

From: Rick Danheiser (on behalf of OVC) facultychair-reply@mit.edu
Subject: Emergency Academic Regulations
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To: cookj@MIT.EDU



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Office of the Vice Chancellor

This is being sent on behalf of Rick L. Danheiser, A. C. Cope Professor and Chair of the MIT Faculty

Dear MIT Students,

I am writing to inform you of the “Emergency Academic Regulations” that have been developed in response to the Covid-19 crisis. Let me first say that my colleagues and I have been tremendously impressed and encouraged by the amazing resilience, creativity, and determination shown by the student body in meeting the challenges presented by the current crisis. We wish you the best as you navigate through this very difficult time and we hope that you will continue to connect with and support one another over the next several weeks. I am sure that the Faculty and MIT Administration will continue to be understanding and to support you as we work together to adjust to these very trying circumstances.

Now, with regard to academics: The Rules and Regulations of the Faculty (Section 2.102) provides that in the event of a “Significant Disruption” of academic activities, the Chair of the Faculty, in consultation with Deans’ Group, the Registrar, and the chairs of the Committees on Academic Performance, Graduate Programs, and the Undergraduate Program, may declare that emergency academic procedures are in effect and may impose temporary changes in the regulations regarding the academic calendar, registration, assignments and examinations, grades, the procedures for accepting theses, and the awarding of degrees.

Beginning last Monday, I have been working with my fellow Faculty Officers Duane Boning and David Singer, with Tami Kaplan (Faculty Governance Administrator), and with an Emergency Academic Regulations Team comprising (alphabetically) Chris Bourg, Mary Callahan, Anne McCants, Krishna Rajagopal, and Ian Waitz to develop emergency guidelines. Arthur Bahr (Chair of CUP) and Kris Prather (Chair of CAP) have also participated in most of our discussions and we have also received valuable input from a number of other colleagues including Dan Frey (Chair of CGP) and Larry Vale (Associate Dean, SA&P). I have also consulted with the officers of the Undergraduate Association and the Graduate Student Council and they have provided valuable feedback as well.

Developing emergency regulations that take into account the diversity of our educational offerings, that anticipate exceptional situations, and which are sensitive to the difficult and unusual circumstances confronting our students, our faculty, and all members of the MIT

Community who support our educational programs, has been no easy task. Some decisions, such as how to address grading, have been especially difficult and in these cases we have made a particular effort to consult widely and to carefully consider diverse views. In this email (following the “Key Features”) I have summarized the considerations that led to the decision to mandate “alternate grades” for all subjects and to not allow students the option to request letter grades.

Below you will find a “short” version of the Emergency Academic Regulations which highlights the key features of the most important regulations. [Here is a link to the “long” version](#) which addresses additional aspects and which provides further details elaborating on the key features covered below.

With best wishes to all during this trying time, be well,

Rick

Key Features of the Emergency Academic Regulations Per Rules and Regulations Sections 2.102 and 2.64

- (1) A “Significant Disruption” (<https://facultygovernance.mit.edu/rules-and-regulations#2-102>) is declared at MIT effective at 8 AM Friday March 13.
- (2) All in-person class meetings are suspended as of 8 AM on Friday March 13.
- (3) No classes, exams, assignments, or any academic exercises can be held or be due during the week of March 16 and the week of Spring Break (i.e., through Sunday March 29). As a result there will be ca. one fewer week in the semester. No additional meetings of classes can be added to compensate for the cancelled meetings. The curriculum of each subject must be reduced accordingly.
- (4) Classes and academic exercises will resume on Monday March 30 but will be conducted online, i.e., without in-person meetings of classes. It is anticipated that faculty will need to be creative in developing online versions of their classes that achieve the existing or appropriately revised learning goals of the subjects. In the exceptional cases where instructors believe it is not possible to develop an online version of the remainder of a subject, they can petition the Chair of the Faculty (facultychair-reply@mit.edu) for permission to terminate a subject early or to cancel a partial term subject that has not yet begun to meet. The request must be approved and submitted by the Head of the Academic Unit (e.g., Department Head or their designee such as the Associate Head for Education). The request must include assurance that the Office of Digital Learning has been consulted with regard to the feasibility of developing an online version of the subject.
- (5) Beginning March 30, those subjects conducting real-time (“synchronous”) class sessions will be expected to begin at the same time and end no later than what was scheduled under the normal schedule of classes (Eastern Daylight Time). In addition, instructors are strongly encouraged to deliver class content via an “asynchronous” online format (e.g., via a posted video recording) that students can access at any time. This will

be especially beneficial for students whose home time zone makes it difficult to participate in a class session at the normally scheduled time. As an alternative, instructors may choose to deliver class content solely via an asynchronous format. Note that in the case of asynchronous delivery the duration of the recorded lecture must not be longer than that of the normally scheduled lecture.

(6) For all subjects, both undergraduate and graduate, the Instructor must provide to students, no later than the end of the week of March 30 (5 PM on Friday April 3), a description of the schedule for the remaining assignments and any changes in the required work and procedures that will be used to determine grades relative to that announced at the end of the first week of the regular semester. It is recognized that in some cases Instructors may need to make subsequent adjustments in what is announced the week of March 30; any such changes after April 3 must be approved in advance by the Chair of the Faculty (facultychair-reply@mit.edu).

(7) In view of the global pandemic, its effect on our students, faculty, and all the members of our community who support our educational programs, and after extensive consultation and deliberation, it has been decided that the “**Alternate Grades**” (PE, NE, and IE) defined in Section 2.64 of Rules and Regulations of the Faculty must be used for **all undergraduate and graduate** full-term subjects this semester. Exceptions are the grades S and SA defined in Section 2.62.2 and O, OX, DR, T and the Thesis grades J and U as defined in 2.62.3. In accord with the intent of the “Alternate Grading” system, O and OX grades will resolve to the grading system in place for the semester in which they were assigned, e.g., to NE and PE for O and OX grades assigned this semester.

(8) For half-term H3 subjects, instructors have two options. Letter grades may be awarded according to the normal rules defined in Rules and Regulations Section 2.60 based on the work completed in the six weeks of the normal seven-week H3 period ending March 13. Alternatively, instructors may choose to assign “Alternate Grades” as defined in Section 2.64. This should be the case if instructors believe that they have insufficient information to allow discrimination between A, B, C-level etc work in the six completed weeks of the class. Note that no additional assignments, exams, and other academic exercises can be scheduled or be due for H3 subjects after 5 PM on Friday March 13.

(9) Half-term H4 subjects will be presented according to the normal schedule. Alternate grades must be used for all H4 subjects.

(10) The regulations (<https://facultygovernance.mit.edu/rules-and-regulations#2-53>) with regard to exams during the term are not changed.

(11) Final exams will be “remote exams” and will be held according to the schedule previously published by the Registrar. Final exams can be “open book” or “closed book”. The choice of format must be announced and expectations must be clearly stated no later than drop date (April 21).

(12) Thesis defenses may be conducted remotely if necessary. The dates for thesis submission etc. will follow the normal schedule. Theses may be submitted electronically and individual departments will inform students of the schedule for submission and

approval of theses.

(13) The regulations with regard to the scheduling of evening exams and other required academic exercises are not changed.

(14) The number of units for UROP subjects taken for credit may need to be adjusted if the suspension of meetings on campus affects the research. If an adjustment in units is deemed appropriate, then this can be implemented by the normal change process by the deadline of May 12.

(15) In the case of students applying for degrees with one or more deficiencies (see attachment), the usual process will be followed in which the student's major department applies to the Committee on Academic Performance for approval. It is expected that the CAP will take into consideration the extraordinary circumstances of this semester in evaluating these requests. Alternate grades will be regarded as acceptable for all purposes including degree requirements that normally require a letter grade. Students should note that no notations are made on transcripts for degrees granted with deficiencies.

The Decision to Mandate Alternate Grades for All Subjects

The Emergency Academic Regulations Team appreciates the importance of grades to MIT students and we spent an enormous amount of time considering when "alternate grades" should be employed during this period of significant disruption. Four scenarios were discussed extensively: (a) Individual Instructors could choose whether to use normal letter grades or alternate grades on a subject-by-subject basis; (b) Alternate grades would be mandated for all subjects; (c) Alternate grades would be the default grading system but individual students would have an opportunity to "opt in" for letter grades in a subject; (d) Letter grades would be the default grading system but individual students would have an opportunity to "opt in" for alternate grades in a subject. After extensive deliberation over the past week, which included important input from Student Support and Wellbeing, the Team unanimously decided to mandate alternate grades for all subjects, i.e., Scenario (b). As explained below, the Team concluded that this is most consistent with the intent of Rules and Regulations, will best mitigate current and future stress and anxiety of students, and most importantly, it is the grading system that recognizes and responds to the significant disruption that impacts all students and our entire shared academic endeavor.

The decision to mandate alternate grades for all subjects was announced last Thursday. While many students expressed gratitude and applauded the decision, other students were dismayed and appealed to us to reconsider. Students expressed the concern that not having letter grades this semester might adversely impact their applications for graduate school, medical school, internships, and other positions outside MIT. I can assure you that the Team appreciates why this question is of such importance to many students and we took their concern most seriously. It is our very strong view that having alternate grades this semester will not negatively affect applications for jobs and admission to programs outside MIT. The current global pandemic affects everyone and the unusual circumstances of this semester will certainly be taken into account in the future as professional schools and companies evaluate applications. It is likely that other measures of performance will have greater than usual importance, including, for example, letters of recommendation which provide Instructors with an opportunity to elaborate in detail on a student's

performance.

In summary, the Emergency Academic Regulations Team concluded that adopting alternate grades this semester will not have a detrimental effect on the competitiveness of MIT students seeking positions outside the Institute. A number of considerations then led the Team to decide that mandating alternate grades was the best grading scheme for the Institute to adopt during this period of disruption:

(1) The original intent of Rules and Regulations 2.64 is that alternate grades would be employed in the event of a natural disaster or pandemic illness as a result of which Instructors would be unable to make the usual distinction between (for example) A-level, B-level, and C-level work due to the disruption. The Team believes that to think that Instructors would be able to assign a letter grade for some students in a class and not for other students is not consistent with Section 2.64 of Rules and Regulations.

(2) The Team concluded after extensive consultation and discussion that the nature and magnitude of the disruption caused by Covid-19 is such that assigning accurate letter grades will not be possible in essentially all full term (and H4) subjects this semester. There are several reasons for this. Few if any Instructors have experience with the evaluation of a student's mastery of material via remote means. In fact, many faculty have no experience whatsoever in delivering class material via online vehicles and the time available for Instructors to get up to speed is limited. We expect that there will have to be quite a lot of experimentation this spring with Instructors trying out alternative ways to evaluate progress and performance.

(3) It is also worth bearing in mind that these are also difficult times for our Instructors and for all of the members of our Teaching Staffs as well. The lives of everyone are being disrupted and teaching from home is not going to be easy for many Instructors, some of whom will have to deal with having young children at home due to the closing of schools and daycare facilities. In summary, the Team believes that the accurate determination of grades will be especially challenging this semester and it is not reasonable to expect Instructors to be able to make the usual distinctions required in a letter grade system.

(4) Students are accustomed to studying together and benefiting from support groups of classmates and it is very uncertain to what extent this can be reproduced remotely in the coming months. The impact of this on different students is likely to vary considerably and Instructors will not be in a position to take this accurately into account in assigning grades.

(5) The Team was also concerned that different students will be experiencing different situations at home, and for some students it may be very challenging to focus on studying. This is in addition to the general stress and anxiety that the Covid-19 crisis is causing in everyone, students, their families, and the members of our teaching staff.

(6) The Team was advised that giving students a letter grade "opt in" choice would in fact lead to increased stress and anxiety for many students. For example, some students would feel pressured to choose to opt in for a letter grade because not doing so would be interpreted to mean that their performance was not strong.

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(7) The team discussed a number of other considerations. One was associated with the question of final exams. Some of our peer schools require that remote final exams be “open book”. A number of faculty instructors here at MIT have suggested that “open book” exams necessarily have to be different and perhaps more difficult as compared to exams conducted in person in past years. Mandating that alternate grades are in effect relieves the concerns of Instructors in this regard, allowing them to be comfortable designing exams to be conducted remotely that are similar to exams of past years.

In closing, I want to thank all of the colleagues at MIT, including students, who have provided valuable input as the Academic Regulations Team wrestled with these difficult decisions. I hope that this explanation will provide a better understanding of the complex issues that we took into account. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any comments and please accept my best wishes for your health and wellbeing during the remainder of the semester.

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