
Fwd: Response to Grading System Decision

1 message

Riccardo-Wood, Jack <jack_riccardo-wood@brown.edu>
To: Pb919@georgetown.edu

Sat, Apr 4, 2020 at 7:48 PM

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From: **Riccardo-Wood, Jack** <jack_riccardo-wood@brown.edu>
Date: Tue, Mar 31, 2020 at 9:46 AM
Subject: Response to Grading System Decision
To: Rashid Zia <rashid_zia@brown.edu>

Dear Dean Zia,

Hi there. My name is Jack Riccardo-Wood, a third-year student double concentrating in Literary Arts and Public Policy. I am writing in response to your email addressing the student body with regard to the decision to not adopt the Universal Pass grading system.

Firstly, I would like to thank you and the administration for taking student voices and new ideas (i.e. Universal Pass) into account when coming to a decision on the grading policy. This is definitely a strange time for everyone, met with unprecedented challenges. It is certainly important to be all ears for a wide range of ideas.

Personally, I feel that the decision to not adopt Universal Pass for the Brown student body is a poor one. I also feel that the basis for which you made the decision is also not very adequate. I have several reasons for why I feel this way:

1. Going to college and spending time away from home is a huge part of how students learn to their fullest potential. We are given spaces to fully immerse ourselves in our studies and acquire knowledge in all of our areas of interest. It can't be denied that although we are managing to keep academic rigor up to speed virtually, it is truly not the same as in-person, at-college learning. It should not be expected that all students will maintain full academic performance from an environment outside of what Brown normally provides us. A lot of students (including myself) do not live in home environments that are anything even remotely like Brown. These spaces do not offer us the same ability to learn and perform as well as we normally would be able to if we were at Brown.
2. What has taken place this semester is beyond anything our community has ever faced. Students make Brown a home. Brown is where we grow academically *and* socially. We find incredible knowledge, create friendships that last a lifetime, and most importantly, we are given the space to become our full and actualized selves. We've been stripped of these many facets to self-actualization

through unexpectedly being asked to leave Brown. Putting further stress on us by not implementing the Universal Pass system will certainly not help lessen the blow of being asked to leave our *home*. This is especially true for students like myself who have hard lives while being back at the places where we grew up and rely on being at Brown for eight months out of the year to maintain our mental health.

3. Your statement “For these students, letter grades this semester – even if only in one class – could showcase their resilience in the face of adversity, and help them secure access to future opportunities” is troubling. When you say adversity, unless I am mistaken, you are referring to the COVID-19 epidemic and the resultant shut down of Brown’s campus for student life and activity. By receiving an A or B in a class despite the adverse circumstances may be well and great, but what about the other hundreds of students that will potentially suffer poor grades as a result of this adversity and have their future access to opportunities jeopardized? What about the hundreds of students (if not more) that will be sent home to familial or other social circumstances that add to the ubiquitous hardship they are facing? I consider myself one of these students. I live in a household with a diabetic grandmother that requires rides to and from dialysis and other life-saving doctor’s appointments every week. I also live with a mother who has acute mental illness and is unable to care completely for herself at most times. Being home under the COVID-19 conditions puts an unbelievable strain on me, on top of the strain that is normally put on me when I’m home. I am certain there are hundreds of others in similarly challenging circumstances that weigh on our mental and physical health. Receiving poor grades, having to choose to S/NC a class for our concentration to avoid a poor grade, or even failing will not serve us well in either of those areas.
4. Building off of point 3, the fact that resilience in the face of adversity for students who have struggled academically in the past is more compelling than students with unavoidable familial, economic, social, and other personal hardships is also troubling to me. If the Universal Pass option didn’t offer anything for those students who in fact compelled you, I would be a bit more understanding of your choice. However, Universal Pass offers access to future opportunities just as well as a letter grade. Graduate schools (such as Harvard) will not penalize students for a mandatory pass/fail grading system. In addition, the Universal Pass system still offers those students the ability to showcase their achievements through earning a Pass with Distinction. Based on this, I feel that your focus on future opportunities from a letter grade-based lens is not sufficient enough to sustain your argument for not adopting Universal Pass.

I am sure that I will not be the only student emailing you back in response to the decision. I am also certain that you will receive lengthy emails like mine, but I ask that you take the time to read through all of them. Maybe something else in this email and others will compel you to come to a different conclusion. I hope this email finds you well and that you reconsider the implementation of Universal Pass to ensure that Brown equalizes the ability to learn and academically perform for ALL students in all different kinds of circumstances.

Best,
Jack Riccardo-Wood

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