

The Proper Use of Incompletes

Each semester instructors may be contacted by students in their classes about the possibility of getting an “Incomplete” for the term — sometimes to “buy a little time” within which to complete the requirements of that class. In some cases the student’s situation is fairly clear cut and an “Incomplete” is the best stop-gap measure: for example, the student is involved in an auto accident during dead week, is hospitalized, and cannot turn in the final paper on time; or a parent suddenly must take care of a sick child on the day of the final exam; or the funeral of a relative or close friend is scheduled during the week of final exams. Such circumstances are legitimate. However, it is not appropriate to grant an Incomplete to a student who did not put in the time needed to get everything done or done as well as the student wished.

1. The Incomplete is a “contract” between the student and the instructor, with the instructor listing the conditions for successful completion of the course [within the bounds set by the university as described on p. 42 of the current catalog] and the student fulfilling those conditions in a timely manner. The academic adviser’s signature is not requested on an “I” form.
2. At the time the Incomplete is granted, the student must have been passing the course. [As Secretary of the LAS ASC, I check all the incomplete forms as the Registrar returns them to the college for filing -- and I am amazed at the numbers that are granted to students who had midterm reports for the class.]
3. Ideally, the student initiates a request for an Incomplete and the student signs the incomplete form. Only in limited instances, when the student cannot physically be present to initiate the form, should an instructor initiate and attach an Incomplete form to the final grade report without the student’s signature. In such cases, the student should provide the instructor with an email or other written request for this action.

From statistics provided by the Office of the Registrar, every fall term since 1994 the average number of undergraduate Incomplete forms turned into the Registrar is just over 500 — not an inconsiderable number! Over 1/3 of these are from instructors in the LAS College. The number of forms submitted by instructors, but NOT signed by the student involved, has risen dramatically in the last few years— and in this past fall term 128 of the 205 LAS forms turned in were not initiated by the student. For each of these, the Registrar must send a contract form to the student to sign to confirm whether or not the Incomplete is correct. If the student does not accept the Incomplete, the student will need to contact the instructor and request a grade by midterm of the following semester. If this does not occur, the student must resolve the Incomplete according to the conditions listed by the instructor on the incomplete form.

Generally speaking, instructors often feel that granting an Incomplete helps the student. However, there may be several unforeseen and harmful outcomes. Students may not realize that they have only one calendar year within which to finish off the Incomplete contract. After year is up, whether student is still in school or not, the Registrar will convert the “I” to an “F” on the student’s permanent record. This results in a negative impact on the student’s GPA and will raise the quality point deficiencies if they happen to be on TE. Several students already on TE and in danger of dismissal have in the past requested Incompletes to temporarily avoid a poor grade being factored into their GPA.

Sometimes under “Requirements to resolve” the instructor will note: “Student must repeat the class.” In fact, a student cannot repeat a course to remove an Incomplete. What happens is that the student will receive an “F” for the unresolved Incomplete after the year expires and the “repeated course” grade is added to the student’s GPA. That repeated course grade does not remove the effect of the “F.” AND, the student will have paid twice for the class. Although not common, it IS possible for an instructor to tell the Registrar to extend the time of completion beyond one calendar year, if warranted. Reasons given as examples by the Registrar were unforeseen military service or medical circumstances.

So, what should an instructor do? If the factors involved are not extenuating circumstances and/or if the student is not in a position to pass the class on work already completed, we recommend that the instructor turn in a grade appropriate for work already completed at that point by that student and at the end of the term the student is enrolled. If a grade change is warranted later due to additional work submitted by the student, then it is the decision of the instructor whether or not a grade change is to be turned in to the Registrar.

If we can reduce the number of unnecessary Incompletes granted in each term, the overall outcome will be of benefit to students, instructors, administrative advisers, and the Office of the Registrar.