UA Recommendations:

Penn's Response to COVID-19

47th Session

2019 - 2020

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OVERVIEW

The Undergraduate Assembly recognizes the severity and unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 outbreak facing the University and the world. We understand that it has significantly altered the normal state of operations at Penn and thank the University for taking the necessary steps to help reduce the spread of the disease and protect the student body's health.

The UA acknowledges that recent changes to Penn's policies (e.g. grading system, housing, virtual instruction, financial aid) have left many students uncertain and concerned about their futures. Important progress has been made by the University, but we feel that there is still more to be done to assist our peers. Students have expressed numerous concerns about financial, personal, and academic challenges as a result of the crisis.

In order to ensure that decisions made by the University address these concerns, the Undergraduate Assembly administered a school-wide survey to provide student input on future policy decisions and receive feedback on current policies. Based on our survey, this report was developed to provide insight into the student perspectives on the Penn administration's recent decisions. Below we have provided a comprehensive analysis of the survey results as well as a list of recommendations that we believe will address our fellow students' concerns.

Overall, it was communicated that Penn students were concerned about how the pandemic would affect their financial status, wellbeing, and academic standing. Additionally, students felt it was important for the University to provide more resources to those who were experiencing hardship. Thus, the Undergraduate Assembly urges the University to remain accommodating and open to student concerns across campus. We ask the University to implement our recommendations and establish a strong and transparent line of communication between the student body and the administration. In addition to increased support for its students, we hope that Penn will continue to support members and businesses of the greater Philadelphia community, especially given the important role it serves in our lives.

Sincerely,

The Undergraduate Assembly

UA RECOMMENDATIONS

The Undergraduate Assembly recommends the following in order to support our fellow students and the Penn community. We acknowledge that some recommendations have already been adopted, but urge the administration to ensure that all students are aware of and have access to available resources. In order for the University community to understand our recommendations, we ask that you read the following background and survey results sections.

1. **Student Financial Concerns**
   a. Create a public timeline and a centralized channel for refunding students for on-campus housing, dining, and activity fees.
   b. Provide funding for housing and living expenses, as well as virtual learning expenses to students in the form ClinCards, checks, or direct deposits to accounts.
   c. Create and publicize an emergency fund for SRFS to support vulnerable populations including FGLI, highly aided, international, and LGBTQ+ students.
   d. Establish a centralized communication channel between SRFS and students to ensure an accurate and timely information exchange. Ensure all students receive standardized information about funding application deadlines and assistance programs.
   e. Reimburse travel and moving costs for highly aided students immediately, and set aside funding for students in need to return to campus and collect their belongings.

2. **Student Personal Concerns**
   a. Create an online forum for all students to voice their concerns to University administration regarding financial, personal or academic concerns.
   b. Ensure that all University communications are compassionate and respectful of all student situations or circumstances.
   c. Provide full details regarding how decisions about housing were made and reach out to all students, including RAs, and GAs, who were rejected to ensure that they have proper housing.
   d. Provide access to online mental health resources, including CAPS, to all students in need and reach out to all students who were receiving on-going services from CAPS during this semester.
   e. Provide official guidance through Career Services about future employment opportunities and assistance for students whose summer internships, summer research programs, summer courses or full-time jobs have been cancelled.

3. **Student Academic Concerns**
   a. Request that each Dean reach out to all Department Chairs to encourage faculty to remain flexible and understanding of student situations.

b. Encourage academic advisors to reach out to students to clarify new grading policies and expand additional office hours.

c. Urge ISSS to actively communicate to international students about their visa status.

d. Request that professors record all classes, be accessible to students for online office hours, and not increase course workload in order to emphasize student wellness.

e. Create and ensure online tutoring, disability accommodations, and course materials through the Tutoring Center, Weingarten and the Penn Bookstore.

4. **Student Grading Policy Preferences**

   a. Given the current Penn policy, extend the pass/fail deadline to the end of the semester to accommodate students' varying home situations.

   b. Consider the aforementioned student preferences and concerns when making future decisions regarding Penn's grading policy.

   c. Ensure any Penn grading policy does not widen disparities that exist between students that may be facing extenuating circumstances.

   d. Urge administration to encourage its peer institutions' Admissions to be understanding of Penn's current or future academic policy and not penalize students for opting into pass/fail due to the pandemic.

5. **Concerns for Penn Community**

   The UA acknowledges the impact that the COVID-19 crisis has not only on Penn students but the larger Philadelphia community. We support Penn's contribution of $4 million to provide financial support to: the PHL COVID-19 Fund, dedicated to raising and distributing money in support of local non-profit social services agencies; emergency assistance for eligible Penn employees and third-party contract workers including dining workers employed by Bon Appétit; and resources for independently owned small businesses in University City. We also commend Penn's additional contribution of $1 million to the Penn Medicine Employee Assistance Fund to aid employees with unexpected financial challenges. We urge Penn to continue to support members of the local Philadelphia community, who support us so much throughout the year.

BACKGROUND

Current University Status

The University of Pennsylvania has taken several steps to help reduce the spread of the disease and adhere to national guidelines.

1. January 24th, 2020 ([An update on coronavirus](#))
   a. The university first informed the community about the coronavirus outbreak and encouraged students to take general precautions to prevent the disease.
2. March 2nd, 2020 ([Penn's latest coronavirus update](#))
   a. A university task force was developed and charged with reviewing pandemic procedures. All university affiliated travel to China, Italy, Iran, and South Korea was suspended
3. March 10th, 2020 ([Penn's latest update on coronavirus](#))
   a. All future university related travel domestic and international was prohibited until at least April 17th, 2020
   b. All large events were curtailed until at least April 17th, 2020
   c. Coronavirus website was developed to provide updates to the Penn community
4. March 11th, 2020 ([Coronavirus and important changes to our operations for the remainder of the semester](#))
   a. Spring Break was extended by one week for all students not in health-related schools
   b. Virtual instruction would be used for the remainder of the spring semester for all courses
   c. Students were asked to not return to campus if out of town and all students currently living on campus were asked to must move out by 8 PM on Sunday, March 15th, 2020
5. March 12th, 2020 ([March 12 - Update from Penn President Amy Gutmann and Provost Wendell Pritchett on Campus Planning Regarding the COVID-19 Pandemic](#))
   a. The university distributed an application for students to apply to remain on campus that had to be submitted by 12 PM on March 13th, 2020
   b. The deadline for moving out from on-campus housing was moved to Tuesday, March 17th, 2020 at 8 PM
6. March 13th, 2020
   a. The pass/fail deadline for the college was moved to March 27th, 2020
   b. The last day to withdraw from a class for the College was moved to April 13th, 2020
7. March 14th, 2020 ([March14 - Important Message to Students](#))
   a. The University reaffirmed its mandate to cease all in-person student group activities on and off campus. Student organizations violating this directive would face consequences from the Office of Student Conduct
8. March 15th, 2020 ([March 15 - Important Message from the Provost for Penn Families](#))

a. The University communicated with Penn students' parents that they were in the process of depopulating the campus

9. March 16th, 2020 ([March 16 - A Message to the Penn Community on Major Changes to Commencement](#))
   a. The community was informed that three Penn students had tested positive for COVID-19 following a Spring Break trip
   b. Commencement was moved to a virtual ceremony and the discussion for an on-campus celebration in the Fall began

10. March 17th, 2020 ([March 17 - A Personal Message from Amy Gutmann](#))
    a. The University affirmed that there would be an in-person commencement ceremony in the future for all graduates

11. March 20th, 2020 ([March 20 - Pass/Fail Options](#))
    a. The University outlined the pass/fail policy for the Spring semester. All undergraduate students across all four schools are eligible to take courses pass/fail and count regardless of previous requirements
    b. The Pass/Fail deadline was moved to April 13th, 2020

12. March 26th, 2020 ([COVID-19 | Penn Libraries](#))
    a. Penn Libraries announced that all Penn students now have access to digitized versions of textbooks through partnership with Barnes and Noble

13. March 30th, 2020 ([Penn provides an additional $4 million of support to communities, small businesses and workforce impacted by COVID-19](#))
    a. Penn announced that they would pay Penn employees and contract workers including, Bon Appetit employees, through May 15th, 2020

Proposals From Student Body

These proposals are directly from members of the student body and were brought to the attention of the Undergraduate Assembly.

Commencement Ceremony Fall Request (Addressed March 17th, 2020)

1. Date: March 17th, 2020
2. Authors: Emma Loving and Arman Ramezani
3. Recommendations
   a. Request a postponed, in-person commencement to take place in the Fall
   b. [Petition](#) created to underscore the importance of this request (11,715 signed as of March 30, 2020)

Pay for Penn Dining Hall Workers (Addressed March 30, 2020)

1. Date: March 20th, 2020
2. Authors: Student Labor Action Project and Urooba Abid
3. Recommendations

a. Reverse the decision announced on March 17, 2020 to lay off 140 Penn Dining Hall workers, and pay said workers their normal salary

b. Support Penn workers with healthcare and other benefits during this time

c. [Petition](#) created to underscore the importance of this request (8,256 signed as of March 30, 2020)

Destigmatize Pass/Fail Grading System

1. Date: March 26th, 2020
2. Author: Siddharth Jaiswal (SEAS '21)
3. Recommendations:
   a. Given that some graduate programs such as Harvard Med School will not accept opt-in pass/fail grades, Penn should urge the administration at highly-attended graduate schools, and even at Penn graduate schools itself, to reconsider their policies when it comes to reviewing a student's decisions and performance during the Spring 2020 semester.
   b. Read the full statement [here](#).

Penn Leads the Vote COVID-19 Crisis Voter Guide

1. Date: March 18, 2020
2. Authors: Penn Leads the Vote
3. Recommendations
   a. With regard to the COVID-19 crisis, PLTV asks that the University communicate updated information on primary registration and voting in Pennsylvania and that their COVID-19 guide is distributed through Canvas in Spring 2020.
   b. The full proposal was passed unanimously by the Faculty Senate in March 2020 and is [linked here in the University Almanac](#).
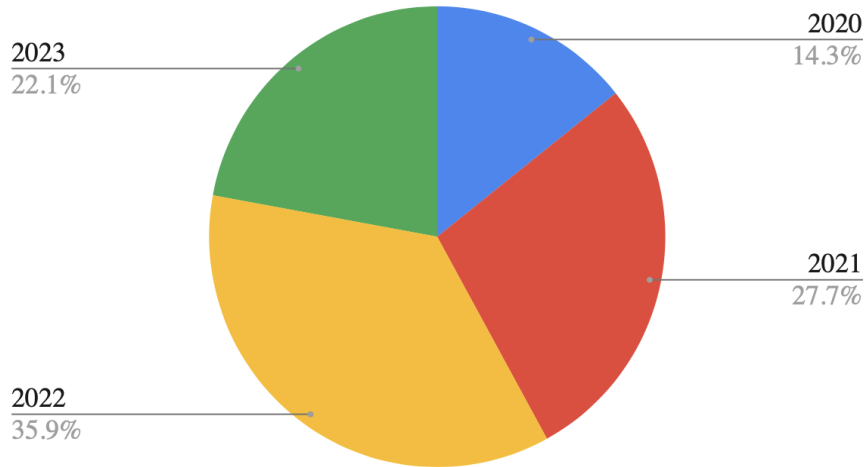
COVID-19 Housing Response

1. Date: March 16th, 2020
2. Authors: Mercedes Owens and Anthony Scarpone-Lambert, supported by select members of Penn Student Government
3. Recommendations
   a. Alleviate strict housing limitations that have caused numerous students to be required to leave on-campus housing regardless of if they have somewhere to go.
   b. Inform students regarding why they were denied housing.
   c. Provide more accessible and tangible resources for students to find alternative housing if they are unable to return home (e.g., publishing the [Mutual Aid Form](#), publicizing the financial support being offered).
   d. Actively distribute a more tangible and comprehensive financial aid reimbursement FAQ outlining resources available to students.
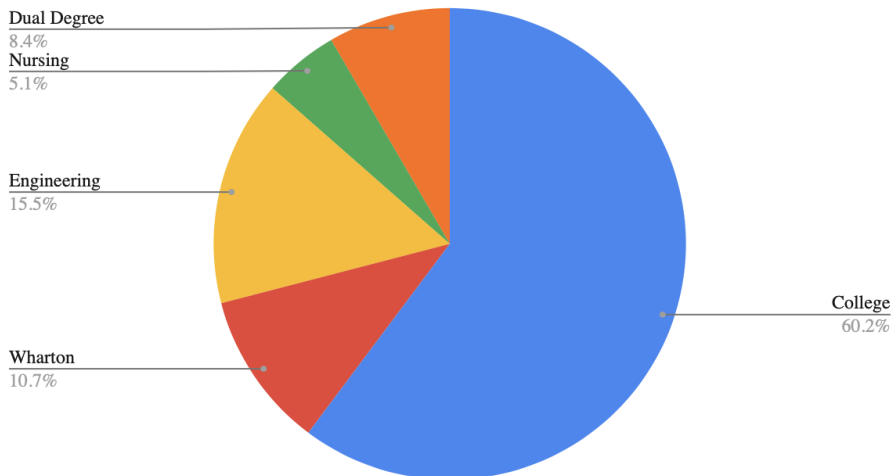
UA CORONAVIRUS SURVEY RESULTS

The UA conducted a survey from March 20th to March 30th, 2020 to better understand the concerns of the student body with regard to recent Penn policy changes. The survey was completed by 944 undergraduate students across all class years and schools. Each student was asked how the administration could better alleviate the financial, personal, and academic challenges associated with this unique time. Students were also asked to provide their input on the new grading policy and their preferences for alternative grading systems. A copy of the survey questions can be found at this link.
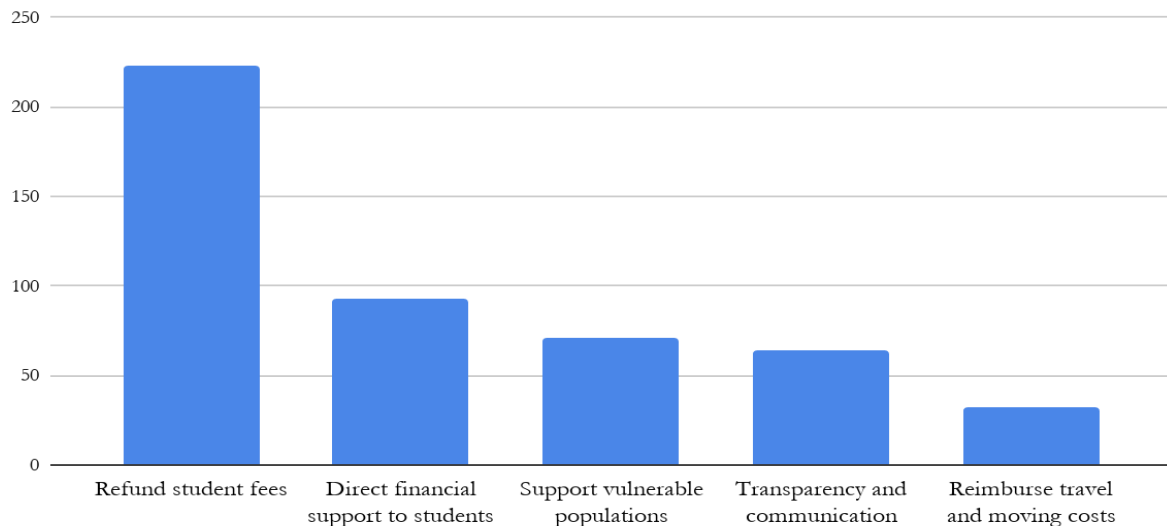
Graduation Year

2023
22.1%

2020
14.3%

2021
27.7%

2022
35.9%

School

Dual Degree
8.4%

Nursing
5.1%

Engineering
15.5%

College
60.2%

Wharton
10.7%

Student Financial Concerns

Top 5 Student Financial Concerns

1. **Refund student fees:** Students urge the return of funds paid to the University for the remainder of the semester in a timely manner. These funds include: on-campus housing, dining, activity fees and tuition. Students also ask that the administration announce a timeline for these refunds and create a centralized channel for any concerns to be addressed.
2. **Direct financial support to students:** Students request the financial support of the administration to pay for essential needs such as food and shelter, as well as online academic costs such as internet and course materials. Students living off-campus hope that the administration will work with landlords to ask for refunds on their housing.
3. **Support vulnerable populations:** Students express concerns about the effects this transition may have on FGLI, highly aided, international, LGBTQ+, and other vulnerable populations. Students ask the University to prioritize their needs and ensure they have access to the resources they need.
4. **Transparency and communication**: Students hope that a centralized communication channel can be established between the administration, specifically SRFS, and students, as they have found communication regarding crisis-related expenses to be unclear and inconsistent. Students also ask for all deadlines for financial requests to be nullified and for transparency in the process of requesting greater aid.
5. **Reimburse travel and moving costs:** Students ask the University to reimburse moving and transportation costs that have posed significant burdens on students financial situations, which consist of storage fees, flight costs, etc.

# Student Personal Concerns

Top 5 Student Personal Concerns
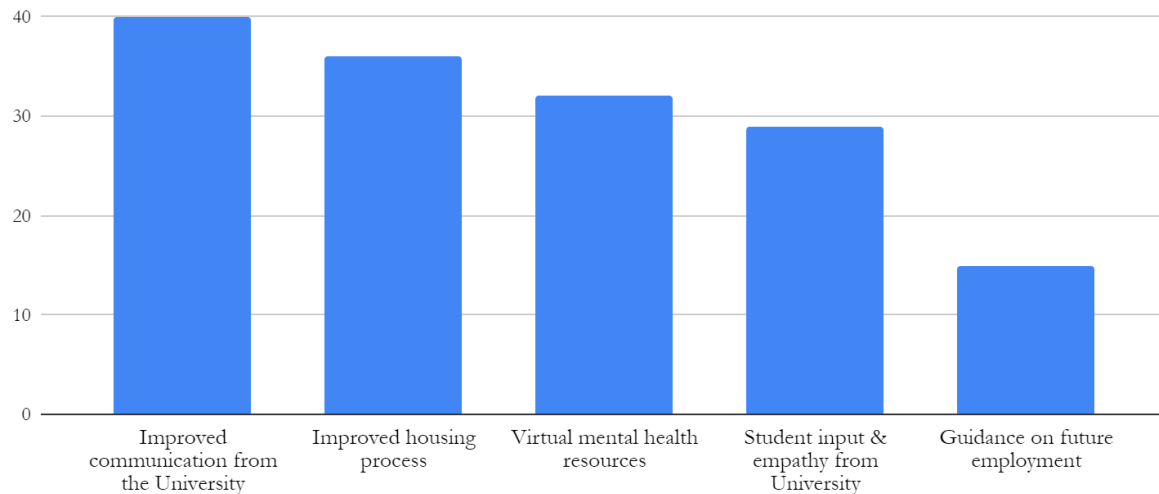
1. **Improved communication from University:** Students express that communication from the University regarding all issues related to the transition from on-campus to online courses is contradictory and vague.. Specifically, students claim communication from SRFS is confusing and varies by student, and students request that SRFS actively reach out to all students on financial aid.
2. **Improved housing process:** Students state that the process by which students applied and were selected to stay in on-campus housing was not transparent and unjust. Students express that they were left with no options for housing and that SRFS was not accessible or timely. Communication to students about who could stay on campus was also described as late.
3. **Virtual mental health resources:** Students are in need of mental health resources not available at home due to increased levels of depression, loneliness and other mental health issues. Students request that CAPS staff reach out to every student who is currently undergoing therapy or other services at CAPS to check in on them.
4. **Student input and empathy from University:** In addition to improved communication from the University, students state that University communications did not accurately address specific populations of students in need. Students urge the creation of specific hotlines for students in desperate situations and that administrators and staff actively check in on students that they know are in such situations.
5. **Provide official guidance on future employment opportunities:** Students are concerned because their summer internships, summer research programs, and full-time jobs have been cancelled. They request guidance on the best way to proceed and that the University assists students in finding employment opportunities.

Student Academic Concerns

Top 5 Student Academic Concerns
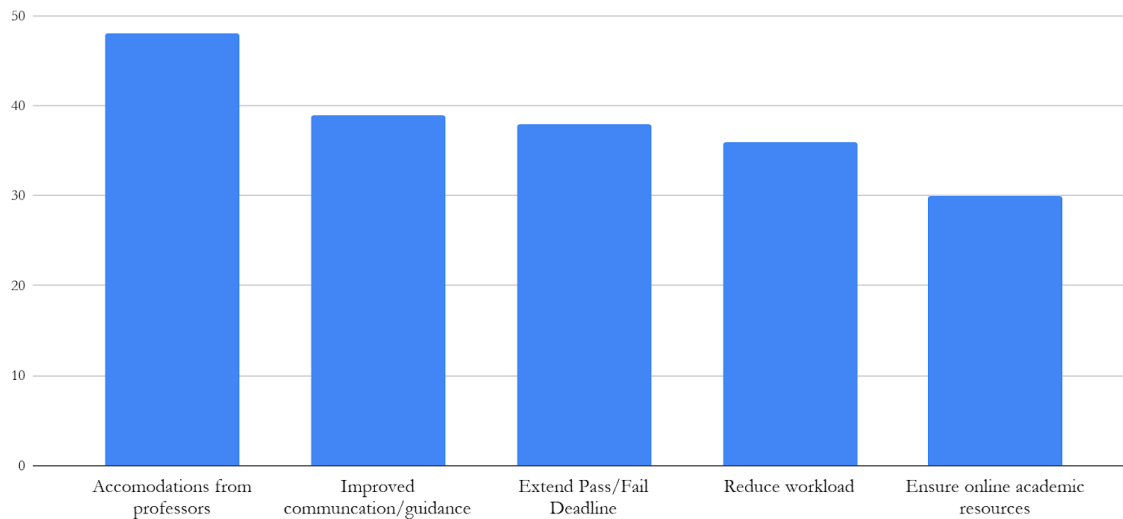
1. **Accommodations from professors:** Students request that professors acknowledge students' varying home situations and how that impacts their ability to work, including: internet capabilities, family responsibilities, financial issues, etc. Some students also feel that their professors have been condescending when they explained their particular situations. Professors should make an effort to hold virtual office hours and communicate via email that they prioritize student wellness.

2. **Improved communication/guidance:** Students ask that the University gather student input on academic decisions and communicate how these policies will affect future employment and graduate school admission. Students also request that Professors make an effort to communicate grading policies for the semester clearly and as soon as possible.

3. **Extend the current pass/fail deadline:** Students state that it is difficult to determine what their home situation will be in the future and that extending the pass/fail deadline later into the semester is necessary to ensure students are accommodated.

4. **Reduce workload:** Students are concerned about the increase in workload for classes. This places an undue burden on them in addition to an increase in stress, family obligations, and other extenuating circumstances at home.

5. **Ensure online academic resources:** Students express that online tutoring services are necessary to perform well academically from home. Students ask that materials be made available online and that the administration accommodate those with learning disabilities. Students state that required attendance in live classes is harmful to students who may be in different time zones, have different internet capabilities, or have extra responsibilities at home.

Student Grading System Preferences*

Student Support for Grading Systems
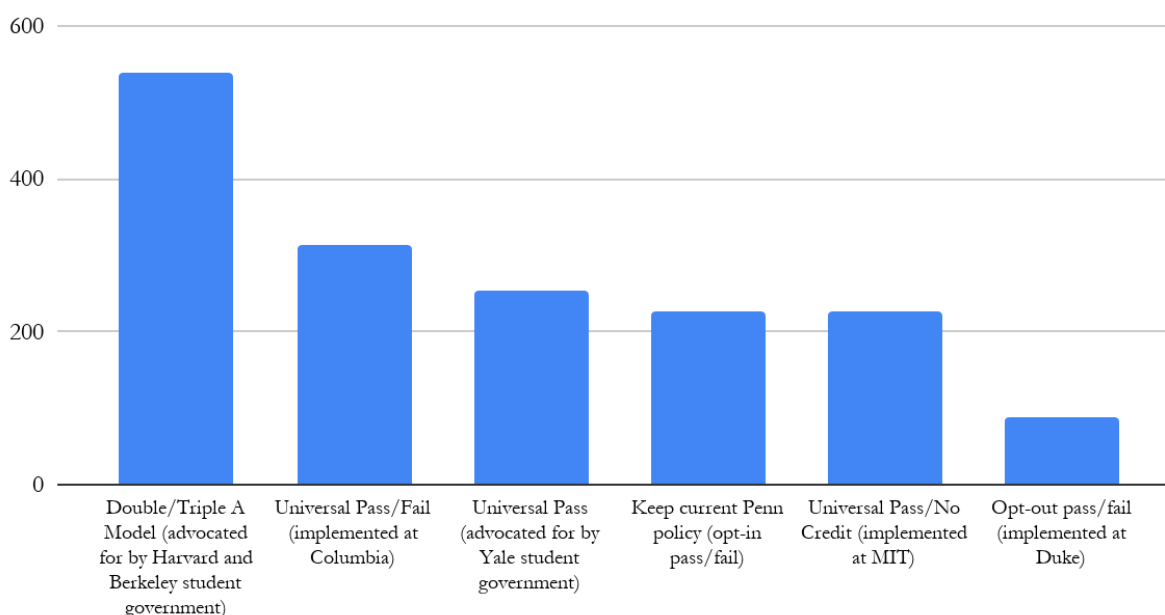
*Students were allowed to indicate preference for multiple policies.

Double-A/Triple-A: Harvard University and The University of California, Berkeley's student governments advocated for all students to receive a range of A's as their final grade.

Universal Pass/Fail: Columbia University announced all classes will be graded on a pass/fail basis.

Universal Pass (UP): Yale University's student government members had been advocating for a Universal Pass/Fail model, in which every student's courses would be given a passing grade.
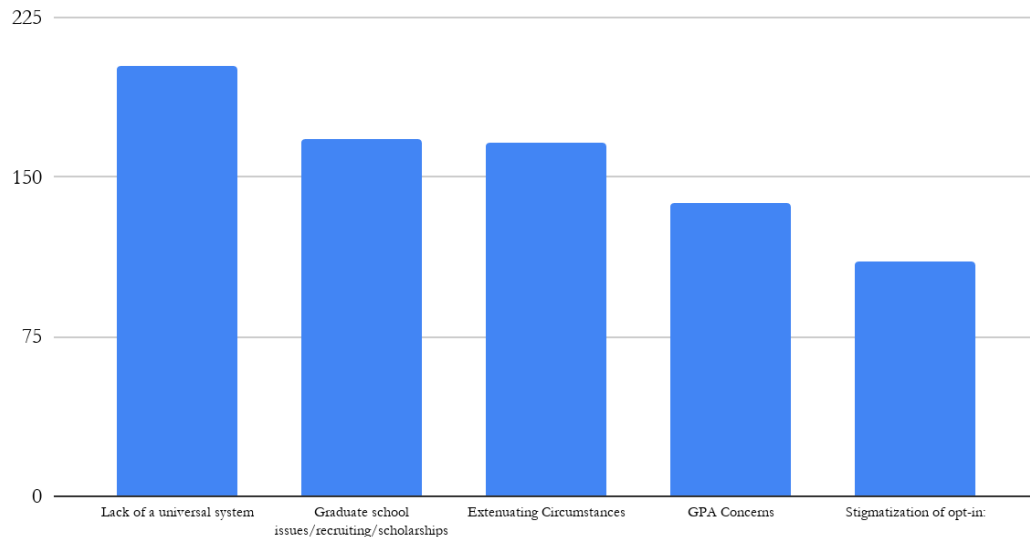
Current Penn Policy (opt-in pass/fail): Provost Pritchett announced that undergraduate students across all four schools are eligible to take courses pass/fail and count them in major regardless of previous requirements.

Universal Pass/No Credit: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) has instituted a mandatory Pass/No Credit policy for classes for all undergraduate and graduate courses.

Opt-out Pass/Fail: Duke University announced to its student population that spring semester undergraduate classes will now be automatically graded on a satisfactory/unsatisfactory scale unless they opt-out of the program.

Student Concerns for Grading Systems

Top 5 Student Grading System Concerns

225	
150	
75	
0	Lack of a universal system · Graduate school issues/recruiting/scholarships · Extenuating Circumstances · GPA Concerns · Stigmatization of opt-in:

1. **Lack of a universal system:** A common theme among students is that any academic policy implemented should apply to all students equally. They communicated that a mandatory system levels the playing field for students who are facing difficult circumstances now that normal procedures have been suspended.
2. **Graduate school issues/recruiting/scholarships:** Students have two distinct concerns about how their future graduate school plans will be affected by the academic policy this semester. As Harvard Medical School and other graduate schools have announced that they will not accept opt-in pass/fail grades, students feel obligated to take classes for a grade despite the burden of home obligations. Other students feel that the opportunity to increase their GPA for graduate school admissions, job application requirements and scholarships is made more difficult under a mandatory pass/fail grading system.
3. **Extenuating circumstances:** Students are concerned about their home environment, responsibilities, and illness. Many students also point to increased responsibilities (e.g., siblings, job, sick family members) and a lack of proper resources (e.g., access to the internet, no study supplies) as obstacles in their ability to perform academically.
4. **GPA concerns:** Many students are concerned that their GPAs are not going to be reflective of their work. Students are concerned that their efforts to improve GPAs may be fruitless.
5. **Stigmatization of opt-in:** Students feel pressure from peers, recruiters, or scholarship programs to not engage in pass/fail. The current policy makes some students feel like they will be judged and be put at a disadvantage if they opt-in.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS