

## Political Science Department Advisory on Finals & Grading in the Context of COVID-19

(All information is as of May 1, 2020; updates will be sent as warranted)

The following topics are covered in this advisory:

- Minimizing cheating on the final
- Preparing students for the final
- Scheduling the final
- Assigning course grades
- Submitting course grades
- Student recourse if unhappy with course grade (CR/NC option)
- Contact for students with questions about their options

### Minimizing cheating on the final<sup>1</sup>

The fact that we cannot offer proctored, in-person exams this semester increases the risk of student cheating exponentially. The College has also forbidden use of Respondus, or any similar electronic monitoring platforms, for administration of final examinations. This raises the question of how best to mitigate this risk and maintain the integrity of our courses and grades.

**Communicate your expectations:**<sup>2</sup> In advance of the final, provide students with a clear statement about your expectations of their conduct regarding academic integrity and honesty. (For example, clarify if it's okay for them to refer to notes or Google a fact.) Where applicable, also specify the steps you will take as the instructor to assess academic dishonesty (e.g., Turnitin for detecting plagiarism—see below). Clearly specify what the consequences are for academic dishonesty in terms of your grading (fail that assignment? fail the course? other?). Finally, on the assignment itself, consider requiring students to answer T/F to a statement about them upholding your academic integrity expectations.

**Rethink your exam format:** Given our inability to monitor, your exam design should assume that students will treat the exam as an open-book, open-note, and open-Google exam. For many of us, this will mean that the format of our usual (in-person) exams is not appropriate.

Fortunately, there are pedagogical and design strategies that make it harder for students to simply copy and paste from online sources or each other.<sup>3</sup>

**One strategy** I recommend is simply to avoid easy-to-cheat formats such as multiple choice or objective (simple right-or-wrong answer) questions. Instead, ask complex, specific questions such as: “Define a collective action problem and provide an illustration that is specific to your family context.” Els de Graauw in our department recommends presenting students with hypothetical scenarios that require

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Els de Graauw for helping with me on this section.

<sup>2</sup> Borrowed from: <https://blogs.baruch.cuny.edu/ctl/balancing-academic-integrity-during-final-exams-with-student-privacy-access-and-equity-in-spring-2020/>

<sup>3</sup> I have borrowed large chunks of this section, wholesale, from this source: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/career/teaching-intelligence-how-take-your-classes-online#survey-answer>

them to apply the lessons learned in class, and explain their logic/reasoning, in order to answer. For example:

*The table below shows the profiles of two hypothetical registered voters. Which voter do you think is more likely to vote on Election Day? Provide three reasons (and three reasons only) for why you think Voter A or Voter B is more likely to turn out to vote. Be sure to explain the logic behind your answer.*

<i>Voter A</i>	<i>Voter B</i>
<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
<i>65 years old</i>	<i>34 years old</i>
<i>Hispanic</i>	<i>White</i>
<i>Married</i>	<i>Single</i>
<i>High school degree</i>	<i>M.A. degree</i>
<i>Part-time custodian</i>	<i>Full-time sales consultant</i>
<i>Member of a labor union</i>	<i>Volunteer at her church</i>
<i>Rents an apartment in the city</i>	<i>Owens a suburban home</i>
<i>Independent voter</i>	<i>Registered Democrat</i>

A **second strategy** is to use alternative assessment formats, relying less on essays and written exams and instead embracing oral exams using Zoom or Blackboard Collaborate, or having students produce podcasts, YouTube videos, posters, or Vocat presentations that can be shared online.

A **third strategy** is to design final assignments that include process questions, in which students reflect upon and describe the experience of writing the essay or taking the exam. Not only do these kinds of questions promote metacognition, they may also deter cheating.

A **fourth strategy** is to create exam formats through Blackboard that deter cheating through features such as narrow time windows, randomizing question order, forced completion of questions before moving to the next one, and no backtracking. This strategy comes with significant caveats, however. For example, you would need to have a plan for how to deal with students who get kicked out of the exam because of bad internet connections or because they didn't follow instructions. For information about creating exams in Blackboard, see:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hms51SQtYzY&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hms51SQtYzY&feature=emb_logo)

**Plagiarism detection:** For any final paper assignment, instructors are strongly encouraged to use the plagiarism detection software that Baruch subscribes to, *Turnitin*. The best way to do this is by setting up the assignment to be submitted directly to *Turnitin* using this integrated feature on your course's Blackboard site. You can find instructions here: <https://www.kbcc.cuny.edu/its/documents/Turnitin.pdf> Questions about using *Turnitin* on BB should be directed to [Kevin.Wolff@baruch.cuny.edu](mailto:Kevin.Wolff@baruch.cuny.edu) at BCTC.

**Resources:** Detailed findings and recommendations about exams and cheating can be found here: <https://blogs.baruch.cuny.edu/ctl/balancing-academic-integrity-during-final-exams-with-student-privacy-access-and-equity-in-spring-2020/>

### **Preparing students for the final**

While classes are still officially in session (in *advance* of distributing the final), all instructors should distribute (or re-distribute) to their students a *written* description of

- a) the format of the final (short answer? essays? expected length of answers?)
- b) how and when it will be administered & submitted (take-home? synchronous? BB? email?)
- c) the topics that may be covered by the final (comprehensive? only topics since midterm?)
- d) the standards of conduct that are acceptable (e.g., open book?)
- e) the standards of evaluation (what type of work is expected for an A, for a B, etc.)

Providing this information in advance will go a long way to reducing the stress level for your students and reduce their complaints to the department chair.

In addition, all instructors **must make themselves available, in a timely manner,** for students who have questions about format or substance of the exam.

### **Scheduling the final**

If you hold a **formal,** fully synchronous final exam, it **MUST** be held on the day and time slot specified by Baruch's Final Exam Grid, found here:

<https://www.baruch.cuny.edu/registrar/students/documents/Spring2020FinalExamGrid.pdf>

Even if your **exam-final** is not fully synchronous (for example, a "take-home assignment"), you **must should** keep the scheduling grid in mind. Specifically, you may choose to give your students more than a two-hour window in which to complete your final, but **have** the window that you give **must encompass** your course's scheduled exam slot. (The purpose of this **would be rule is** to ensure that even if a student is fully booked with other synchronous exams, they at least **have** your course's window open to complete your exam.)

In most cases, is recommended that you conduct your **exam-final** with a larger-than-usual window of time between when it is distributed and when it is due, in order to accommodate uneven access to computers and internet by our students, and to avoid later student complaints in this regard.

### **Assigning course grades**<sup>4</sup>

First, I recommend generosity and compassion when thinking through course grades. This could mean a few different things. If a student is on the borderline between two grades, my personal recommendation is the higher grade. If a student has failed to turn in an assignment(s), you may want to consider grading the student based on the assignments turned in—or, alternatively, weighting the grade toward the assignments turned in. If a student has effectively fallen off the grid and is unresponsive to emails, consider that student's performance before we moved online and after we moved online and judiciously assign a grade that reflects challenges that student may have faced after March 13.

At the same time, instructors should NOT simply assign the same, blanket course grade to all students regardless of effort and performance. If we are assigning grades, they should strive to meaningfully distinguish high performers from low performers. Students who may have simply fallen victim to circumstance do have recourse after the fact, including a generous CR/NC option (discussed later), so it is not your responsibility to fully adjudicate such issues.

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<sup>4</sup> Large portions of this section are borrowed from an advisory written by Jessica Lang, Chair of the English Dept.

Regardless of how you calculate them, final grades are submitted as **letter grades**. You can see a rubric of how percentage grades should be translated into letter grades (and how letter grades translate into GPA) at the *bottom* of this page: <https://www.baruch.cuny.edu/registrar/faculty-and-staff/non-traditional-grade.html>

At the top of that same link, you will also see options and explanations for several non-standard grades. A few of these deserve special mention:

**INC** (Incomplete): It is College policy that *students* request an INC. The instructor does not assign INC otherwise and is not compelled to agree to a student request. Instructors should *not* agree to give an INC if the student does not have a reasonable chance of passing even if incomplete work is later turned in. That said, instructors can help advise students whether to request an INC or not. In this regard, keep in mind that even under the best of circumstances, students have trouble completing incompletes, and the INC turns into an F after one semester. This semester in particular, the INC may not be in students' best interests, for two reasons. First, given the challenges that students will continue to face going into the summer and fall, an INC doesn't buy them time in the way it might during a more typical semester. Second, this semester there is a unique CR/NC option for students to also consider (discussed below), which may be more advantageous for them than an INC. If an instructor gives an INC, and the student does not complete the work, the student loses the CR/NC option. Specifically, the CR/NC option cannot be applied to an INC grade before work is completed, nor to an INC later converted to a letter grade, nor to an INC later converted to an FIN because the work was not completed.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, in my view, this semester it would generally may be unwise for students to request, or instructors to agree to give, an INC. (An eExceptions might be if the student is likely to either earn an A or move from an F to a passing grade simply by turning in a very small piece of missing work.)

**WU** (Withdrew Unofficially): Theoretically, this grade should be assigned to a student who attended at least one class session, *stopped attending class, and did not take the final exam* (or hand in a final paper or project). For GPA purposes, a WU counts as an F. Just as with INC, a student cannot apply the useful CR/NC option (see below) to a WU grade. Given the context of COVID-19 and the fact that students may be sick or caring for a sick family member, I believe that assigning a WU grade this semester may be overly punitive. In most cases, assigning an F would be more advantageous to the student than a WU, because it would allow the student to convert the F to a NC, thereby not harming the student's GPA.

### **Submitting course grades**

You must submit course grades electronically through CUNYfirst. Detailed instructions can be found here: <https://www.baruch.cuny.edu/registrar/faculty-and-staff/grade-submission.html>

As of today, grades are **due by May 28, 2020, 11:59pm**. I am very aware this is a short turnaround. Nevertheless, the electronic system will close after the specified date. Late grades can only be submitted via very cumbersome process (also specified on the website above). Late grades also threaten graduation status for seniors. Please try to avoid this if at all possible.

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<sup>5</sup> It CAN be applied to an INC for which the student completes the work and the instructor assigns a letter grade.

### **Student recourse if unhappy with course grade (CR/NC option)**<sup>6</sup>

The CR/NC (Credit/No Credit) option is being made available exclusively this semester because of our current crisis. It works as follows: using the normal process above, the instructor awards the student the *letter* grade they earned. The student *sees that grade* on CUNYFirst. By June 25 (20 days after the grading deadline), any unhappy *student* applies for the CR/NC option. If the grade that was assigned by the instructor is a D or higher, a CR replaces the grade. If the grade is an F, a NC replaces the grade. There is a footnote on the transcript explaining the CR/NC. Neither a CR nor an NC grade affects the student's GPA (without a letter grade, the course is not used in calculations of the student's GPA). In the case of a CR, any major, minor, or Pathways requirements the course fulfills are considered met. *Note:* in some cases, it is possible that an NC might impact financial aid and/or progress towards degree.

**How might the CR/NC option affect instructors?** Given the presence of this CR/NC option, instructors should not feel pressured to unreasonably inflate student grades. A student who receives, say, a D+ can subsequently convert this grade to a CR, which will not hurt their GPA. Conversely, if a student has not done enough work to pass your class, rather than assign an INC or WU, an instructor might consider simply assigning an F. A student who receives an F can subsequently convert this grade to a NC, which will not hurt their GPA.

**Comparing other student options:** The usual option for a student to request to take a course P/NC (in *advance* of grading) is essentially superseded by the CR/NC option. In most cases, it makes no sense for a student to request P/NC since the terms of CR/NC are better in every way. I believe that the same logic applies to the student's option to request a W (withdrawal): staying in the course, waiting for a grade, and then applying CR/NC (if desired) seems more preferable for students than requesting a W (in my understanding).

**CR/NC FAQs:** <https://www.cuny.edu/coronavirus/credit-no-credit-policy/faq/>

### **Contact for students with questions about their options**

If students wish to confer with a live person about their options (W, INC, P/F, CR/NC), in addition to their own advisors at the Student Advisement office, they can also contact Barbara Shea in the Baruch Registrar's Office: [Barbara.Shea@baruch.cuny.edu](mailto:Barbara.Shea@baruch.cuny.edu)

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