Flexible P/NR Grading Option proposal
Committee on the Undergraduate Program

Basic Concept and Goals

A new grading system: first-year grading would remain mostly the same, but after the first semester, students would be allowed to convert up to **48 units** to P/NR grading **after** receiving their final grade. This proposal would retain most of the existing first-year P/NR system's goals and many of the desirable features of Phases One and Two of the current CUP Experiment. These include facilitating the transition to MIT, encouraging exploration and discovery throughout a student's career, and creating a safety net to help reduce student stress. An additional goal is to simplify the current menu of grading options.

Details of Proposal

- First-year grading would remain the same (fall grades are P/NR and spring grades are ABC/NR, though the Flexible P/NR option would be available).
- Up to 48 units after the first semester may be retroactively converted to P/NR ("Flexible P/NR").
- Subjects must be designated as P/NR **after** grades are finalized, no later than Add Date of the next enrolled semester. Final term seniors must designate subjects as P/NR prior to the CAP's SB degree candidates meeting.
- A passing grade in the subject would be a C- or better; NR would be allocated for D or F grades.
- Flexible P/NR subjects can be spread out or used all in one semester.
- Any subject is eligible for Flexible P/NR designation, including GIRs and major or minor requirements.
- Once a subject has been designated as P/NR, it may not be converted back to regular grades in the future.
- This option would replace the Sophomore Exploratory and Junior-Senior P/D/F options.
- The Committee on Academic Performance acts with power in determining whether to review petitions (late designations, revert to grades, etc.) under extenuating circumstances.
- Implications and consequences of the policy would be extensively reviewed over five years beginning in AY 2020-21. Informed by feedback from other faculty governance committees and the broader MIT community, as well as its own data-collection, CUP would issue a report on the policy to the Faculty early in AY 2024-25. This report will recommend maintaining, amending, or rescinding the Flexible P/NR proposal.

Origins and consultation

This idea was initially conceived by Professor Jesse Thaler from Physics. It has been modified in response to early feedback and may change further as we continue to hear from the MIT community. So far, we have consulted with the Committees on Curricula and Academic Performance; the Vice Chancellor and Office of the First Year; the Faculty Officers; the Faculty Policy Committee; the CUP Subcommittees on the Communication and HASS Requirements; the Deans Group; the UA Executive Council; and S^3 and Counseling and Mental Health.

Next steps

Due to the current situation, the open forums for feedback from instructors and students were canceled. Instead we plan to present the idea during the March Faculty meeting, with a possible motion and vote later in the spring.

More information can be found at: https://registrar.mit.edu/flexpnr-proposal
Feedback can be sent to: fpnr-feedback@mit.edu

Possible advantages

- The grading option is discipline-agnostic.
- Students would have incentives to explore and take risks throughout their undergraduate careers.
- Allowing students to designate P/NR grading only after seeing the grade, and to retain these options for later use (i.e., making them "bank-able"), could incentivize students to strive to do well the whole semester.
- The option could serve to decrease student stress since it creates a safety net beyond the first term.
- It provides more flexibility than the existing grading options offered beyond the first year.
- It could mitigate the gaming of P/NR in the first term, while supporting students as they transition to academic life at MIT.
- It is more straightforward for students and advisors to understand than Sophomore Exploratory and Junior-Senior P/D/F.
- It does not impose a one-size-fits-all model on students.

Possible disadvantages

- Students may elect to a substantial portion of their Science Core GIRs, HASS GIRs, or communication-intensive (CI-H or CI-M) subjects on P/NR, which might reduce engagement in some of those subjects.
- Students may elect to take particularly challenging departmental requirements P/NR—though incentives exist that we think would minimize this behavior (see below). Strong advising would also be helpful here.
- The policy could be used in a way that optimizes for transcript polishing, as much as (or more than) exploration—though given MIT's comparative lack of grade inflation, CUP did not consider this a major drawback.

Thoughts on specific details of the proposal

Why 48 units?

Forty-eight units is the equivalent of **four** 12-unit subjects, approximately the number allowed under the status quo ante (two Sophomore Exploratory, two Junior-Senior P/D/F).

Why units instead of subjects?

The use of units eliminates confusion around what constitutes a subject and allows flexibility for students to decide where to apply this safety net, be it a 6-unit subject or a 24-unit subject.

Why allow students to use these subjects at any time during their careers beyond the first semester, and to use more than one during a semester?

When things go wrong, they often go wrong in several subjects during the same semester. For example, if a student gets seriously sick and is fighting to recover, being able to P/NR more than one subject could help keep them on track for graduation, while reducing stress about having one or more C's on the transcript.

Why do students need to designate a subject to be graded P/NR by Add Date of the next enrolled semester after the grade for the subject is finalized?

- Giving until Add Date of the following semester allows both a brief "cooling-off" period and consultation with students' advisor(s) about the decision to designate one or more subjects P/NR.
- At the same time, this relatively short window minimizes the amount of time in which the transcript is subject to change. This is important since having more than one version in circulation could be problematic.

Why are there no restrictions on which subjects students can designate as P/NR?

- Two goals of this proposal are to simplify multiple complex grading options and to create stress reduction and flexibility for students when and where they need it. Restrictions add complexity, reduce flexibility, and increase the likelihood of unintended consequences.
- "C" certifies enough prerequisite knowledge to continue to a more advanced subject, so since only grades of "C" or better can be converted to "P," that grade would serve the same function under this proposal.
- Incentives already exist for students to avoid designating important subjects in the major P/NR. They are often the subjects of most interest to students intellectually and important to employers and graduate schools.
- Strong advising should help students make wise choices concerning which subjects they designate P/NR.
- Restrictions could add challenges for students wanting to change majors.
- Adding restrictions around majors could present additional auditing challenges.

Why eliminate Sophomore Exploratory and Junior-Senior P/D/F Options?

These options are under-utilized and may provide less flexibility than is desired by students. According to data provided by the Registrar's Office, of the 1,142 students earning an SB in AY2018-19:

- Sophomore Exploratory: 37.7% of students designated one subject, 25.7% designated two, and 36.5% did not use option. 79% of students did not change to listener status. 19.9% changed 1 and 1.1% changed two.
- Junior-Senior P/D/F: 19.3% of students designated one subject, 7.2% designated two, and 73.6% did not use option. 54.9% of the designations occurred in the final term.

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