



COVID-19 Update: April 6, 2020

1 message

UCA President's Office <presidentsoffice@uca.edu>

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Students, Faculty, and Staff:

As we start the last three weeks of instruction, I want to share with you some of the discussions surrounding grading policies for this term and what UCA is doing to respond to concerns, including details below regarding extending the course withdrawal date to April 15, 2020. This update gets a little longer than my norm, but please bear with me to the end because the topic is of importance to academic integrity and to recognizing that we all are managing difficult circumstances.

Last week we announced that we would not as a university be assigning "pass/fail" grades this semester but would adhere to our normal grading process, in which students are primarily assigned letter grades for the semester. Whether a student earns a grade of A, B, C, D, F, credit, no credit, etc. is not a university decision. The grade is within the discretion of the faculty member and is based upon the quality of student work against standards and assessments in the individual course. This grade calculation would include individual course requirements and grading adjustments that have been reconsidered and already revised in light of the recent changes to course delivery.

Friday morning found me in three conversations that sum up some of the anxieties students are feeling regarding grades. The first one involved an upper division student that was very concerned that their work this spring was going to result in a "credit/no credit" or "pass/fail" as opposed to the high letter grades that they were confident that they earned through three quarters of term. They not only were concerned about not getting the grade earned, but rightly pointed out that most professional and graduate school programs will not honor "credit/no credit" or "pass/fail" academic marks. The student was pleased to learn that our existing grading policy and process will remain and that they could finish what they started.

The second student was very concerned that our UCA faculty were not taking into account the stress to students of shifting to an online completion model for the last four weeks of instruction. The main concern was that all students' grades would suffer unnecessarily in an online-only environment. Upon talking further with the student, they shared with me that of their five classes, three had been face-to-face and two were online from the start of the term. We talked through all three of the formerly face-to-face courses, and the student acknowledged that the faculty members in each of their courses had made fair adjustments and considerations that would enhance the ability to earn a good grade. The student was feeling much better about their personal courses that had moved online; however, they were still worried about fellow students in other courses throughout the university. By the end of the conversation, the student said that their advice to their friends would be to communicate with faculty.

The third student was honest about how concerned they were before spring break about whether or not they could handle the shift in their classes for the last four weeks. I asked them how it was going after several days of the new model. They told me that they were feeling much more confident about three classes and still nervous about the fourth. We ended the conversation with some ideas about how to express their concerns to the faculty member in the fourth class.

Behind all three students' situations and all the various circumstances they represent, our faculty, each of our academic department chairs, and all five academic deans are working to provide accommodation, flexibility, and understanding within each of their courses. Additionally, our counselors and student success professionals are working directly with students to address concerns and provide tools that can aid them during these final weeks of class. The advice of the second student that contacted me is exactly right. If you are concerned, you must talk to your faculty member. Our faculty and staff understand your stress and your situations and are working diligently to help you finish these last three weeks.

In addition to the topics mentioned in the above conversations, below is a list of other common student questions and how we are handling these situations as a university:

Did the university consider extending the deadline to withdraw from a course and receive a W as opposed to a poor academic mark?

Yes. Because of the shift to online due to COVID-19, the deadline to withdraw from a course has been extended from March 30, 2020 to April 15, 2020. This is in acknowledgment of the extraordinary circumstances causing the move to online teaching and learning. This extension is meant to allow students additional time to familiarize themselves with an online learning platform, as faculty convert to alternative course delivery, before having to make a decision to withdraw from a course. Again, if you are concerned about how you are doing in the new online mode, please take the time to talk to your faculty member.

What if I withdraw from a class and fall below hours attempted/earned for the academic year as it relates to university and state scholarship requirements?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we are not going to penalize students on university scholarships for withdrawing from a class or classes and dropping below the credit-hour requirement. We have worked diligently with the state to make sure that this same consideration is given to students facing an hours-earned threshold on scholarships, grants, and other aid from the state of Arkansas. Though the state has not issued their formal release of their updated eligibility standards, we have been told to reassure students that their state aid will not be at risk due to falling below the hour threshold after March 20, 2020.

Will my special accommodations documented with the Office of Disability Services extend to the online delivery model?

Yes. All students with documented accommodations as of March 12, 2020 will have those remain in place and implemented in the online classroom setting.

Are faculty considering that certain portions of originally planned class activities do not lend themselves to an online environment and/or assessment?

Yes. All faculty have made (and will continue to make) adjustments to course requirements to ensure fairness in grading, including having alternate assignments that take into account online delivery. Again, these adjustments are being made by all UCA faculty with academic integrity as their guide.

Was availability of technology to students taken into consideration when UCA made the decision to move instruction online?

Yes. If technology is the challenge named, we are committed to bridge that divide. Many of the students that have petitioned to remain in university housing listed access to broadband as one of their hardship reasons. Our library, academic departments, and information technology staff have worked to get loaned laptops to students who need them. We have even loaned wifi hotspots to some students who were traveling home to locations without internet service.

Finally, I want to thank all of the students that have reached out to me to share their concerns, to offer encouragement, or just to update me on how things are going. With only a few exceptions, the tone of the communications has been positive and reflected that they themselves, their university generally, and their

individual faculty are all making the best of a difficult situation. I deeply appreciate that our faculty and staff are navigating these last few weeks with support for our students and their successful completion of the spring semester as the primary academic concern. I am proud of our university community and know that we will emerge from these challenging times even stronger.

Sincerely,

Houston Davis
President