

Graduate Education--Grades, Virtual Defenses, Paperwork Submission, Graduation Deadlines, etc.

Dear Faculty, Staff and Graduate Students,

Thanks for all you are doing to keep the university's educational mission on track during the pandemic. Please continue to check the [COVID-19 Graduate Studies](#) page for updated information. On the [FAQ page](#), there is a link to submit questions that you would like us to answer.

The purpose of this email is to offer guidance on graduate course grading, virtual dissertation defenses, on-line submission of theses and dissertations, and an extension of graduation deadlines for graduate students.

Grading System for Graduate Students

As you know, undergraduates will have the option to choose the CR system for their final course grades this semester. After consulting with the Graduate Associate Deans of the colleges, the GSS President, the Associate Dean for Graduate Life, the Registrar, and other senior leaders, we have decided that the current grading system for graduate students has enough flexibility built in and therefore will not change.

We recognize that graduate students are facing additional stress, as those in coursework adjust to taking courses remotely, TAs transition the courses they are teaching to remote instruction, RAs continue research while observing social distancing in the lab and prepare for a potential shut down, and GAs work with their supervisors to shift to projects that can be accomplished remotely. In addition, about a third of our graduate students are international; either unable to return home or facing difficult journeys if they do. Finally, many graduate students are responsible for caring for children who are now home from school, or for elderly parents whose health risk is high if they contract the virus.

With all this in mind, we encourage faculty to adjust the content and assignments in their graduate courses to reduce stress for everyone, even as students work to achieve learning objectives crucial for their careers.

In addition to its inherent flexibility, there are three additional reasons for retaining the current grading system for graduate education as the default. First, it is important for graduate students to receive grades in order to prevent ambiguity about the competencies achieved when applying for licensure, certification, or continued graduate education. Second, R&P does not allow the Pass/Fail option for graduate courses. And third, the CR option offered to Lehigh undergraduates does not map onto the R&P rule that graduate students lose their good standing after receiving 4 grades lower than B- because it is not clear what the grade threshold would be for Credit.

Alongside reasonable adjustments to individual course content, two key elements in the current grading system for graduate education offer room for accommodation. First, R&P provides for the liberal use of Incomplete for graduate courses, an appropriate option for graduate students who are experiencing difficulty due to the current challenging circumstances. Students can request an Incomplete in a course at any time in the semester. Second, a grade of SP, or Satisfactory Progress, already used to indicate that a multi-semester research project such as a thesis or dissertation is underway, is also available to graduate students undertaking fieldwork that they are not able to complete due to the current crisis. Unlike an Incomplete, SP will not automatically convert to an F after a period of time. Instead, it can serve as a placeholder as long as needed. When the graduate student completes the fieldwork, research, thesis, or dissertation, the faculty member can convert the SP into a standard grade.

To summarize, while the current grading system for graduate education with the options of Incomplete and SP offers flexibility, faculty should adjust course requirements where possible to respond to the complex stressors graduate students are experiencing during this time. **The assignment of an Incomplete or an SP this semester should not be regarded negatively.**

Theses and Dissertations

Many graduate students are in the thick of preparing to submit their Masters Theses, or preparing to defend and submit their Dissertations. We recognize how stressful it is to reach these major milestones during a pandemic. We hope graduate students and advisors will find a way to reflect with pride on all that graduate students have had to accomplish in order to reach this point in their education, and to celebrate in whatever way is possible. We offer guidance on virtual dissertation defenses, the on-line submission of paperwork, and graduation deadlines below.

Dissertation Defenses

As of 3/18/2020, the university has limited gatherings to 10 people or fewer. Although a doctoral defense can include as few as 5 people (1 doctoral student and 4 committee members), we still urge you to make plans now to conduct defenses remotely. LTS recommends using [Zoom](#) for remote defenses. Faculty, doctoral students, or staff should contact [LTS Help](#) for assistance in preparing to set up the Zoom session for the defense or for support during the defense itself. The LTS Help Desk is aware that these are especially high-stakes moments and will be prepared to offer extra support. If the presentation is followed by a confidential committee discussion, you will need to set up two different Zoom conferences. It is up to individual programs and advisors to decide whether to include audience members—such as other students, other faculty, and family members—in the Zoom defense.

On-line Submission of Paperwork for Dissertations and Theses

We are working with Registration and Academic Services (RAS) and the Graduate Managers (or designees) in each college to develop mechanisms for the electronic submission of required paperwork for those finishing theses and dissertations. More information about the process will be available next week.

Deadlines

Masters and Doctoral students who plan to graduate in May are likely experiencing unexpected challenges and may need more time to complete the requirements. Although we do not yet know what will happen with the May Commencement, degrees will be conferred as planned on May 18. RAS is able to extend the deadlines for May degree conferral by two weeks. Thus, the April 10th delivery of theses and dissertations will be extended to April 24th, and the May 1st deadline for all paperwork and uploading the dissertation will be extended to May 15th. If you find that you are not in a position to meet the new deadlines for the May degree conferral, please consider aiming instead for the dates associated with the August 25th degree conferral. Consult your individual college websites for specific due dates for August.

Finishing a dissertation or thesis is difficult enough, and in these anxious times it is so much more challenging. If you need more time, there is absolutely no shame in shifting to the August dates. International students can request an extension with OISS; program extensions happen all the time. If you move to the August 25th degree conferral, you will still be eligible to walk in the May Commencement ceremony when and if this ceremony is held. We are working on a university-wide policy on eligibility for the Hooding Ceremony for August graduates; it currently varies by college. We will update you when that is finalized.

Regards,

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