, we understand recent developments are adding stress, including exam cancellations and changes in spring semester grading. Please know we are committed to working with you and offering as much flexibility as possible. Specifically, you will not be at a disadvantage if you are unable to submit AP or Subject Test scores (these scores are not required for Stanford's application). Similarly, you will not be at a disadvantage if your school adopts a credit/no credit (pass/fail) grading policy."



- [University of California](#)

I am a current high school student. How will credit/no credit (pass/fail) grades impact my ability to be eligible and competitive for UC in the future?

"The temporary suspension of the letter grade requirement for A-G courses applies to all A-G coursework completed in spring and summer 2020, including coursework completed by students currently in 9th, 10th, and 11th grades.

The Pass or Credit grade in spring and summer 2020 will continue to meet A-G requirements for any student currently enrolled in high school during the 2019-20 academic year."

- [Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#)

"In recent days, we have received more questions from prospective students worried about disruptions to other aspects of their education, including grading policies, extracurricular activities, and so on. I'm writing to reaffirm that, consistent with our longstanding practice, we will not penalize students for factors outside their control, including changes to grading policies and procedures, cancellations of activities and exams, and more, because of COVID or any other disaster or disruption. We always strive to evaluate applicants fairly in their context, especially in times like these."

- [Tulane University](#)

My high school is going pass/fail. Is that OK?

"Whatever your school does, we'll support it. If you have only P/F in the second semester, we'll totally understand. It might mean we put a bit more emphasis on your first semester, but we'll also completely understand your circumstances. If you're currently on an upward trend, we'll make the assumption that that trend would have continued in the second semester. We'll give you the benefit of the doubt in every single way we can. Tulane just announced that students can opt to take their classes Pass, Minimal Pass, Or Fail, so we get it. Go to your online classes, do the best you can, make your presence felt, try your hardest. We'll notice, trust me."

- [The University of Chicago](#)

"We recognize that school transcripts will look different for many students this year, and we will work with that! Academic progress as usual is currently being disrupted for students across the globe. We encourage students to continue to engage with whatever method of learning your school is able to offer, and to do so to the best of your ability. If your school moves to an alternative grading system or method of credit notation (pass/fail, credit/no credit, etc.), we will fully understand why the change has been made and it will not, in any way, be an issue for an admissions office. If a high school closes and does not provide any online or structured replacement educational opportunities, rest assured that we will understand that as well (this is a good opportunity to read something new that piques your interest!)."

- [Amherst College](#)

"We realize that your education may be undergoing substantial disruption during this time. Your school may have ended the academic year abruptly, moved to remote learning, switched to pass-fail grading or introduced other changes related to public health. Similarly, there have been significant changes to the administration of AP, IB and other exams. More changes may need to be instituted for your senior year. As a college that is committed to holistic review and considering each applicant within the context of their school environment, Amherst will be very understanding of these situations. Please be assured that the consideration of your application will not be negatively affected by academic developments that are clearly beyond your control."

- [The California State University system](#)

"Perhaps most notably, the CSU system has also agreed to accept Credit/No Credit (Pass/Fail) coursework, and has explicitly stated that this approach will satisfy state requirements for entry. Also, admissions to the CSUs is not holistic in the strictest sense in that it admits primarily based on grades and scores with no essays, no letters of recommendation, etc.

The CSU will consider course grades of "credit" or "pass" as fulfilling "a-g" requirements for those courses completed during winter, spring or summer 2020 terms."



Finally, for any students or parents who might come across this document: What do I do if my school is allowing me to opt into Credit/No Credit (Pass/Fail) grading?

Collegewise is aware of some high schools where this is now a choice – opt for a letter grade or opt for Pass/Fail. If that's the case, here's our honest answer: you should opt for the letter grade with the following caveats:

If you have connectivity issues or a technology impediment, a mental health concern, or a significant family situation that's impacting your ability to do schoolwork, you should absolutely feel good about opting for Pass/Fail. And you will be able to convey that broader context in your eventual applications (there's typically space in most apps for exactly these details)

But, for those students who don't have such impediments, we'd consider this choice as something you're opting out of – as in, if an admissions counselor asked why you chose not to have grades this term, what would you say? If you don't have one of those reasons we suggested above, our advice would be to stick with the grade. And, this all comes back to context: if a district makes this choice, admissions offices will read it uniformly. But if an individual makes this choice, colleges will want to understand the individual reasoning to do so.

Who do I contact if I have more questions?

If you need further detail or additional information on the admissions impact of Credit/No Credit for your counseling work, for your administrators, or even for your students and parents, please contact Paul Kanarek, our guru of all things curriculum, at PaulK@Collegewise.com.

This absolutely qualifies as a time of uncertainty, but we hope this document provides some clarity for school districts that might have questions/concerns about potentially negatively impacting their students should the district move to credit/no credit for this semester. For students, it's important to remember that colleges will assess you – as they always have – according to what you had (and didn't have) available to you and what you as a student chose to do within that framework. This is a unique opportunity for both districts and students. We encourage both to seize it.

