



# Cornell University Student Assembly

## Cornell University Student Assembly

Minutes of the Tuesday, March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2020 Meeting

6:00-7:30pm virtually via Zoom (<https://cornell.zoom.us/j/115376253>)

### I. Call to Order & Roll Call

- a. J. Anderson called the emergency meeting to order at 6:00 pm.
- b. Roll Call:
  - i. Present: M. Adeghe, S. Ali, J. Anderson, M. Baker, C. Benedict, A. Cass, U. Chukwukere, J. Clancy, J. Feit, M. Haddad, C. Huang, Y. Li, G. Martin, N. Matolka, I. Pavlov, T. Reuning, L. Smith, P. Solovyeva, S. Sun, N. Watson, B. Weintraub, K. Wondimu, S. Xu, V. Xu, J. Youngblood, Y. Yuan
  - ii. Absent: O. Egharevba (excused), J. Kroll (excused)

### II. New Business

- a. [S.A. Resolution #59: Support of the University Pass Grading System for the Remainder of the Spring 2020 Semester](#)
  - i. M. Adeghe introduced S.A. Resolution #59. The objective of the resolution is to support Universal Pass. The Faculty Senate will be voting on the issue and the passage of this resolution would constitute a show of support from the SA prior to their meeting.
    1. Cosponsor A. Elsammak introduced himself as one of the organizers of Big Red Pass and shared a few personal stories from other students to explain the motivation behind the resolution. One student has a mother with aggressive brain cancer and a compromised immune system. The student stated that Universal Pass would allow her to focus on her family. Another student is suffering from life-threatening mood swings. He will not be passing classes and thus graduating as intended. The student stated that Universal Pass takes into account the chaos and mental hardship of students rather than making them feel shameful for not being able to keep up. Another student shared that their mother passed away the previous night and because of COVID-19, the hospital did not allow visitors. The student's father also lost his job last week. Another student shared that their sister passed away and that their family is in deep financial trouble.
    2. M. Adeghe stated the importance of a universal system compared to an opt-in system. Graduate schools are stating they will accept pass/fail grades if the system is universal. An opt-in system puts pressure on students to take the letter grades. She also added that many students are taking care of children, becoming the main breadwinner in families, dealing with sick family members, or become

sick themselves. The situation is unprecedented and incomparable to the situation students are in when living on campus and going to school.

- ii. B. Weintraub pointed out an ambiguity in line 50. He stated it sounds the resolution is asking for a Universal Pass, which means there will be no opportunity for students to fail a course or receive a letter grade. He stated his support for a Universal P/F system, which would ensure students do not need to worry about letter grades. He also shared concerns that Big Red Pass would disincentivize students to show up to class, do assignments, and learn the material.
  - 1. A. Elsammak highlighted incentives for students to do work, including maintaining good relations with professors. He stated that students, to some extent, care about courses and materials.
  - 2. L. Sterling added she is genuinely interested in her classes and expressed gratitude for the opportunities to learn.
  - 3. B. Weintraub responded that it is not the case for many students.
  - 4. M. Adeghe stated that students are allowed to skip class throughout the semester.
- iii. V. Xu stated that other universities are considering extending deadlines for optional S/U grading. She supports this as the best option as it favors both sides.
  - 1. G. Martin noted this would be the Big Red Choice option. He views it as counterproductive, pressuring students to opt for the graded option.
  - 2. A. Elsammak said Big Red Choice does not appeal to both sides. One aspect of Universal Pass is not showing any distinction between letter grades. Any opt-in policy creates stigma. Graduate schools will see students had the choice to choose the graded option but opted into not to. He stated that any letter grade distinction would give unfair advantages that would normally not exist to more privileged students.
- iv. J. Feit reiterated A. Elsammak's advantage and equity point. He shared that he was initially a supporter of Big Red Choice. However, students who receive a 4.0 GPA this semester would have received an unfair advantage. He is in favor of a Universal S/U policy. While he would like to imagine everyone cares about their grades and school, he is unsure that it is the case. He stated support for some kind of incentive to ensure students are attending classes. Having many students absent defeats educational opportunities.
  - 1. M. Adeghe said she agrees that those who choose the graded option are likely to get a higher grade as the curve is lower. Many of her professors are posting pre-recorded lecture, so she is unsure about J. Feit's concern about people not attending lecture and engaging with each other.
  - 2. J. Feit clarified that he was referring to discussion sections and classes on subjects like public speaking and argumentation.
  - 3. A. Elsammak stated that students who would not have shown up to class probably would not show up in online classes. He stated that

the likelihood of decreased engagement would have happened anyway. He added that the S.A. members have to ask themselves whether they are willing to sacrifice a little engagement in class for the benefit of protecting everyone who have failed under a S/U system. He stressed prioritizing the benefit of marginalized people over the potential of some more engagement.

- v. T. Reuning highlighted that they are in the midst of a pandemic but worried about grades. He noted that many people are suffering and thousands have died and will die. While some of them on the S.A. may not be personally affected, many are starting to have friends and family members who are as the crisis is escalating. He shared his support for Universal Pass and noted that issues regarding attendance and involvement is not the S.A.'s concern but that of professors'. His concern lies with his fellow students and the communities he represents. He asked why they are expecting people to be able to do homework and stated that there will be long-term ramifications even after the disease passes. Much of the student body is filled with anxiety about that and he urged the S.A. to consider that. He understands the arguments people are making about grade boosts, but reiterated that the situation is much larger.
- vi. K. Wondimu made a motion to vote on Resolution #59.
  - 1. T. Reuning seconded the motion.
  - 2. B. Weintraub made a dissent to the motion to vote. He stated that voting on the resolution would be a false choice between Universal Pass or the current system. There are other options that other members of the S.A. may favor more.
- vii. J. Anderson stated the S.A. is moving into a vote to vote on Resolution #59.
  - 1. Motion **failed** with a vote of 10-11-1.
- viii. J. Crossman stated he is a supporter of Big Red Choice. He said Big Red Pass is trying to implement a universal grading system that is not universally wanted. Many students, including disadvantaged students, still want a graded option. He shared a story from a student who stated that his grades this semester are essential for graduate school applications. His current GPA is below a 3.0 and he is taking six major courses. He planned on using this semester to boost his GPA. However, if his courses go onto his transcript as S, it will cancel his chances of going to graduate school, and he would have to return to Korea to fulfill his military civil service duty. J. Crossman stated that students who are personally affected can explain so in their graduate school applications. In addition, graduate schools will be understanding.
  - 1. A. Elsammak said he does not understand why graduate schools will not be understanding towards the student's situation. In addition, the concern is not whether a system is universally wanted as policies do not have to be implemented by a 100% approval rate. He asked the S.A. to look at the costs and benefits, and something will benefit the student population and marginalized groups.
  - 2. M. Adeghe stated the benefit of the group could sometimes outweigh the harm done to an individual. She noted not everyone will agree with a universal system and she does not believe they claimed everyone would support it.

- ix. Fengnui Zhan, a Guest Room writer for The Cornell Daily Sun, stated he feels letter grades reflect individual achievements and potential for upward movement and mobility for those of lower-income backgrounds. Universal Pass will not benefit everyone. He stated the university should equalize technology access for students and keep the letter grades.
- x. S. Sun made a point of information. She noted that Universal Pass does not acknowledge that many students who struggle during the first years of Cornell due to difficult circumstances or being less academically prepared are counting on a graded option to raise their GPAs. There is a lot more at stake for these students.
- xi. L. Sterling noted a dichotomy between students who are nervous about their lives and students worried about their grades. Testimonies from Big Red Pass feature students speaking about medical situations compared to Big Red Choice testimonies featuring students speaking about grades. She stated there is no comparison between people's lives and people's grades.
- xii. B. Weintraub made a motion for a straw poll to gauge support for Universal P/F.
  - 1. G. Martin raised a point of information. He stated that according to parliamentary procedure for an emergency meeting, the S.A. can only discuss items on the agenda. Universal pass is on the agenda and not Universal P/F.
  - 2. J. Anderson overruled G. Martin's motion. He explained the resolution broadly speaks to grading and while it does try to make specific Universal Pass, he will entertain a straw poll for Universal P/F because the Faculty Senate is considering it. The S.A. has the ability to recommend any changes to the university.
  - 3. Straw poll to gauge support for Universal P/F as opposed to the current grading system: 15 in support and 2 against.
- xiii. B. Weintraub made a motion to amend line 50 to change "Universal Pass" to either "Universal S/U" or "Universal Pass/Fail". His understanding is that Universal Pass/Fail is more forgiving as students can still pass with a D-. He supported providing students more leeway.
  - 1. SA member noted the wording should be "Universal S/U" because it is what the Faculty Senate is referring to it as.
  - 2. Motion to discuss amending line 50 from "Universal Pass" to "Universal S/U" – approved with a vote of 18-4-1.
  - 3. J. Anderson added there will be a second amendment if the amendment passes to put in line the rest of the resolution to this regard.
    - a. Alexandria Gutierrez stated that students advocating for Big Red Pass are mostly concerned about the health status of family members or themselves. It seems students of Big Red Choice are focusing on their grades. She is in a situation where both are important for her. She shared that grades are important to obtain certain scholarships that she needs. She is taking a class to qualify for a patent bar exam she was planning on taking after graduation. By not receiving that grade, she would have to spend thousands of dollars on

- tuition to get a grade in the course. She feels her career would have to be on hold.
- b. M. Haddad noted if the Universal Pass option is supported, it would incentivize the Faculty Senate to consider Universal S/U.
  - c. B. Weintraub shared concerns that there is less support for Universal Pass. He stated the S.A. has a better chance of succeeding in helping students if the vote total shows a universal front. He will not support Universal Pass. By passing the amendment, the SA can put out a resolution a larger majority of S.A. members would support.
  - d. N. Hernandez asked what sponsors need to address or amend to get support.
  - e. U. Chukwukere stated it was disrespectful that people who are in support of Big Red Choice are not considering that students' lives are being upended. With an optional S/U system, there will be students who would have to choose between schoolwork and home life.
4. G. Martin made a point of information for a straw poll for Universal Pass.
    - a. Straw poll to gauge support for Universal Pass: 11 in support and 11 against.
  5. Continued discussion for B. Weintraub's amendment.
    - a. S. Sun noted both sides have a desire to protect vulnerable students. Big Red Pass does not consider students who have had to work harder academically. Students oftentimes most in need of a GPA boost are those who are less privileged. She would be in support of the resolution were it not that so many are in support of Big Red Choice. She stated it is important to add other grading options to the discussion. For example, another option is to have the option to opt-in or out after grades are posted.
    - b. M. Adeghe responded that the notion that first-generation low income (FGLI) students are usually the ones who are struggling the most is insulting. She urged caution when speaking about groups people do not belong to about how those people feel.
- xiv. G. Martin said a motion to extend the meeting for 30 minutes until 8:00 PM – approved with a vote of 17-2-1 (proxy vote accepted via Parliamentarian).
1. Continued discussion for B. Weintraub's amendment.
    - a. G. Martin stated some students are more focused on family and people are in different situations. He highlighted that in a matter of days, about 13% of the student population stated support for Universal Pass.
    - b. S. Sun stated that the constituents she has reached out to have vocalized how Big Red Pass seems to be weaponizing stories from those going through legitimate and difficult

circumstances. She urged for solutions that will be most beneficial to the student body as a whole.

- c. A. Elsemak replied they are not weaponizing stories or identities, but rather sharing stories people have shared with them. He highlighted that marginalization is nuanced and exists in degrees. When speaking about marginalization, he urged for people to look at it from the lowest point of the spectrum. The ability to worry about grades is a luxury. Regarding upward mobility, marginalized individuals would not have the tools to succeed at Cornell, which includes libraries, safe spaces from toxic households, recreational services, nutritional food, and WiFi. He stated that the premise underlying upward mobility depends on those individuals to be upwardly mobile. However, not everyone has those tools at home.
  - d. M. Haddad conveyed C. Benedict's written statement. He noted that lives are in danger and those most affected are probably not worrying about GPAs and graduate school admissions. He highlighted an opportunity to help students by implementing Universal Pass and stated that voting against it would be selfish.
  - e. S. Sun suggested having two meetings. One would be to vote to support universal pass to show it is a legitimate option. The other meeting would be to vote on a Big Red Choice resolution so those who feel strongly about that could also be supported. There could be an opportunity to submit two resolutions.
  - f. J. Anderson responded that he has never been in a situation where the S.A. passed resolutions that counteract each other or present a duality. He noted that very rarely do resolutions they convey feature contentious vote totals. He cautioned against passing multiple resolutions that provide mixed signals because it does not necessarily strengthen any argument.
2. Motion to vote on the amendment to line 50 replacing "Universal Pass" with "Universal S/U" – resolution **amended** with a vote of 17-4-1.
- xv. Motion to amend the resolution so that all other mentions of "Universal Pass" are changed to "Universal S/U" – resolution **amended** with a vote of 19-2-1.
  - xvi. N. Hernandez said FGLI students are accustomed to the semester not accurately reflecting their academic ability regardless of the global pandemic. They are never at a level playing field and she questioned how they are expected to be on the same playing field when they are all across the world.
  - xvii. M. Adeghe made a motion to amend Line 51 of the resolution to say "...to adopt the grading model in with an S represents any grade from A+ through D- and U represents an F" – resolution **amended** with a vote of 21-1-1.

- xviii. Ben Lederman voiced support for Big Red Choice. He asked people supporting both campaigns to be cautious about the words used. He has seen people use terms such as “elitist” and saying that people are only caring about grades. He asked people to be aware there are multiple perspectives and a broad range of views.
1. M. Adeghe responded that the intent was not to show privilege to elitism.
- xix. T. Reuning echoed N. Hernandez’s statement about how the playing field for FGLI students is never level. He shared that he works three jobs during the school year. Now, he has one of those jobs and no income. In addition, a surgery he scheduled is likely to not happen. He is not only affected as an FGLI student but as a transgender student. He knows transgender students who are no longer having surgeries because they cannot, which will have substantial effects on mental health. He reminded that many people who are not affected will be. He questioned pre-med and pre-law students who want to go into public service fields but are more concerned about their grades than fellow students.
- xx. Fengnui Zhan asked how Cornell is working to help people with access and technology issues.
1. M. Adeghe highlighted the Access Fund as a main resource that has provided students with computers. However, there is a lot more than a computer and WiFi that goes into a good educational experience at home, such as a quiet place.
  2. Fengnui Zhan asked if it were possible to add something to the resolution to assist students besides the Access Fund.
  3. J. Anderson noted that other groups besides the S.A. have made donations to the Access Fund. The university has also shared that Spectrum is providing high-speed WiFi. He asked students struggling with connectivity issues to be in contact with their professors. In addition, the Faculty Senate is considering a resolution to amend the Code of Academic Integrity to impart to both students and professors to be lenient on each other.
- xxi. G. Martin made a motion to **call the question**.
1. M. Baker voiced a dissent. She has been waiting to speak for 30 minutes.
  2. Vote to vote on the resolution – **failed** with a vote of 8-15.
- xxii. Motion to extend the meeting to 8:05pm – **passed**.
- xxiii. Niki Amini-Naleni voiced support for Universal P/F. Students have worked hard in previous semesters and if they take the S/U option without it being universal, it would harm their chances in graduate school applications.
- xxiv. Sareh Ghadersohi made a statement on behalf of Big Red Choice and questioned the universality of Universal S/U. She stated it is not right to equalize one group of students at the expense of another. Students should have the ability to make their own decisions and allowing that flexibility would make more sense than a one-size-fits-all policy that may not work for everybody.
- xxv. M. Baker voiced support for Universal S/U and uncovering grades. However, the majority of the senior administration is not in favor of either.

She conducted a poll today that showed Universal Pass being a slight preference. The decision is not within the S.A.'s jurisdiction, and she urged the S.A. to compromise with Big Red Choice.

- xxvi. J. Anderson responded the S.A. is a recommendation-based body and can state concerns. They will provide their input and he does not know how the Provost will take it. However, he clarified that making recommendations on grading is within S.A. jurisdiction. Shared governance is about sharing opinions and not shared decision-making.
- xxvii. S. Xu voiced support for the option to uncover grades. She highlighted that freshmen spring admits do not have a GPA and she received complaints about this. Many freshmen diversity programs require a GPA.
- xxviii. Motion to vote on the resolution via roll call – failed with a vote of 10-12-1.
  - 1. P. Solovyeva made a dissent. She noted the S.A. can vote via the general voting function.
- xxix. Motion to vote on Resolution #59 – resolution passed with a vote of 16-7-2.

### **III. Adjournment**

- a. J. Anderson adjourned the meeting at 8:15 pm.

Respectfully Submitted,  
*Catherine Tran*  
Clerk of the Assembly