Student Course Enrollment Options Spring 2020: some guidance from Academic Advising

There are many reasons why a student might consider changing their grading mode to S/D/F or consider withdrawing (W) from a class. This handout offers a set of questions for consideration and some guidance as a student weighs this decision for the spring 2020 semester. Every situation has differences, so discuss yours with trusted mentors – this should include your faculty adviser. The staff in the Academic Advising Office are also available to consult by email (advising@grinnell.edu), phone or Webex.

The deadline to apply for either option is Friday, April 10.

S/D/F grading
Existing policy: [https://catalog.grinnell.edu/content.php?catoid=12&navoid=2537#s-d-f](https://catalog.grinnell.edu/content.php?catoid=12&navoid=2537#s-d-f)
New options for spring ’20:
(The following guidance was adapted from advice provided by Laura Sinnett to her advisees on 3/12/20 and from Jason Maher, Registrar.)

1. S/D/F grading does not look bad on a transcript, provided you earn an S. An ‘S’ will not reflect poorly on you. Recall that, this semester only, on a student’s official transcript there will be the addition of a comment indicating that spring 2020 courses were completed during a crisis situation. Many, many colleges and universities across the country (e.g., Smith, Duke, MIT, Vanderbilt) have changed all students’ grades to some version of Pass/Fail. Thus, many graduate schools or employers to whom you show your transcript to in the future are likely to be very understanding of Pass/Fail (S/D/F grades) on a transcript for this semester. Although no one can be completely certain of how a transcript will be read in any particular future circumstance, all of higher education is living through this unprecedented time so there is likely to be grace. The exception to this is professional/graduate schools, especially in the health professions; they have provided very little guidance on whether a grade of “S” in a class will satisfy prerequisites for admission or how they will calculate GPAs. Thus, our best advice for students moving towards the health professions is to consult carefully before making a decision to elect S/D/F grading.

2. How are you doing in each class? Carefully evaluate where you are in the class – perhaps get a midterm sense from the faculty – and combine that with what you think about how the class is going to proceed the last 6 weeks. Ask your professors for advice about what to do.

3. Another consideration is your GPA – are you trying to raise it? An S will not factor into your GPA, so that won’t help you if you are trying to raise your GPA.
4. Are you taking the course to replace the grade from a past semester? If you received a “D” or “F” in a course the first time and now elect to receive S/D/F grading, you lose some of the benefit of repeating the course. If you successfully earn an “S” in the repeat course, the original grade points from the “D” or “F” are removed and the new iteration of the class is not calculated into your GPA at all. That’s not as helpful as, say, replacing an “F” with an “A”...but it’s still an improvement.

5. Will you have a good location where you are living to work free from distractions? Do you have a stable wireless connection? Will you have significant family responsibilities or need to work a lot of hours? The challenges of your particular situation may influence your ability to stay focused on school and spend the expected amount of time on schoolwork, so consider the S/D/F grading option if you are concerned about your ability to keep up given these circumstances.

6. Did you travel to or through an area with many cases of Covid-19? Is it hitting your community? Are you extremely stressed about all of this? If so, then S/D/F may be a good option.

7. A, B, or C-level work will earn you an S (Satisfactory). This means that you (only) have to achieve at least a C in the class. The D and F are real grades that do factor into the GPA regardless, so keep this in mind.

Course withdrawal
(https://catalog.grinnell.edu/content.php?catoid=12&navoid=2537#Course_Withdrawal)

1. Have you talked with your professor to get a better idea of where you stand in the class? How much of the grade is left to earn? Can you recover and pass with at least a ‘C’? Get a clearer understanding of whether or not it is possible to pass the class, and, specifically, what it will take on your part to do so. Once you have a sense of what it will take, consider whether you are willing and able to do what is required.

2. What will you gain by continuing with the class and working to complete it?

3. What gains might you have from withdrawing? For example, if you plan to retake the class, you’ll have a much better ‘running start’ next time. What else might be a benefit for you?

4. Will continuing in this class have a detrimental effect on successful completion of your other classes or on your mental/emotional/physical health?

5. The ‘W’ on your transcript does not affect your GPA, but it does reduce credits earned. If you withdraw from a class, how will this affect your 4-year plan?

6. Is your new living situation challenging or are you able to cut down on other commitments (work, activities, etc.) so that you can devote more time and energy to this class?

7. Do you need this class for your major? If so, how will re-taking it fit into your 4-year plan? Be aware that if you do not withdraw, once you’ve completed the course, you can only re-take the course at Grinnell. You cannot take the class at another institution for transfer credit.
8. If you withdraw, would you drop below 12 credits? Enrollment for less than 12 credits requires approval from the Office of the Registrar, and there are a variety of additional implications you need to consider. (See the Registrar’s GrinnellShare page for the ‘Request to Carry a Course Load Below 12 Credits’ application form.)

9. A ‘D’ in a course (although not an ideal grade) is worth credit and counts towards the 124 credits needed for graduation. Note that a ‘D’ grade does not count towards a major, and only 16 credits of ‘D’ count towards graduation.

A final thought: Faculty at Grinnell and across the country are being advised to consider their learning goals and then create courses that achieve these in a bare minimum way. Many courses are likely to be lighter than normal because this is a stressful situation for everyone. So, given this, you might not want to shift to S/D/F or withdraw from any courses. However, if you do, no one will look poorly on you for this. Only you know what the wisest course of action is, and your adviser will be eager to discuss options with you.

Address questions to:
- Your faculty adviser
- Office of the Registrar, 641-269-3450 or registrar@grinnell.edu
- Academic Advising, 641-269-3713 or advising@grinnell.edu