

Transcription for

**THE KEY WITH INSIDE HIGHER ED**

EP. 3: HELPING STUDENTS AVOID PROBLEMS WITH THE 'ASTERISK SEMESTER'

APRIL 2020

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April 29, 2020



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THE KEY WITH INSIDE HIGHER ED

EP. 3: HELPING STUDENTS AVOID PROBLEMS WITH THE 'ASTERISK SEMESTER'

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NARRATOR: Support for this podcast is provided by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which is committed to preserving and expanding educational opportunity for today's students. Now more than ever.

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PAUL FAIN: Welcome to the Key with IHE. I'm Paul Fain, the host and the news editor at Inside Higher Ed. This podcast explores the uncertainties colleges and students are facing during the pandemic, with a particular focus on lower income students. We're going to jump right into this episode. I've got a lot of ground to cover.

A few weeks ago, most of higher ed moved to pass/fail grading. Lilah Burke, a reporter at IHE, has been covering this issue for us among many others. One of her articles about pass/fail was headlined "The

Asterisk Semester." I talked with Lilah about the many challenges this move might create for students and colleges. I also spoke with Anne Kress, president of Northern Virginia Community College. Many students for the college transfer to four-year universities, so Kress is well placed to talk about how college leaders should and can help students avoid disruption as they transfer with pass/fail grades on their transcripts. Finally, I spoke with Marie Lynn Miranda, the incoming provost at Notre Dame University, who's helping to lead a campaign to encourage medical schools to accept pass/fail grades in lieu of letter grades for this spring.

Now on to the conversation...

Hello, Lilah. Good to see and hear you virtually.

LILAH BURKE: Good to see you too, Paul.

PAUL FAIN: You were on the big story here for us pretty early. I know you covered the University of Washington's decision to move to distance instruction. I believe the day before they actually made the call, you wrote about the planning that they were doing for really the worst case scenario. Can you take us back to that?

LILAH BURKE: Yeah, yeah, they did. So the story came out at like three in the morning, I think around noon Eastern time, which is 9:00 Pacific their time. They announced that they were going online for the winter quarter, which seems pretty quaint now. That was until March 20th, and, of course, as we know now, it's going to last much more than that.

PAUL FAIN: That was obviously big news when Washington made the leap, and shortly thereafter, in a matter of days and weeks, most of the rest of higher ed followed suit, correct?

LILAH BURKE: Yeah, yeah. I think it started really locally around Washington, Washington state, with other universities in Seattle. The Seattle press was covering that pretty well. And then sort of around other places in the Pacific Northwest, you might remember that the coronavirus epidemic in the United States first, you know... Seattle was sort of the epicenter in early March. Now that's definitely shifted. That was sort of a domino effect. Then it started affecting places on the East Coast, in rural places, you know, around the center of the country. Universities announced that they were going online and moving

to remote instruction.

What I think is interesting is, while a lot of places followed the University of Washington in that regard in going online, they made a lot of different choices regarding other aspects of shutting down a campus. So the University of Washington, I think, has been pretty unique in allowing students to stay on campus, whereas you see a lot of East Coast universities, most of them said, you know, you have to leave or you need to apply to stay, and we'll choose students with high need or special circumstances who are allowed to stay. In some ways, many colleges followed the example of the University of Washington, and in other ways they didn't.

PAUL FAIN: Speaking of the domino effect, we've seen several cases where colleges make tough choices and then large swaths of higher ed follow. And one of those areas was the move to pass/fail grading, which makes sense that institutions would be doing that amid the pivot to online and the disruption to students' education. One of the most popular widely read stories we've done in this crisis was a piece you did on March 19th about the move to pass/fail. I think the headline was "#PassFailNation." Obviously, a tough call, though, for many institutions, and remains one in several ways. Can you talk a little bit about why that is?

LILAH BURKE: Yeah, yeah... So when I wrote the first article, I think it was only about a dozen, maybe 13, you know, major universities that had announced that they were either instituting a mandatory pass/fail or a binary grading schemes, so satisfactory-unsatisfactory, stuff like that. Or some of them were just expanding their policies, so you used to be able to only take one class pass/fail, now you can take all five of them if you really want. And that has also really grown. So those couple of colleges were sort of the early adopters and now more and more institutions are choosing to use a sort of binary grading scheme like that.

And, you know, I think it's pretty easy to understand why they're doing to. There's the idea that, you know, college students right now are really anxious. It's a really scary time out there, and, you know, the idea that you would have someone in the difficult position being asked to really focus on their grades at a time like this, when they might have family that are sick, they might be losing their income, you know, that seems sort of unfair. And then I think also students are in difficult positions, which, you know, has been well documented with internet access and having a place to study, and things like that, especially for lower income or, you know, more disadvantaged students that might have legitimate trouble completing their courses at home, you know, not at their university.

PAUL FAIN: As many colleges have made the move to pass/fail, I know it remains a difficult decision and has led to worries of negative consequences for students and challenges for college leaders. What are some of those?

LILAH BURKE: Yeah, a lot of institutions, I think, were faced with a judgment call. You know, there wasn't... There were some early adopters, and then, you know, people were instituting similar things. But there's not a lot of standardization. Different institutions are doing very different things. And there's a lot of questions about how that's going to play out for students who want to move from institution to institution.

Also, a lot of the hesitation has come from... It's very complicated to implement. And, you know, you have to think about things like athlete eligibility and students who need to maintain a certain GPA in order to maintain a scholarship or, you know, an honors designation, or a housing selection. And I think some universities, litigating all of that and making decisions about all of that, I think, you know, they sort of decided this was a little too complicated, and runs the risk of being unfair to students in other ways.

And then, you know, similarly there's a lot of people saying, you know, we need to really give all students and instructors, and really everyone, more benefit of the doubt in this really difficult time, and try to be as non-punitive as possible.

And then, you know, that raises questions about rigor. You know, some faculty feel like, well, I don't, you know, I really want my students to learn something. I don't want to lower the standards of my class.

And I think what has been sort of difficult for institutions is that there isn't really consensus among students. There have been a lot of student petitions for a pass/fail or a binary grading scheme. But how exactly that's done, whether it's mandatory, whether it's opt-in, whether some schools, you can...it's default to that, but you can unmask your grades, and when you should have to decide. You know, students are pretty divided on all of that. For one example, MIT had a mandatory binary grading scheme, and then there was a student petition to change that so people could opt in to a letter grade, because students said that either they were really trying hard this semester and they really wanted to, you know, get that A that they'd worked so hard for, or they were really worried about med school, law school, grad school, and how those grades would be interpreted.

PAUL FAIN: Even before the crisis, transfer can be a messy, controversial process. We've written often

about community college students losing credits when they transfer. Can you talk about the range of problems you're seeing for undergraduates and graduate students as they consider moving on with pass/fail on their transcripts?

LILAH BURKE: A lot of problems come from an uncertainty. It is very possible that with many institutions going to pass/fail, many professional and graduate schools are going to really understand that, really change any policies that they might have, and really make it so students, you know, are able to move on in the same way that they would have. But that's not certain.

And right now with different graduate and med schools really choosing to do their own sort of thing, I think a lot of students are anxious about whether their grades, how their grades are going to be seen. Med schools especially have prerequisites that need to be completed. In many cases, they can't be completed online. And, you know, you need to have a certain grade in order to, you know, have passed the prerequisite for the med school. And that creates difficult decisions for students as to, you know, I could choose a letter grade or I could choose pass/fail, but this med school I want to apply to is really encouraging letter grades, which sort of takes that what you might say is like a more compassionate, more forgiving option away from those students.

PAUL FAIN: So because of all the complex outcomes of making a move to pass/fail, it sounds like some colleges are iterating as they go along here.

LILAH BURKE: In the undergraduate realm, you know, like I was saying, students have, some students have wanted a universal pass. Some students feel that that's invalidating. The work they've put in, I've heard from some community college students who are raising children and say, you know, if I can do this, anyone can, you know, and, you know, they really don't want those standards lowered.

Georgetown specifically instituted one binary grading scheme, an opt-in binary grading scheme, and as a result of student input, which was rather fragmented because students wanted different things, the university sort of compromised and created a three-tier grading structure of a sort of pass, and then a credit, which should stand in for like a C-D, and then, you know, a credit or fail option. Other universities are also making new grading schemes. University of Michigan now has a pass or NRC option, which stands for "no record-COVID."

So things are evolving really quickly. A lot of institutions are still in discussion about what their policies

are. Johns Hopkins University's med school is still discussing whether they're going to take online classes as prerequisites. The last I checked, the University of Virginia was still talking about whether they will accept a pass from a community college transfer as credit. These are all still definitely evolving.

PAUL FAIN: Well, Lilah, I know you'll keep on this story and others for Inside Higher Ed. I appreciate you taking time to talk to me about this one and I hope you can take some time to get outside. It looks like it's a pretty nice day here in DC, but wear that mask. Thanks.

LILAH BURKE: Thanks so much.

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I'm speaking with President Anne Kress of Northern Virginia Community College. Anne, thanks so much for your time.

ANNE KRESS: Thank you.

PAUL FAIN: In the decision to move a pass/no pass, one that Virginia's community colleges and NOVA did last month, and many others in the country, you can talk a little bit about the calculus in doing that and the thought process on, particularly for an institution where so many students transfer?

ANNE KRESS: Sure, absolutely... So, first of all, I want to give a lot of credit to our chancellor of the system, Chancellor DuBois, because he really presented this in a way that I think it should be presented, which is, as an equity issue. We know the challenges so many of our community college students are facing, and we also knew that they were being diligent and resilient in moving through the shift to remote learning, but that we needed to find some balance between how we could reward them, if you will, for staying in there and sticking with us, but also recognizing that this was probably not going to be your average semester. So we decided to make that move, but we were very concerned because the majority of our students here at NOVA, they look to transfer. And so we could make a call, for example, around going to a pass grading system, but what if a transfer institution wasn't going to accept that. So

that was really part of the calculus and part of the due diligence that we were engaged in.

PAUL FAIN: Yeah, I don't want to compare to other places, but having a pretty strong system probably helps on this decision because you've got consistency around the state, and I would assume the system probably can also help work with the four-year universities you have such close relationships with.

ANNE KRESS: Yes, absolutely. In fact, the state higher ed organization, SCHEV we call it in the state of Virginia, they did a survey of our public and private institutions, and very quickly learned that most of those of institutions themselves were thinking of moving or had already moved at that point to this pass/no pass grading system, and were able to ascertain that they would accept a pass grade that we could denote in some fashion as being a C or better for transfer. So that was essential, I'm going to say. You know, NOVA, just as an institution, has seen an increase in transfer students by more than 30 percent over the past five years. And we wanted to make sure we could tell those students, yes, this peak class is going to help you move forward.

PAUL FAIN: And how many of your students tend to transfer? I know, George Mason being one of the biggest destinations, but you're really up there in terms of percentage, right?

ANNE KRESS: Yes. You know, in an average year, we'll have more than 11,000 students transfer. We have... When we look at our transfers of those who transfer within the state of Virginia, about 90 percent of them will transfer to a public institution. And of that, almost half of them are going to George Mason. So, again, that makes it in some ways easy for us to have this conversation, because we know we've got a huge transfer population. We know we have universities that are very welcoming of our students, and we know where they're going, so then we could have some of those dialogs.

PAUL FAIN: So as our reporter Lilah Burke poked into the pass/fail issue, we gathered that doing this isn't just as easy as flipping a switch. For an institution of your scale, can you talk a little bit about what goes into making that happen?

ANNE KRESS: Oh, sure, absolutely. It is not that easy, because you've got a lot of moving pieces, and any one of these decisions... First, let's start with the nuts and bolts. You've got technology that you need to program. You've got to change your entire grading system, then you've got to help faculty understand what their options are. We also needed to put in place some deadlines when students would choose whether or not to receive a letter grade. And let me pause right there and say that when students heard



that we were moving to a pass/no pass system, they were very anxious because they had been working so hard and they wanted to make sure that if they got a B or they got an A, they would still get that recorded. So there's that to factor in as well, that you want to make sure that a system is really recognizing that, when you talk about serving students, you're really talking about serving a very diverse group. Some of them are real strivers and they're working for that A and they want to be recognized. And some of them are willing to say, look, ah, I just need a pause. I'm happy for that P.

And we also set up a system, and I thought this was ingenious, where students could essentially select the courses in which they wanted letter grades, and the rest of them would default to the pass/no pass system. If students didn't elect a letter grade at all, all of their grades would move to the pass/no pass system. And, in fact, what we've moved to is a pass/W system, where they'll get a withdrawal grade at the end if they don't wind up with a P+, which in our system is C or better, or P-, which is the equivalent to a D.

PAUL FAIN: I always lose track of time these days, but earlier this week, the American Council on Education and other higher ed groups put out a statement about transfer principles, encouraging colleges to really work with students and institutions to make this more seamless in these unprecedented times, and you endorsed that, I believe.

ANNE KRESS: Um-hum, absolutely, absolutely... First of all, I'm very grateful to ACE, AACC, and all the other organizations that have endorsed these principles and put them forward.

One of the things that I was struck by was how the statement on principles foregrounds equity and recognizes the challenges that we're all facing due to the pandemic, they are not distributed equally across different student populations, across different zip codes. And so we really need as institutions to recognize that and to, you know, sort of put as many people and set an asterisk next to this semester, understand that it's very different, understand that our students are persevering against great odds, and still moving forward. So I was very grateful to the organizations for putting out that statement.

PAUL FAIN: Well, Anne, I am grateful to you for your time. I'll let you go here, but, you know, the focus of this podcast is equity in the crisis, so your thoughts have been really helpful.

ANNE KRESS: Thank you, thank you.

PAUL FAIN: Stay tuned, everybody. We've got more to come, beginning right now.

I'm here with Dr. Marie Lynn Miranda, provost-elect at Notre Dame. Thanks so much for being with us.

MARIE LYNN MIRANDA: Oh, it's my pleasure. Thanks for having me.

PAUL FAIN: So we've been covering the move by most of higher ed to binary grading, pass/fail, and I gather it's a lot work for institutions just to make the change. But it causes a lot of challenges, it can potentially cause a lot of challenges for students as they move on through their higher education, and that this is something that you've been working on to try to minimize the disruptions. Can you talk a little bit about that project?

MARIE LYNN MIRANDA: Sure. You know, I think everybody's aware of all the many things we need to be doing in the moment right now, regarding this very unusual and challenging semester or season that we're having. We're also trying to think a little bit about what are the downstream effects of everything that's happened in the Spring 2020 semester.

You know, one of the things that we noted, that we noticed was the high level of stress among our pre-med students, a lot of that having to do with the fact that medical schools are pretty explicit on their websites about the fact that they will only accept courses as counting toward prerequisites if the courses are taken for a grade. So that puts students who have the option of taking pass/no credit in a little bit of a dilemma, because their home universities are saying we understand what's going on. You can take your courses pass/no credit. And medical schools were saying, well, no, you have to take your courses for credit. So we wrote to a whole series of provosts and deans of medical schools to get them to sign on to the idea that this was an unusual semester, and for the purposes of applications to medical schools, they would accept a pass as opposed to a letter grade for courses taken during this unusual semester.

PAUL FAIN: What are the tradeoffs there? I mean, I can imagine some, but, you know, I think for a lot of folks, it might feel like, why can't you just do this? How hard is it to do, if you could flip a switch? But I assume there are tradeoffs and some work to be done on the receiving institution.

MARIE LYNN MIRANDA: I'm currently at Rice, about to join the University of Notre Dame. They don't have a medical school, so I can't speak to the complexities in medical schools. I do know that medical schools were dealing with a whole series of issues regarding their current trainees and may have been very focused there.

We're asking them to focus on something a little bit downstream, but I think that there are difficulties in shifting your attention when, you know, it sort of seems like your immediate world is on fire, how do I think about, you know, what happens after the fire gets put out.

That being said, we do have, you know, quite a number of medical schools that have signed on to the call of action, and we're hoping to get even more signed on. The call to action says that they commit to accepting pass/fail grades during the Spring 2020 semester. And we've written to the American Association for Medical Colleges, as well as the equivalent organization for schools of osteopathy, asking them to call on all of their members to commit to accepting pass/no credit grades during the Spring 2020 semester.

PAUL FAIN: Gotcha. And, you know, I can imagine, as you mentioned, the stress for students right now. I mean, they're dealing with a lot, to be worried about your move to medical school, the next step in your education. You don't have a lot of time here. I mean, that probably speaks to some of the urgency, that you want to reassure students as soon as possible that they're going to options, that they're not going to be harmed by this.

MARIE LYNN MIRANDA: That's exactly right, Paul. We're trying to get the message out about all the schools that have signed on to this call to action, out to undergraduate advisers and health professions advising centers across the country. And we're also trying to get the word out directly to students via the provosts at all the various schools that have signed on to the call to action.

PAUL FAIN: It seems like a worthy effort and one that I think a lot of our listeners would want to hear more about. How can they learn more about this call to action?

MARIE LYNN MIRANDA: We'd welcome as many additional signatories, you know, from across the country, from both provosts and from medical schools. And anybody who wants more information can just email me, just email [provost@nd.edu](mailto:provost@nd.edu).

PAUL FAIN: That's all the time we have, Marie. Thanks so much for joining us.

MARIE LYNN MIRANDA: Thank you, Paul.

PAUL FAIN: Thanks to all of you for listening to Episode 3 of the Key with IHE. I'll be back next week. I'll be speaking with Steven Johnson, president of Sinclair Community College in my hometown of Dayton, Ohio, about how his institution is planning for the summer and the fall. Catch you then.

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