

Date: March 12, 2008

To: Vancouver Senate

From: Jaspreet Khangura, Student Senator, Elected At Large
On behalf of the Student Senate Caucus

Brendon Goodmurphy,
Former AMS VP Academic 2007-08
On behalf of the Alma Mater Society

Jeff Friedrich,
Former AMS VP Academic 2006-07
On behalf of the Alma Mater Society

Re: Proposal to expand UBC's pass/fail system for Undergraduate Courses (for information, discussion and referral)

Motion: *That the Senate refer the proposal to expand UBC's Pass/Fail system, as described by Student Senator Ms. Jaspreet Khangura, to the teaching and Learning Committee for further study and consultation with other individuals and committees as appropriate, and that the Senate direct the Committee to report back to the Senate in regard to its progress not later than the May 2008 meeting of the Senate.*

UBC's results from the 2006 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), available at pair.ubc.ca, tell a worrisome story about the perceived quality of undergraduate education at UBC. In benchmark performance areas like 'faculty-student interaction,' 'enriching educational experience,' and 'supportive campus,' UBC performs below average in relation to its Canadian and American peers. This proposal is the result of a collaborative effort, started in March 2006, between the Student Senate Caucus and Office of the AMS VP Academic to try and improve the undergraduate academic experience at UBC in light of the 2006 NSSE results.

We are proposing that undergraduate students be given the option of enrolling in elective courses on a pass/fail basis. We believe that expanding the availability and accessibility of pass/fail courses can encourage academic exploration and improve the student-learning experience. Too often, students do not pursue new opportunities for interdisciplinary learning and inquiry due to fear of negative grade feedback. In such cases, grades may not be a proper assessment of "learning" because they stand in the way of further critical inquiry or investigation. An expanded Pass/Fail offering can help expose students to a broader based curriculum and thus offer an enriching education experience. Furthermore, pass/fail courses provide a means of reducing academic pressure for undergraduate students at UBC-V. The objectives of this proposal are summarized below.

OBJECTIVES:

- To improve the undergraduate education experience
- To provide students with greater opportunities for academic exploration, especially in fields where they have little background
- To de-emphasize marks/grades and re-emphasize learning / exploration
- To encourage cooperation and collegiality across disciplines

- Reduce academic pressures in 1st / 2nd year – UBC already has some of the highest entrance grades / averages in country.
- To promote sharing of ideas and information between students and to reduce competitiveness

BACKGROUND & MODEL:

Pass/fail systems have been a successful and popular option at a number of internationally renowned universities in the United States for decades, including Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Wharton (Univ. of Pennsylvania), and many other top American universities.

The models vary slightly between universities but the key features are that:

- Students have the option of enrolling in elective courses on a pass/fail basis, rather than the traditional number/letter grade system
- Usually, students may enroll in only 1 pass/fail course per semester and may take up to a total of 4-8 courses¹ on a pass/fail basis during their undergraduate career.

The American pass/fail models generally fall under one of two grading schemes:

1. a pure “pass/fail” system where:
 - students who score a *D*⁻ or higher receive credit for the course, but a number/letter grade is replaced with a *P* on their transcript
 - students who receive a failing grade in the course will have this noted on their transcript with an *F*
2. a “credit/d/fail” system where:
 - students who score a *C*⁻ or higher receives credit for the course, but a number/letter grade is replaced with a “P” on their transcript
 - where a students final course mark is less than a *C*- (i.e. a *D* or *F*), the appropriate mark (*D* or *F*) will be recorded on the students official transcript.

The key difference between these two models is the cut-off requirement for a *P*. While *P*’s do not figure into the calculation of a student’s GPA, a *D* or *F* grade is included. The model that is currently used at Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Wharton (U. Penn) is the “Credit/D/Fail” System. This may be preferable to the simpler and more traditional P/F system which is subject to abuse by students who put minimal effort into a course and receive credit for a minimally passing grade.

Proposal History:

The idea to expand pass/fail course offerings for undergraduate elective courses was unanimously endorsed by the Student Senate Caucus and the AMS council in November and December 2006 respectively. The proposal was also presented to the Committee of Deans in March 2007, where a number of the Deans present expressed positive interest in the proposal. We have since followed up with those Deans who had any reservations or concerns with the project. We have also had a positive response, or very engaged and interested questions, from those in the University Administration whom we have consulted thus far.

We are now broadening the discussion, seeking Senate’s input and help to take this proposal forward. We will be presenting our proposal to Senate for information, feedback and referral on March 26th, 2008.

¹ roughly the equivalent of 12-24 credits worth of courses at UBC

We recognize that this proposal could be referred to a number of different Senate Committees, and that consultation with several committees, as well as Records & Registration in Enrolment Services, will be necessary in the future. We believe though that this proposal falls most appropriately under the Teaching & Learning Committee's terms of reference, "to promote both Senate and university-wide discussion regarding matters of teaching and learning" and "to make recommendations, as appropriate, on matters of teaching and learning."

Respectfully submitted,

Jaspreet Khangura

Student Senator, elected at large

On behalf of the Student Senate Caucus and Alma Mater Society