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Report on Credit/D/Fail Reform

Introduction

Current Cr/D/Fail policy at Yale is designed to incentivize academic exploration. It encourages students to fully access Yale’s wide selection of courses, even those in unfamiliar departments, and pursue a diverse, rich course of study. The policy operates under several governing rules:

1. Courses designated Cr/D/Fail may not be used to fulfill distributional requirements.
2. Courses must be designated Cr/D/Fail by the date that schedules are due.
3. A maximum of four courses designated as Cr/D/Fail during a student’s tenure at Yale may be counted toward the bachelor’s degree.
4. A maximum of two courses per term may be designated Cr/D/Fail, and at least two courses per term must be taken for a letter grade.
5. Courses designated Cr/D/Fail may be converted to a Letter Grade until a few weeks after midterm (around November 6-13 in the Fall Term, and around April 1-8 in the Spring Term).
6. Courses converted from Cr/D/Fail to Letter Grade before the midterm deadline may not be converted back to Cr/D/Fail, even if the student desires to do so prior to said deadline.

There are a number of benefits to the Cr/D/Fail policy. Students state that it helps reduce academic pressure when taking an unfamiliar course alongside peers who may better grasp the material. Students also utilize the policy to explore fields they are interested in, while also getting a better sense of departmental expectations, grading styles, general level of rigor, and the subject matter itself before taking a course for a letter grade. For example, a student majoring in social sciences but interested in astronomy may take a course in that department Cr/D/Fail to see if he or she would like to explore the field further. More science-minded individuals can opt to take a creative writing course Cr/D/Fail to gain new skills without feeling inhibited by, or fearful of, making a certain grade. If a student continues to be interested in more courses after taking one Cr/D/Fail, he or she can then confidently take additional courses for a letter grade and apply them toward the bachelor’s degree.

Current Cr/D/Fail policy, however, does not permit students to maximize their opportunities for exploration. Some students in majors that do not permit Cr/D/Fail courses to be counted effectively have no Cr/D/Fail-eligible classes, while others easily make use of it. Inconsistencies in major departments’ Cr/D/Fail acceptance policies limit students’ ability to explore academically, simply due to their chosen field of focus. For instance, many STEM majors find it difficult to pursue academic interests beyond STEM because of the combination of course-heavy major programs requiring all letter grades and Yale’s distributional requirements, which cannot be designated Cr/D/Fail. As such, these students do not act on the same incentives to engage in exploration as those in other major programs.

Rigid Cr/D/Fail policies also limit exploration within a major. While basic math and science courses are fundamental to all EM majors, and thus reasonably cannot be taken Cr/D/Fail, students in these departments have little recourse to explore more specialized realms of their fields without grading pressures. Many majors also require that prerequisites be taken for a letter grade, which may discourage potential interested students from testing the waters, so to speak. Students entering Yale with multiple interests may be discouraged from majoring in a more intensive field simply because they have not explored it in an academic setting prior to Yale and are unsure whether or not they would thrive. Yale students are, generally speaking, risk-averse.

Shopping period is also a stressful time for students because Cr/D/Fail designation must be finalized by the scheduling due date. Many students have expressed that they are often unsure about whether to designate a class Cr/D/Fail at the beginning of a course, even after learning grading expectations and reading an outline of the subject matter to be covered. Some are more confident than others and enroll in classes for letter grades—including ones covering material they are less familiar with, but decidedly interested in—only to regret this decision later in the semester when the class moves to more advanced material far beyond their academic comfort zone. Shopping period (which allows for anywhere between 2-6 class meetings) is simply not enough time for students to assess if a course they are interested in is one that they would rather explore or one in which they would like to show their subject mastery. While students can, at a later date, switch a course’s designation from Cr/D/Fail to a Letter Grade, they are not permitted to switch a course from Letter Grade to Cr/D/Fail, even if they initially thought to take it Letter Graded after only a couple of course meetings.

Pass-Fail and Credit/D/Fail Systems at Peer Institutions

Among Ivy League schools, Yale is one of the only universities that requires students to indicate whether a course will be taken Cr/D/Fail or for a Letter Grade at the start of the term (only Dartmouth has a similar policy). Yale is also the only one that limits students to a one-time switch from Cr/D/Fail to Letter Grade. The following are systems at peer institutions:

*Brown University*

Students can change their grades from a Letter Grade to Satisfactory/No Credit or vice versa anytime through the fourth week of classes.

*Columbia University*

Students can change their grades from a Letter Grade to P/F and vice versa anytime until the middle of November or March, depending on the semester.

*Cornell University*

Students can change their grades from a Letter Grade to a non-Letter Grade and vice versa through the first three weeks of classes.

*Dartmouth College*

Students can change their grades from a Letter Grade to a Non-Recording Option (student specifies lowest grade they are willing to have recorded; grades of D or lower invalidate the option) within the first fifteen days of the term. Students can make multiple changes their specified “lowest grade to be recorded” at any time—specifying a C minus essentially changes this system to a Letter Grade regime—up until five days before the end of the term.

*Harvard University*

Students can change their grades from a Letter Grade to Pass/Fail and vice versa anytime before the fifth Monday of the term.

*Princeton University*

Students can change their grades from a Letter Grade to a non-Letter Grade and vice versa anytime during the seventh through ninth weeks of the term.

*University of Pennsylvania*

Students can change their grade from a Letter Grade to P/F and vice versa any time through the end of the fifth week of classes.

By comparison, students at Yale have two weeks to decide whether to designate a course Cr/D/Fail or as a Letter Grade. If they designate a course as Cr/D/Fail, they can change it to a Letter Grade by mid-November or early April. Unlike students at other institutions, however, if they designate a course as a Letter Grade, they **cannot** change it to Cr/D/Fail whatsoever. They can only drop the class.

The Mid-Semester Cr/D/Fail Designation Switch

The inflexibility of Yale’s current Cr/D/Fail policy is detrimental to the undergraduate academic experience. The Yale College Council therefore proposes the following:

Proposal I: Yale College should permit students to switch a course from a Letter Grade to Cr/D/Fail and vice versa during the first four weeks of each semester.

Extending the amount of time Yale students have to determine whether to designate a course Cr/D/Fail would likely lead them to make more accurate declarations. This policy would reward daringness without punishing students for it, as those who were perhaps too adventurous during shopping period would be provided more time to consider the grade mode they would like for their elected courses. It is not necessary for the date upon which students must make their designation of a course as Cr/D/Fail or a Letter Grade final to coincide with the date upon which schedules are due. It streamlines record keeping, but is not a pedagogical imperative.

Some students may not realize that they actually want to take a course in a more exploratory atmosphere until well after shopping period; perhaps the last few units of the course are well beyond their academic comfort zone. Doubling the length of time students have to consider their grade mode would give them more opportunity to get a sense of class workload, subject matter, student-professor relationship, and make a more educated decision about utilizing the Cr/D/Fail policy, rather than registering courses Cr/D/Fail simply to retain the option beyond shopping period until deciding to switch to a letter grade. Instead of indicating Cr/D/Fail on the schedules that students hand in to their residential college deans, they would check a box on the Student Information Systems website after four weeks of courses.

Cr/D/Fail Designations for Majors

In the October Yale College Council survey of over 1,500 students, **87.43%** of all respondents indicated a preference that at least one course within their major should be eligible for Cr/D/Fail enrollment. Humanities and Social Sciences majors were more likely to select “2 Classes” than STEM students, who were more likely to select “1 Class.”

The question read: In your opinion, how many classes should students be able to designate Cr/D/Fail within their major?

1. 0 Classes: 12.57%
2. 1 Class: 19.22%
3. 2 Classes: 46.10%
4. 3 Classes: 13.66%
5. More than 3 Classes: 8.45%

If students had embraced choice (e), it would be reasonable to assume that students were more concerned with reducing academic rigor than enhancing their intellectual experience, thereby delegitimizing this question. However, the fact that only 22% opted to choose an arrangement that is more flexible than any major at Yale (Political Science and Psychology allow for 2 Cr/D/Fails in the major) suggests that students were genuinely concerned with both achieving the appropriate level of rigor and enhancing opportunities for exploration.

Students in certain majors that do allow Cr/D/Fail indicated preferences in close agreement with their major’s respective policy. For example, Political Science and Psychology majors indicated that their general preference was for “2 Classes.” Philosophy majors also indicated preference for “1 Class,” in line with the current Philosophy department policy.

The most apparent pattern, however, was that students across majors desired an increase of one in the number of Cr/D/Fail courses permitted within their major program. Majors that allow one Cr/D/Fail had many respondents who indicated a desire for two Cr/D/Fail courses to be applied toward the requirements. Students in majors that do not allow any Cr/D/Fail courses often selected “1 Class.” This included students in Applied Physics, Biomedical Engineering, Chemical Engineering, Classics, Economics, Electrical Engineering, Global Affairs, Mathematics, MB&B, MCDB, Mechanical Engineering, and Physics. Many of these majors also have prerequisites that cannot be taken Cr/D/Fail, so students in these fields have less opportunity to use Cr/D/Fail, as more than a dozen (sometimes up to seventeen) of their 36 courses must be taken for a Letter Grade. These measured responses—rather than a plethora of “3 Classes” or “More than 3 Classes”—indicate that students both are committed to taking most of their program of study for a letter grade and would like at least some opportunity to explore within their major or beyond it.

It is also clear, however, that there are several arguments as to why the majority of majors at Yale do not permit Cr/D/Fail:

1. Cr/D/Fail exists for the sake of broadening Yale’s liberal arts curriculum, not as a GPA insurance option.
2. Cr/D/Fail is meant to promote exploration beyond students’ selected field of study, not permit them to easily pass required courses.
3. Majors deem **all** of their courses essential in preparing students for a future in the respective field, and therefore ask students who commit to the major to also make a commitment to receiving grades in all courses.
4. Majors with no Cr/D/Fail option, like Economics, often grade required courses on curved scales that account for the rigor of those courses; thus, there is no need to offer Cr/D/Fail in those majors.

In light of these arguments, YCC recognizes that it is not prudent to allow a blanket standardization of Cr/D/Fail across all majors at Yale. Each department has a different academic program, and Cr/D/Fail policies should be tailored to these departmental differences. However, these arguments are limited. After all, even within a major, there are certain courses that some students would not even consider taking because they are outside of that student’s subfield or specialty. Cr/D/Fail within a major could spur exploration outside of Comparative Politics, for a Political Science major, and into complex Political Philosophy courses. Most majors do not become specialists in **all** of the subfields of each major after 12 term courses. Thus, exploration need not be isolated to non-major courses. Expanding Cr/D/Fail within majors would help broaden Yale’s liberal arts curriculum within a major, as well as beyond it.

In response to point 4, majors with this kind of curved introductory sequence, like Economics, could easily prevent students from taking a required course Cr/D/Fail, and instead allow students to use a Cr/D/Fail for one of their advanced seminars, or by discretion of the DUS. Certain foundational courses that are fundamental to **every** Economics major should not be designated Cr/D/Fail, but rigorous courses like advanced Game Theory seminars could attract more students not specializing in Game Theory if a Cr/D/Fail were applied to those courses.

Therefore, YCC proposes the following to incorporate Cr/D/Fail in major curricula:

Proposal II: Conduct a review of Cr/D/Fail policies in each department and either (a) develop a rationale for current policies or (b) reform them to expand options for Cr/D/Fail within a major.

Given the clear student preference across majors for at least one Cr/D/Fail eligible course, all majors should consider whether current Cr/D/Fail policies are optimally promote intra-major exploration or help students hone and refine their interests without grading pressures. Students have a clear desire to use Cr/D/Fail for academic exploration rather than for indiscriminate use, but at present, students interested in the sciences (as well as selected humanities and social science majors) have little opportunity to engage with unfamiliar disciplines in Cr/D/Fail courses either because of heavy prerequisite requirements that must be taken for a Letter Grade or inflexible major requirements.

Without an opportunity to take introductory courses Cr/D/Fail, potential science majors also have no way to gauge how they may fit with a particular major without committing to take a course for a letter grade—a psychological barrier large enough to discourage enrollment entirely. One of the major benefits of the Cr/D/Fail option is that it affords students a chance to evaluate a course’s expectations, grading style, subject matter, and level of rigor without having to debate whether or not to drop a course entirely. Majors that do not provide this opportunity owe their students a clearly stated reason for this decision at the very least, so that potential students in the major not only understand expectations from the outset of their academic career but also understand how letter grades are an essential aspect of every course within the major.

Pending the results of departmental reviews, YCC recommends that departments that find sufficient reason to warrant a change in Cr/D/Fail policy *consider* permitting students in the major to designate one course Cr/D/Fail, per the discretion of the DUS. This is not a binding recommendation, but rather a suggestion based on data collected in the YCC Fall Survey.

According to that survey, students in Humanities and Social Science majors would largely prefer that at least one course in their major be designated Cr/D/Fail. Many Humanities and Social Science majors have course requirements spanning several categories as well as “tracks” —student-chosen courses of study focused around a designated theme. In majors that are organized this way, Cr/D/Fail could be used to promote cross-track exploration. It is unlikely that this would detract from a student’s expertise in his or her pre-selected track, as he or she would only be able to make use of this option once, if at all. It would, however, broaden students’ education as, say, a Global Affairs major or an Archeological Studies major. Students would graduate from majors both well rounded from their experience beyond their track and specialized because of their chosen focus.

Admittedly, each major has certain unique ways of organizing their program of study, and it is with this in mind that YCC recommends such a policy change be implemented at the DUS’s discretion and at the departmental level, rather than the Yale College level. Each DUS can help determine which course, or courses, should be Cr/D/Fail eligible within their respective majors. In this way, DUSs can assure that students will be using the Cr/D/Fail within the major for exploratory purposes, rather than for GPA insurance.

Proposal III: Extend the Cr/D/Fail to Letter Grade conversion deadline to the first day of finals period each semester.

The current Cr/D/Fail conversion deadline (about ten weeks into the term) comes at a time when students are often still do not clearly know their academic standing in courses. When the deadline arrives, many students have not yet received grades on their midterm assessments and are unable to make a decision about whether or not they should elect to switch their designation. This makes the current date a source of stress, rather than a promoter of academic exploration. If Yale College does not elect to move this deadline, YCC strongly recommends that courses increase opportunities for students to receive graded feedback on their work before this deadline, so as to better inform students about whether they should take a course Cr/D/Fail.

YCC is not advocating unlimited switches between Cr/D/Fail and Letter Grade regimes through the end of the term. YCC recommends that back and forth switching be allowed for the first four weeks of the term (Proposal I), and that the final, one-directional, and one-time-only Cr/D/Fail to Letter Grade switch (currently about ten weeks into the term) be extended through the beginning of finals week.

With the deadline at the beginning of finals week, students would still be required to indicate their grading preference without viewing their final exam marks or final grades, which are returned to students during the early weeks of winter and summer recess. Such an extension has overwhelming student support, with a majority of elected YCC representatives in support of such a change.

Conclusion

YCC offers these proposals for consideration, with the hope that they may increase academic exploration and encourage greater utilization of the Cr/D/Fail program in a way that is consistent with its pedagogical goals. The Yale student body has indicated overwhelming support for increased Cr/D/Fail opportunities, which the Council attributes to rigid policies in some majors, especially concerning prerequisites. It is likely that one to two major eligible Cr/D/Fail courses or prerequisites would both increase general student satisfaction and establish a more consistent academic experience among students in different majors.

This report aims to create an ongoing dialogue between the student body and Yale College administration on the subject of Cr/D/Fail policy. The YCC hopes that initiating a constructive discussion regarding these proposals will ultimately help improve upon the existing Cr/D/Fail policy at Yale.