

A Pass/D/Fail Option for Graduate Students
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For the past year and a half, the Students for Graduate Curriculum Options, a task force under the Academics, Research and Careers Committee of the Graduate Student Council, has been examining the possibility of an option for MIT graduate students to take subjects beyond their core requirements on Pass/D/Fail (P/D/F), similar to the option available to MIT undergraduate juniors and seniors. This article describes some of our rationales for supporting a graduate P/D/F option and the process thus far for getting the change implemented.

We propose the following policy, which mostly mirrors that of the Junior/Senior P/D/F option:

- Regular graduate students are allowed to take up to one subject per term on Pass/D/Fail (P/D/F).
- Subjects taken on P/D/F cannot be used to satisfy any of the student's degree or program requirements.
- Subjects taken on P/D/F count towards any unit limit restrictions, like any subject taken on grades.
- Registering for a subject designated as P/D/F in the Catalogue and online subject listing does not count as using the P/D/F option.
- All MIT subjects, both at the undergraduate and graduate level, may be taken as P/D/F option by graduate students.
- A P grade is not used in the computing term and cumulative GPAs but D and F grades are used.
- With the instructor's approval, students have until Add Date to:
 - add a subject on P/D/F status,
 - change a subject from listener or grades to P/D/F status,
 - change a subject from P/D/F to listener or grades status.
- Students have until Drop Date to:
 - drop a subject registered under the P/D/F option.
- Pursuant to the educational goals of their respective programs, and with the approval of the Committee on Graduate Programs, individual departments may implement policies that restrict how the P/D/F option is to be exercised by students in their programs.
- Instructors may regulate the enrollment of students exercising the P/D/F option in their subjects.

The MIT Mission states: “The Institute is committed to generating, disseminating, and preserving knowledge, and to working with others to bring this knowledge to bear on the world’s great challenges.” The proposed P/D/F plan would address the objectives outlined in this statement as they pertain to graduate students.

As fields are becoming increasingly interdisciplinary, there has been a rise in demand on students to have a breadth of knowledge. However, students interested in exploring tangential fields may not have all the background for a particular subject, especially at the graduate or advanced undergraduate level, but would still benefit from the material covered. A P/D/F option would lower the barrier to this type of exploration to gain fundamentals of other fields that may impact their research. As a secondary note, it is not uncommon in advanced undergraduate subjects for a student to receive a C grade (a rather rare occurrence in most graduate subjects), which may jeopardize a student's fellowship status.

Furthermore, P/D/F would promote more effective learning in the classroom. Students can focus on distilling the core concepts of a subject rather than on grades. Students would be less prone to dropping non-required subjects, which inevitably happens as the semester goes on. Since subjects are designed assuming that students would complete its course, dropping out halfway may result in learning much less than half of the material. This change would result in more accurate and consistent teaching resource allocation for students, including assigning the correct number of TAs and graders.

The most common suggestion we heard from students and faculty alike was that P/D/F is unnecessary because students can already take optional subjects at their own leisure on listener status, where they can attend class without the pressure of doing homework, taking exams, or grades. Although the listener option is intended to address some of these issues, it does not cover all concerns for a student seeking further enrichment nor does it provide sufficient motivation to be correctly utilized. Human nature being as it is, motivation in listeners wanes as semester progresses, and many eventually stop attending class. A P/D/F option would increase commitment without unduly increasing burden. Furthermore, since taking a subject as a registered listener does not appear on a student's official MIT transcript, many students do not bother to register and instead simply attend the lectures. Transcript records may be important for some students when they apply for jobs, an issue especially emphasized by students seeking jobs internationally. In contrast, P/D/F subjects would appear on the transcript and thus boost the student's desire to register. As a result, estimates for allocating subject resources would become more accurate. Even if a student does register as a listener, the teaching staff has no obligation to grade problems sets and exams nor to devote time for listeners in office hours, which can be a valuable educational resource.

We presented the proposal to the Committee for Graduate Programs (CGP), which includes some senior MIT administrators and department officers in February 2007. While the reception was positive, they recommended we do some background work to learn how P/D/F would impact individual departments and programs.

We started testing the waters by judging how important the student body thought this issue was. The proposal was presented at the February 2007 General Council Meeting of the Graduate Student Council (GSC). In March 2007, the proposal was unanimously endorsed by the GSC. During the spring and summer of 2007, we met with graduate officers and administrators from several departments around the Institute. Through these discussions, we gained valuable insights on how their graduate programs work and the subtleties of how graduate P/D/F might affect their students and faculty. The departments were roughly evenly divided into ones that whole-heartedly

supported the proposal, were neutral to it, or had some reservations. The neutral departments felt that their students, particularly at the master's level, were already busy with coursework and thus would not use the P/D/F option. One reservation that some departments expressed was a concern that additional coursework would take time away from research. The other reservation was that popular subjects would become over-subscribed. In response to these concerns, we emphasize that graduate officers and advisors are the gatekeepers to their students' use of P/D/F and that instructors may already control enrollment in their subjects, as is always the case. We leave a considerable amount of discretion in the hands of the departments and instructors. For example, a department may choose to allow doctoral students to exercise the P/D/F option only after they have taken all the required coursework and passed the qualifying exams, unless by petition.

To quantify our belief that students were interested in interdisciplinary learning, we examined data from the Registrar's Office from the past two years. In any given term, more than 15% of graduate students take at least one subject on listener status, even without accounting for unofficial listeners. Of these subjects, more than 40% are outside students' home departments. This conservative estimate suggests substantial interest in graduate students in additional coursework for their own intellectual development. Finally, we learned that many of our peer institutions, including Stanford, UC Berkeley, Caltech, and Harvard, have a P/D/F option for their graduate students.

We presented these findings to CGP again in September 2007, where the proposal was unanimously approved. The Faculty Policy Committee (FPC) followed suit, also with unanimous approval, in February 2008. An amendment to Clause 2.62.1 of the MIT Rules and Regulations of the Faculty that would enable graduate P/D/F has been presented to the faculty at the regular February 2008 meeting and will be voted upon at the March meeting. We hope that the faculty votes affirmatively and that the Registrar will update its system in time for graduate students to begin using P/D/F in the Fall 2008 term.