New York University
Undergraduate Academic Affairs Committee

Advisory on Midterm Grades
Fall 2018

The issue of midterm grades was discussed by the UAAC this semester at the request of the Student Senators Council (SSC), whose members expressed concern about the low rate of submission. In fall 2018, for example, only 57 percent of all possible grades for undergraduate courses were posted on Albert, which represented a modest increase (3 percent) from the previous fall. Submission rates varied widely by school, from 11 percent to 87 percent, with five schools reporting less than half of their possible undergraduate midterm grades.

Midterm grades play an important role in helping schools’ advising offices identify and respond to students in need of support. In addition, they enable students to assess their progress in their courses and to determine what they need to do to improve. Indeed, research shows that providing early feedback through midterm grades has a positive effect on students’ academic outcomes.

On the other hand, schools and departments have conveyed to the Registrar’s Office a number of concerns that faculty have surfaced about posting midterm grades. Among these are that midterm exam results, which are typically used to determine midterm grades, are not a fair assessment of what students’ final grades will be or how they will ultimately perform in a given course. Although a few faculty have also suggested that posting high midterm grades might have the unintended consequence of removing the incentive for students to work hard during the rest of the semester, the more pressing (and more widely shared) concern was that low midterm grades might cause students to panic and prompt them to withdraw unnecessarily.

Taking these concerns into account, the UAAC makes the following two recommendations for increasing midterm grade submission:

1. Keep the current letter-grade options plus “UE” (“Unable to Evaluate”), but add two non-grade options: “satisfactory” and “needs improvement.” These new options will enable faculty who do not feel comfortable or prepared to assign letter grades to give some mid-semester feedback to students. Faculty who do not administer a midterm exam or require a midterm paper or assignment should have assigned enough work in the first half of the semester to be able to provide an evaluation of students’ progress as, in the very least, satisfactory or needing improvement. The “UE” option should therefore be used only in exceptional
cases, such as when wellness- or family-related concerns prevent students from completing coursework or midterm exams. [NOTE: If students in crisis situations are not already getting the help that they need, faculty should contact the Wellness Exchange. The “UE” midterm grade option should not be used as an alternative to the Wellness Exchange.]

If in future terms the use of “UE” rises significantly above current levels (3 percent of all fall 2018 midterm grades), then the UAAC should consider whether it should be changed or removed from the list.

2. Improve the midterm grade roster interface for faculty in order to ease data entry, thereby facilitating participation among faculty who teach large classes and who report finding the current drop-down grade menu burdensome to complete.

The first of these recommendations is easy to implement, and the proposed changes should be made in Albert for the spring 2019 semester. A communication strategy will need to be devised to ensure that faculty are aware of the options before the midterm grade roster goes live. As part of this strategy, a statement about the University’s expectation that faculty submit midterm grades for all students should be posted on the “Grades” page of the Registrar’s website. It would also be helpful for this page to include guidance about appropriate uses of “needs improvement” and “unable to evaluate.” (The “needs improvement” option could, for example, be shown as roughly coterminous with the letter grade range of C-minus and below.)

The second recommendation will require more technical development, and it may not be possible to implement for next semester. But the Registrar should be asked to include this change in the schedule of upcoming enhancements to Albert, and to partner with faculty in the user-interface design process.