



STUDENTS & USAP

*Results of the student survey
on McGill's University Student
Assessment Policy*



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Credits and Acknowledgements

Survey design: Senator Henrique Mecabô, in collaboration with Senators Jeremy Garneau, Julia Kafato, Adrienne Tessier, and Madeline Willson.

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Executive Summary

Grades, marks, GPAs - they are ubiquitous parts of the student experience, especially at a competitive university like McGill. The assessments that fill student's schedules and keep them up at night are ultimately what could determine future employment and careers.

This survey, designed by student senators, aimed to get a snapshot of student's perceptions and experience of assessment at McGill. This was done to inform the rewrite of the University Student Assessment Policy ("USAP").¹ This policy provides the framework for all assessments conducted at McGill at the undergraduate and graduate level.

This survey ultimately elicited 196 responses from students and recent alumni, 6 of which were in French.² The survey was open as a Google Form from March 30th until May 4th, 2020 in both English and French. It was publicized via Faculty listservs hosted by student associations, the McGill subreddit, SSMU social media outlets, and word of mouth.

Student Expectations of Assessment

The first set of questions asked respondents to compare their perceptions of assessment as a McGill student, as opposed to when they were a prospective student. The majority (54%) of respondents stated that their experiences "have been reasonably within the expectations I had before joining McGill". However, only 4.6% of students stated that their experiences had been "better/smooth than expected", with 38.7% stating that assessment had been "more difficult / rougher than expected".³

Students Express Strong Preference for Assignments Over Exams

While the majority of students (67.8%) had not taken a class where the final exam was worth more than 75%⁴, students strongly indicated that the maximum allowable weight for final exams should be reduced. When asked what the maximum weight should be, a majority (56.1%) of participants indicated that it should be between 50-60%. Only 15.8% indicated that the maximum weight should be over 60%, with the remaining 25% indicating that final exams should be worth less than 50%.⁵

When asked to express a preference between more assignments (5) or more weight on the final exam (0), 43.3% of students chose 5, whereas 22.9% of

1. McGill University, "University Student Assessment Policy" (2016) online (pdf): *McGill University* <https://www.mcgill.ca/secretariat/files/secretariat/2016-04_student_assessment_policy.pdf> [USAP].

2. Four alumni responded to the survey. Two were the class of 2019, one the class of 2017, and one did not specify.

3. Percentages will not add up to 100 due to rounding and 3 "Other" responses.

4. USAP art 6.1.3: "The maximum weight of a final examination in a regularly scheduled Course shall be no more than 75% of the Course Grade. Exceptions shall be made where a student has been offered the choice in advance to write a final examination worth more than 75% of the Course grade. [citations omitted]".

5. Students were presented with a range in 5% increments, from 25% to 100%. Under 50%, the most popular option was 40% (14.2%).

students chose 4. This suggests a clear preference by the majority of respondents in favour of more assignments over heavier exams.

In comments, students noted that exams can add to stress, discourage engagement with a course during the term, and encourage cramming. One wrote that “I really hate going into an exam knowing 12 weeks of learning depends upon my response to 1-3 questions and it just seems like such a poor way to test [a] student’s mastery of the knowledge.” Another wrote that assignments can disproportionately hinder students with families or other responsibilities outside of school. A proposed compromise of “assist-only” or optional assignments was proposed by another commenter to give students the flexibility needed to balance their academic and personal obligations.

Students Identify Issues with Participation Grades

Students noted the difficulties of assessing participation, particularly when subjective “quality not quantity” elements are being considered by a professor or Teaching Assistant. However, when asked what weight participation should be given of a total grade, the results were mixed, but generally in favour of lowering the potential weight of participation grades - or eliminating

them entirely. The most popular answer was capping participation grades at 10% (28.6%).⁶ However, the next most popular option (17.3%) was not allowing them at all. When courses weighted participation at more than 10% and a rubric was provided, as per USAP guidelines, a majority of students who had taken such a course (54.5%) felt that the rubrics were unclear.⁷

Students noted in comments that participation grades are often not accessible to those who have anxiety, or simply are not comfortable participating in a large classroom. A proposed solution was offering alternative methods of engagement (discussions on MyCourses; emailing the professor or TA after the fact; office hours). Some stated that participation grades did not make sense in a large lecture, but were more acceptable in a smaller seminar format. A Francophone student noted that speaking in their second language in front of a large lecture hall was intimidating, thereby hindering their ability to take advantage of participation marks.

Laptop Bans Are a Controversial Balance of Student Autonomy and Ensuring Focus

70.8% of students surveyed had taken a class with a laptop ban. The opinion of those surveyed were deeply divided on

6. USAP art 3.1.6: “Normally, participation will not exceed 10% of the final grade. If participation (which may include attendance) is to exceed 10%, instructors must include a clear rubric in the course outline.”

7. Of the 196 surveyed, 132 had taken a course with more than 10% participation. 72 indicated that the rubric received was unclear.

their efficacy and impact. A number of students enjoyed having a laptop ban and found that it improved their focus and learning in a course.⁸ They stated that they found that it removed distractions from the class and improved their focus. Others stated that it hindered their learning.⁹ This ranged from creating inconvenience (eg not understanding disorganized handwritten notes; needing to take the time to retype notes after the fact), to increasing cost from the need to print out readings, to increasing stress due to missing course or lecture material.

A number of students identified the impact of laptop bans on students with disabilities. One student with arthritis had to ask friends for notes on certain days. Another ignored a laptop ban entirely because handwriting was not accessible to them. Two students stated that they made arrangements with the professor to have their laptops, but felt exposed and uncomfortable when using them.

Finally, on a principled note, students argued that it was not up to professors to determine the best way for students to learn. It is up to the students to determine for themselves whether they preferred to handwrite or type their notes. A proposed solution was to designate a section of the class for those with laptops, to minimize distraction for those who prefer not to see the screens.

8. 35 comments in response to a general question asking for student opinions on laptop bans.

9. 22 comments.



Introduction

Assessment is an omnipresent part of every university student's life, and a key part of the academic core of McGill's mission to offer the best education possible.¹⁰ But how should students be assessed? What is fair, transparent, and accommodates the varied needs of learners, while meeting the rigorous standards of a McGill course? What do students want to see on their syllabi? This study seeks to respond to these questions.

The University Student Assessment Policy ("USAP")¹¹ is the framework for all assessments at McGill at the undergraduate and graduate levels. It seeks to "protect the students from excessive workloads, and to ensure that all students are treated equally," with the understanding that "[s]tudents should be able to write examinations in conditions that permit them to put forth their best effort."¹² In Fall 2019, a USAP Working Group ("Working Group") was struck by the then-Dean of Students Chris Buddle and Teaching and Learning Services in order to rewrite the policy to better fit the needs of students and Faculty. This report is intended to aid the work of the Working Group by providing data on the student experience of assessments at McGill.

This report is divided into three main sections. The first describes the methodology followed by the survey. The second summarizes the results. The last section looks at the results in a more holistic fashion, pointing to key themes and findings from the survey.

10. McGill Secretariat, "McGill University Mission Statement and Principles" (2020) online: *McGill University* <<https://www.mcgill.ca/secretariat/mission>>.

11. USAP, *supra* note 1. It was first approved by Senate in 2011, last amended by Senate in 2016.

12. *Ibid* at 1.1.

Methodology

This survey was designed by student Senators in collaboration with the SSMU VP-UA, in order to better inform the current USAP revision process. It was designed to answer the following questions:

- *How informed are students of their rights under the USAP?*
- *What do students think of the current policy?*
- *What issues have students encountered related to curving and/or laptop bans?*
- *How would students resolve issues related to USAP?*

The survey was open as a Google Form from March 30th until May 4th, 2020 in both English and French. No data was collected on the identities of participants (email address, student number, etc.). It was publicized via Faculty listservs hosted by student associations, the McGill subreddit, SSMU social media outlets, and word of mouth. In total, it generated 196 responses, of which 5 were in French.

The survey was structured around certain rights guaranteed to students in the USAP. Each section began with an article from the policy. The following questions would relate directly to that article. For instance, section 9, "Reporting a USAP violation", began with the following article:

"The USAP (1.4) establishes that "Students may come forward in cases of perceived violation of the University Student Assessment Policy. The matter may, as appropriate, be confidentially referred to the Professor, Department Chair, Director or Associate Dean to ensure the spirit of the University Student Assessment Policy is respected.""

The following questions were then based on this excerpt. `

The purpose of organizing the survey in this manner was two fold. Firstly, it was an easy way to organize questions about a wide-reaching and important policy that includes many rights and responsibilities. Secondly, it was strongly suspected that students would not be aware of the policy and its contents - as was confirmed by our results. Thus, the survey also served to educate the student community about the existence of the policy, and the rights it contains.

Results

The results of this survey represent an incredibly useful portrait of the student experience at McGill with regards to assessment. Throughout, students spoke of the need to balance their own autonomous learning styles and needs with the needs and expectations of Faculty. Students clearly care deeply about how they are assessed, and whether it is done in a fair and reasonable manner to encourage excellence and engagement in learning.

This section summarizes the responses. For the sake of consistency, it uses the same headings as the survey itself. The full list of questions is included in Appendix A.

Demographic Data

As noted above, there were 196 usable responses to the survey. There were 192 responses to the English version, one of which was omitted because the person identified themselves as a course lecturer. There were 5 responses to the French version of the survey.¹³ Four respondents identified themselves as alumni.¹⁴

Of the students who participated, the majority are in U1 or U2.¹⁵ Table 1 lists the number of participants by year of study.

Table 1: Participants by year of study

Level	Number	Percentage
U0	14	7.1%
U1	54	27.6%
U2	53	27%
U3	36	18.4%
U4	10	5.1%
U5	2	1%
Professional undergrad ¹⁶	17	8.7%
1L	3	
2L	9	
3L	2	
4L	1	
1M	2	
Graduate (Masters)	5	2.6%
Alumni	4	2%
Other ¹⁷	1	0.5%
TOTAL:	196	

13. The survey was developed in English, with questions then translated into French. As noted in Appendix A, two questions in the French version deviated from the English version.

14. One from the class of 2017, two from the class of 2019, one did not specify. Despite the input of four recent alumni, this report uses “students” to refer to those who responded to the survey, as this is reflective of their experiences when enrolled at McGill.

15. 54 respondents were in U1, 53 in U2.

16. The options presented to students were U0, U1, U2, U3, U4, U5, and “Other”. Those who self-identified as 1L, 2L, etc. did so via the “Other” box. As not all students enrolled in the Faculties of Medicine and Law did so, these numbers differ from the listing of participants by Faculty or School in Table 2.

17. One student identified as being a U0 in the Faculty of Music, but U1 in the Faculty of Education.

Table 2 lists the participants by Faculty of School. The survey did not ask participants to identify which Faculty or School they declared their major in; rather, the survey asked at which Faculty or School participants had taken the majority of their classes. This was done for two main reasons. First, students (especially in U0) may not have declared their major at the time of their participation. Secondly, despite having a declared major, students may not have taken the majority of their classes in that Faculty or School. For example, a U2 student who has recently declared an Arts major, but has taken most of their classes in the Faculty of Science prior. Given the goals of the survey, having this student be categorized as an Arts student would be incorrect, as their experiences with assessment are more reflective of those of students enrolled in the Faculty of Science.

It is important to note that Law students are very overrepresented in this survey. There are only 926 students enrolled in the Faculty, which is far less than 21% of the student population in terms of enrollment at 2.3%.¹⁸ The most likely explanation for this overrepresentation is that the author of this survey currently serves as the Law Senator and was able to use existing popular social media channels for law students. As well, the Faculty of Law uses a different assessment system than the rest of the University that is fairly controversial amongst students - as reflected in the results of the survey.

Table 2: Participants by Faculty or School where they have taken the majority of their classes

Faculty or School	Number	Percentage
Agriculture and Environmental Sciences	5	2.6%
Arts	55	28%
Arts & Science	7	3.6%
Education	5	2.6%
Engineering	21	10.7%
Law	43	21.9%
Management	7	3.6%
Medicine	8	4.1%
Music	5	2.6%
Science	38	19.4%
School of Environment	2	1%
School of Social Work	0	0%
TOTAL:	196	100%

18. McGill Enrolment Services, "McGill University Enrolment Reports" (2019) online: *McGill University* <<https://www.mcgill.ca/es/registration-statistics>>. While, as noted above, this survey did not ask students for declared major or enrollment, for law students this is a useful comparison. Those enrolled at the Faculty law are required to take no more than 6 non-Law credits at McGill, outside of a declared minor.

General Questions on Assessment Experience at McGill

These five questions asked generally about students' knowledge of, and experience with assessment at McGill. The majority of participants (58.6%) were not aware of the existence of USAP prior to taking the survey.

For a slim majority of participants (54%), their experiences of assessment at McGill match with their expectations prior to arriving at the university. However, 38.7% reported that their experiences had been more difficult/rougher than they expected, with only 4.6% of participants reporting that their experiences had been better/smoothen than they expected. In comments, students expressed that their experiences depended on the quality of assessments and how they were administered. Another expressed that "I think that there's really no way of truly knowing what will happen until you actually take your exams." Another student stated that, as someone for whom English is not their first language, multiple choice exams were especially hard for them. Finally, two students expressed their disappointment in how assessment is administered. One identified themselves as a mature student who has attended other institutions and described McGill assessments as "astonishingly unprofessional, and the worst I have ever seen, anywhere". Another stated that they expected more of McGill University prior to arriving.

The next question focussed on whether students felt that their assessments were arbitrary or biased on a scale from 0-5. 0 meant "I have never been in such a course", while 5 indicated "I feel like that's every course in my department". As shown in Figure 1, while 1 was the most common answer (43 out of 196 responses, or 21.9%), answers ranged from 0-4.

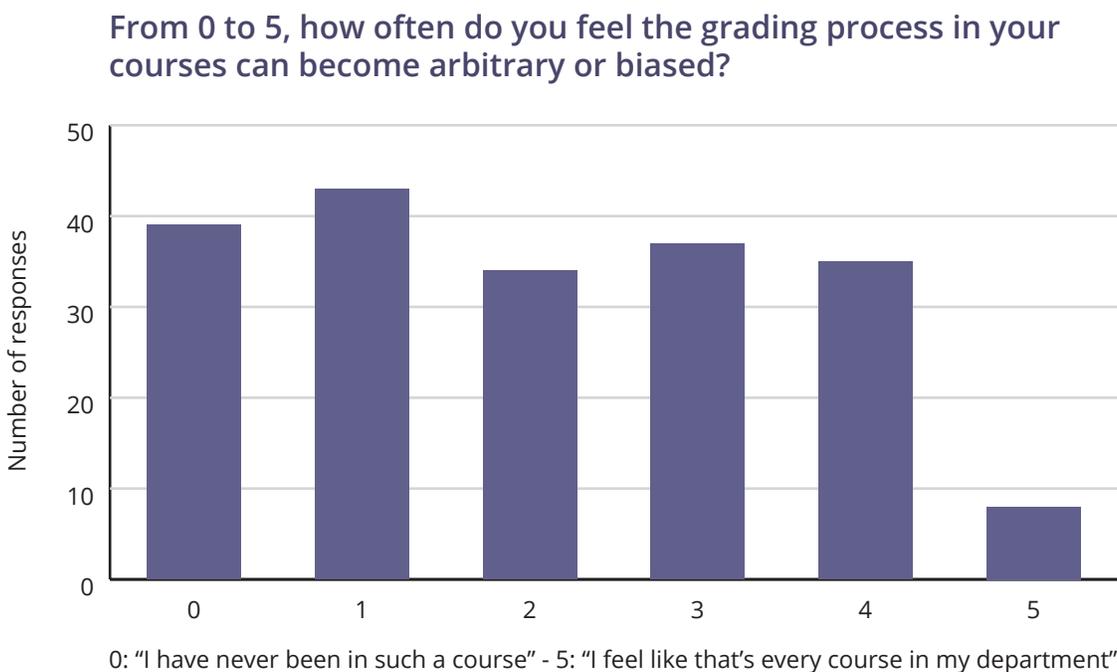


Figure 1:
Experience of
arbitrariness
or bias in
assessment

Students were asked whether they felt that it was possible to achieve an A in a course (i.e. on the standard grading scale, to receive over 85% in a course).¹⁹ The majority of students felt that it was not possible to receive an A in a course (143, 72.9%).

Students pointed to the difficulty of marking certain types of assessments objectively:

"I have found all final exams at McGill to be well-organized with clear expectations. Assessment methods have always been very objective and do not depend on [a] relationship with prof whatsoever. I have gotten high grades having rarely interacted with a prof in that class. I have also found it doable to get above 85% in all the classes I have taken, particularly in math classes. However, my experiences are strictly limited to the faculty of science so perhaps this is not the case in other faculties such as arts where assessment is more subjective."

Others pointed to the fact that essays or papers are graded more subjectively than, for instance, multiple choice exams:

"I took a philosophy course in which the instructor's paper guidelines said that scoring >85% required "flawless or nearly flawless" work. Especially for philosophy, where arguments are always deeply nuanced and require examination of their flaws, a field in which you are supposed to push boundaries of thought and be welcomed to go out on a limb, this is ridiculous."

Lastly, two students expressed that they liked the current numerical scale, as having an A pegged to 85% made it more achievable than a 100%.

19. While the standard grading scale assigns a percentage value of 85% or above to an A grade, this may vary by Faculty. For instance, the Faculty of Law does not have a numeric scale. Rather, A corresponds to "Real Excellence", A- to "Excellent", B+ to "Very Good" and so on. See McGill Faculty of Law Student Affairs Office, "Grading" (2020) online: *McGill University* <<https://www.mcgill.ca/law-studies/courses/policies/grades>>. The Faculty of Engineering, as well, does not use the standard numerical scale and instead allows individual professors to determine the scale for their individual classes. See McGill eCalendar University Regulations and Resources, "Grading and Grade Point Averages (GPA)" (2020) online: *McGill University* <https://www.mcgill.ca/study/2020-2021/university_regulations_and_resources/undergraduate/gi_grading_and_grade_point_averages>. Finally, the Faculty of Medicine only uses a Pass/Fail system on transcripts, but still awards grades to give students feedback, determining the Dean's Honours List or other Faculty awards and prizes, and counselling. See McGill Faculty of Medicine, "Recording of Numeric Grades" (2015) online: *McGill University* <https://www.mcgill.ca/ugme/files/ugme/numeric_grades_v1.1.pdf>.

Maximum Weight of Final Exams

While the majority of students (67.8%) had not taken a class where the final exam was worth more than 75%,²⁰ students strongly indicated that the maximum allowable weight for final exams should be reduced. When asked what the maximum weight should be, a majority (56.1%) of participants indicated that it should be between 50-60%. Only 15.8% indicated that the maximum weight should be over 60%, with the remaining 25% indicating that final exams should be worth less than 50% (See Figure 2).

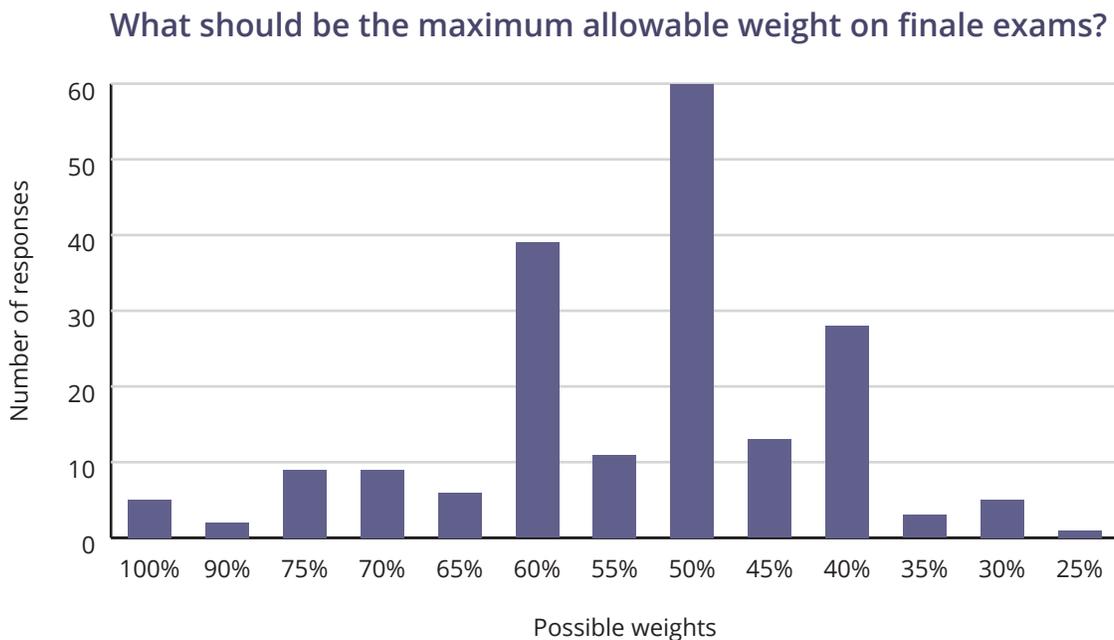


Figure 2:
Maximum allowable weight for final exams

When asked to express a preference between more assignments (5) or more weight on the final exam (0), 43.3% of students chose 5, whereas 22.9% of students chose 4. This suggests a clear preference by the majority of respondents in favour of more assignments over heavier exams.

In comments, students noted that exams can add to stress, discourage engagement with a course during the term, and encourage cramming. One wrote that “I really hate going into an exam knowing 12 weeks of learning depends upon my response to 1-3 questions and it just seems like such a poor way to test [a] student’s mastery of the knowledge.” Another wrote that assignments can disproportionately hinder students with families or other responsibilities outside of school. A proposed compromise of “assist-only” or optional assignments was proposed by another respondent to give students the flexibility needed to balance their academic and personal obligations.

20. 8 students indicated that they had, but it was due to the weight of a midterm or other assessment being shifted to the final.

Curving and Enforced Averages

Participant responses indicated a mixed opinion of curving. When asked how positively they viewed curving from 0 (“Very negatively - students should keep the grades they originally got”) to 5 (“Very positively - average grades in a course should never be extremely inflated or deflated”), the most popular was 3 (See Figure 3).

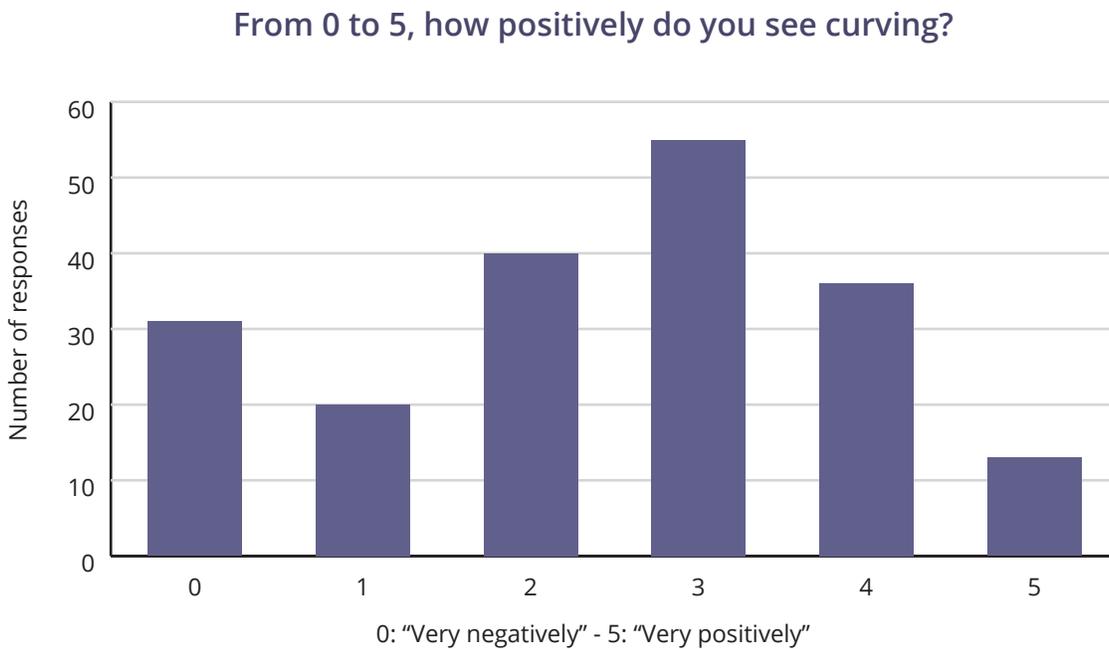


Figure 3:
Perception of
curving grades

The next question was based on anecdotes reported to SSMU University Affairs over the course of the year. Students had reported that professors would tell graders in advance how many of each grade could be awarded, regardless of the work submitted. The majority (57.1%) of participants had never been in a course where they had strong reason to believe that only a certain number of grades would be distributed.

In comments, students felt that curving grades down was unfair, did not reflect the work that students put into their coursework, and could have future implications for them. Others felt that curving down could be penalizing students for a professor who did not design a course well, or who did not communicate the information in an understandable way:

“Curving down shouldn’t be permitted - it is not fair to penalize students if a professor somehow makes a course too easy, or if a class is unusually high-performing.”

“it should be noted that a class that happens to have a neat bell curve doesn’t necessarily mean that it was a well designed course.”

One student pointed directly to the practice in the Faculty of Management to curve down grades:²¹

“As a student with a management minor, I am very against the Desautels curve. It breeds so much toxic competition in the faculty and often results in grades decreasing (rather than increasing). I firmly believe it causes the negative culture in the faculty that I’ve experienced and breeds “survival of the fittest” that I haven’t experienced in Arts.”

In regards to curving grades up, one Engineering student pointed out that this could have negative repercussions in their field in the future, as their transcript would “attest to a student’s nonexistent skills”.

21. While this is not the official policy of the Faculty, SSMU has received a number of anecdotal reports from students whose grades were lowered in Management courses.

Receiving Accommodations

The next section of the survey dealt with the issue of accommodations. These questions were meant to capture accommodations provided through the Office of Students with Disabilities (“OSD”), including OSD-registered students, as well as more informal accommodations that students may seek directly from their professors or Student Affairs Office (“SAO”).

Students were asked whether they had faced problems securing an accommodation or alternative arrangement for an assessment, even when the required documentation was provided. 19.3% of students said yes, whereas 79% of students said no. The next question asked whether students had to present their instructors with medical notes when requesting in-term academic accommodations. 31% of participants said yes. 40.8% of students said that they were not required to present a note.²² One student noted that they could not request an in-term accommodation because they had no way of accessing medical notes.

When invited to submit further comments on this issue, a number of students pointed to systemic barriers that prevent students from accessing medical notes. For instance, International students who cannot access care outside of the Wellness Hub. Another student argued: “Requiring medical notes for when a student has the flu or a fever puts an unnecessary burden on the health care system and an unnecessary financial burden on students, who are often charged for a medical note.” Two students pointed to the administrative burden of accessing an accommodation, stating that students would rather “power through” than request one.

One student shared that they had been dealing with chronic illness since their first year at McGill, but had only been recently diagnosed. Prior to their diagnosis, they avoided deferring an exam because they would not have been able to get a medical note.

“I’ve since asked instructors for accommodation for personal health reasons, as delays in assignment submission is something I’ve been granted, but I’ve never delayed an exam because I would have had to present a medical note and that seems like a last resort (especially as an international student who would have to jump through hoops for it). Even now if I ask for an extension, it’s always a push-pull of how much to say: how much do I have to disclose to have the instructor believe me and grant it? how much personal information do I have to give away to be “trustworthy” in what should be an easy request?”

Students noted the one-time deferral policy positively. One student said that they were grateful to use their “freebie”, while another stated that they were glad to have that in their back pocket as necessary.

22. Question 19 (See Appendix A). 31% Yes, 40.8% No, 16.8% Non-Applicable, 8.1% left the question blank.

The Right to Receive Feedback on Your Grades

77% of students had never requested a re-assessment of an assignment, mid-term, or final exam. 59.7% of students had considered requesting a reassessment but ultimately decided against it.²³

The next question asked participants whether a professor had ever declined to give them feedback on an assignment or exam. 68.3% responded that no, a professor had never declined to give them feedback. 25% stated that a professor had declined to give them feedback, while 3 students noted that they had never asked for feedback. As well, 5 students noted that professors had not answered emails requesting feedback on assignments. One student stated that they had requested feedback, but the professor was not amenable to making their schedules work. Others noted that the quality of feedback that they received was inadequate, as it was vague or too late:

"[S]ometimes feedback was dismissive and combative and not in the spirit of learning."

"I have received very inadequate and vague feedback. I have also received feedback that does not reflect the grade I received: that is, 'your paper was excellent, one of the best in the class' with a grade of B+ on the paper. B+ was the highest grade given for the paper (which was a midterm)."

"[P]rofessors have simply not returned assignments / papers / exams, before or after the course marks were submitted, so there's no way I could have gotten feedback anyway."

"[A] professor last semester never made the exams accessible to students until after the date to contest the final mark had passed. Another professor does not have an office near campus and insisted that students come to his workplace to receive feedback."

Students noted the administrative barriers that are sometimes present when requesting feedback, or when they want to review their exam papers. In the Faculty of Law, students are required to contact the SAO, who will forward them the graded assessment on behalf of the professor. However, if the professor does not send the graded papers to the SAO, then students cannot receive feedback. One student stated that several of their courses did not allow them to review their exam papers at all, meaning that they had to take their marks at face value on their transcript. The student suspected that this was to allow professors to re-use questions in subsequent years. In requesting a reread of an exam, students are charged a \$42.35 fee - though this may be refunded in some circumstances.

23. Question 22 (See Appendix A). 38.2% said No, 2 participants left the question blank.

24. McGill Student Accounts, "Other fees, fines and charges" (2020) online: *McGill University* <<https://www.mcgill.ca/student-accounts/tuition-fees/non-tuition-charges/other>>. For example, in the Faculties of Law or Engineering, if a re-marked exam results in a higher grade, the fee is refunded. See McGill Faculty of Law Student Affairs Office, "Grade Reviews" (2020) online: *McGill University* <<https://www.mcgill.ca/law-studies/courses/exams/grade-reviews>>; McGill Faculty of Engineering, "Reassessment of a Grade and Reread" (2020) online: *McGill University* <<https://www.mcgill.ca/engineering/students/undergraduate/courses-registration/exams-assessment/reassessment-grade>>.

Presence of Instructors During Examinations

Table 4 lists the responses to question 25.

Table 4: Have you taken a final exam in which the instructor, the associate examiner or a designate (such as the TA) was not present, hindering your chance of asking clarifying questions?²⁵

Response	Number	Percentage
Yes, not at the Office for Students with Disabilities ("OSD"):	95	48.5%
No, not at the OSD:	76	38.7%
Yes, at the OSD:	16	8.1%
No, at the OSD:	3	1.5%
Blank:	8	4%

One student noted that they thought professors were not permitted to be in the room during exams, as they have only ever seen their TAs. Another shared the following:

"I had a final once where the professor failed to show up with no warning and was unreachable by phone. I wouldn't have cared or noticed but the exam was riddled with glaring misprints/errors (like having a multiple choice question with two of the same exact answer for different letters that was also the correct choice)"

Another student noted that she was unable to reach her TA while writing an exam in the OSD exam centre. As a result, she did not have access to information that the TA wrote on the board. One student pointed out that none of the invigilators could read French, and were therefore unable to help them during a French exam.

25. Totals will not equal 196 because some students answered twice (eg "Yes" at the OSD, "No" not at the OSD).

Maximum Weight of Participation

Students noted the difficulties of assessing participation, particularly when subjective “quality not quantity” elements are being considered by a professor or Teaching Assistant. However, when asked what weight participation should be given of a total grade, the results were mixed, but generally in favour of lowering the potential weight of participation grades - or eliminating them entirely. The most popular answer was capping participation grades at 10% (28.6%). However, the next most popular option (17.3%) was not allowing them at all. When courses weighted participation at more than 10% and a rubric was provided, as per USAP guidelines, a majority of students who had taken such a course (54.5%) felt that the rubrics were unclear.

Students noted in comments that participation grades are often not accessible to those who have anxiety, or simply are not comfortable participating in a large classroom. A proposed solution was offering alternative methods of engagement (discussions on MyCourses; emailing the professor or TA after the fact; office hours). Some stated that participation grades did not make sense in a large lecture, but were more acceptable in a smaller seminar format. A Francophone student noted that speaking in their second language in front of a large lecture hall was intimidating, thereby hindering their ability to take advantage of participation marks.

Reporting a USAP violation

Notably, the current policy does not offer a clear, confidential avenue for students to resolve issues concerning USAP, or violations of their rights under USAP. Figure 4 lists a number of possible routes to resolution of violations of USAP.

To whom would you feel comfortable reporting a violation of USAP?

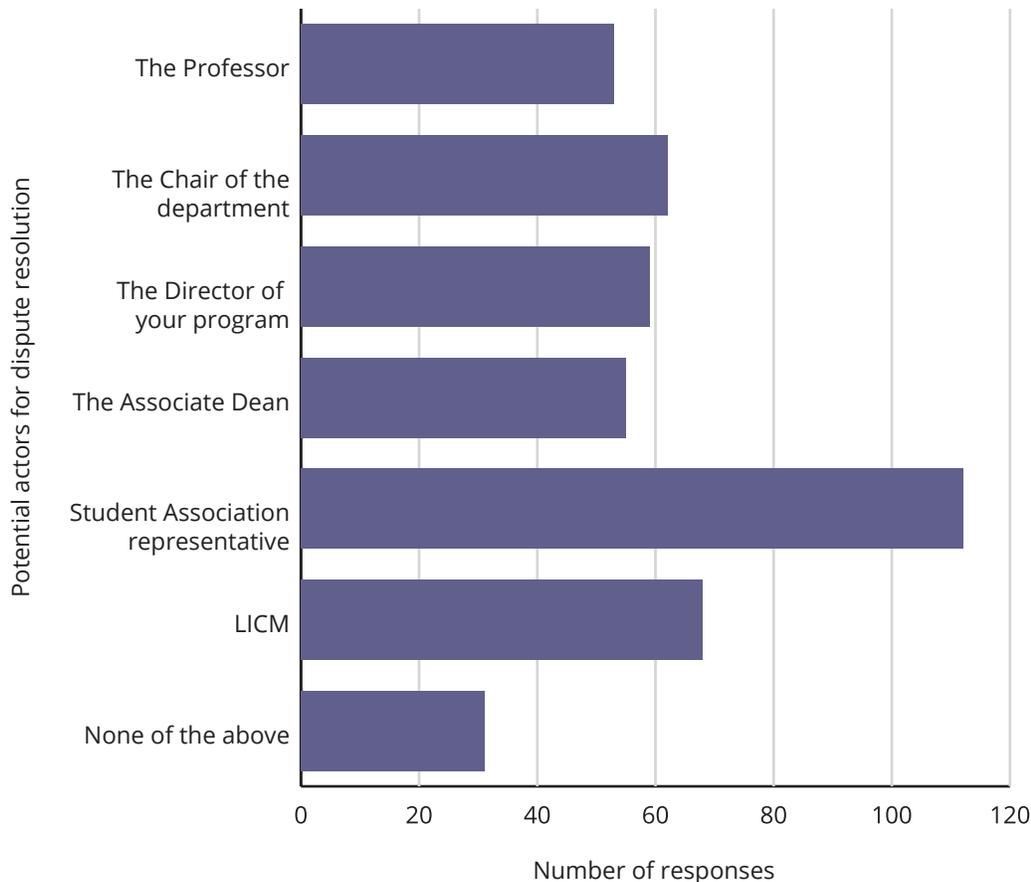


Figure 4:
Reporting
USAP
violations²⁶

The results suggest a strong preference by students to addressing violations through their peers. One student noted that their answer would depend on the context of the violation.

When asked whether they would feel uncomfortable bringing up a violation of USAP to Faculty member in a non-confidential manner, a majority of students (52%) said yes. 24.4% said maybe, and 21.4% said no. Students were then asked how clear they found the procedures for reporting violations as currently outlined in USAP, where 1 meant "unclear" and 5 meant "clear". Figure 5 sets out their responses.

26. Note that the totals are greater than 196 because students could choose more than one option. "Student Association Representative" could include Faculty or departmental VP Academic Affairs or SSMU Student Rights. "LICM" refers to the Legal Information Clinic at McGill - Student Advocacy Branch.

How clear do you find these procedures?

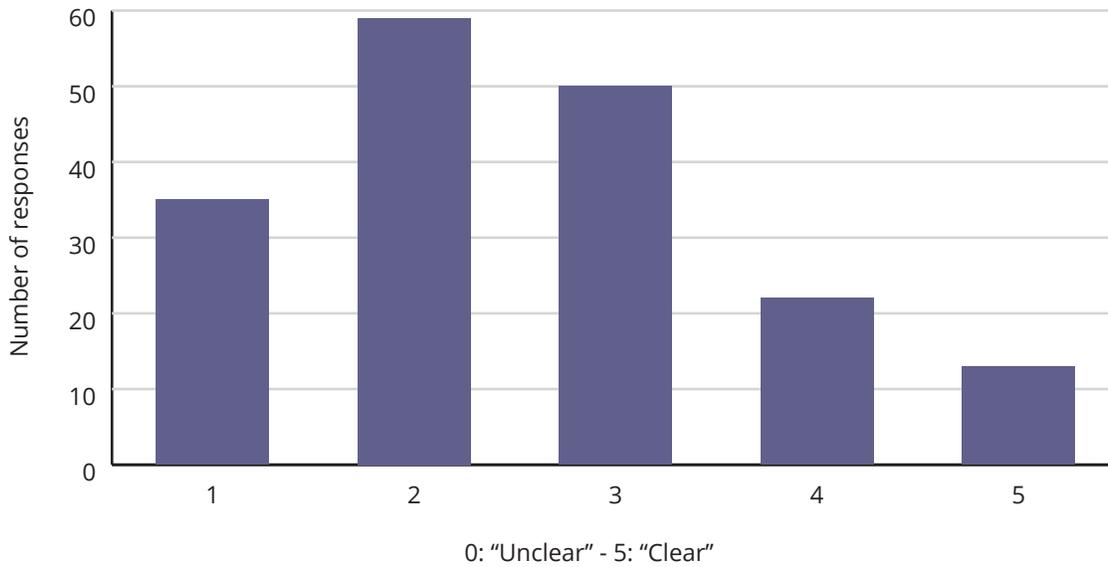


Figure 5: Clarity of reporting procedure for a violation of USAP

In comments, one student noted that they trusted those responsible to keep their issue confidential - even if the procedure is not officially anonymous. Six students noted that they had not heard of USAP prior to taking the survey and that they found this procedure to be unclear.

Miscellaneous Pedagogical Questions

Lecture Recordings

Students were asked whether they had taken a class in a room that was equipped for lecture recordings, but were not given access to the recordings. 70.4% said yes. One respondent noted that this was due to confidential patient information being on the slides.

Laptop Bans

70.8% of students surveyed had taken a class with a laptop ban. The opinion of those surveyed were deeply divided on their efficacy and impact. A number of students enjoyed having a laptop ban and found that it improved their focus and learning in a course. Others stated that it hindered their learning. This ranged from creating inconvenience (e.g. not understanding disorganized handwritten notes; needing to take the time to retype notes after the fact), to increasing cost from the need to print out readings, to increasing stress due to missing course or lecture material.

A number of students identified the impact of laptop bans on students with disabilities. One student with arthritis had to ask friends for notes on certain days. Another ignored a laptop ban entirely because handwriting was not accessible to them. Two students stated that they made arrangements with the professor to have their laptops, but felt exposed and uncomfortable when using them.

Finally, on a principled note, students argued that it was not up to professors to determine the best way for students to learn. It is up to the students to determine for themselves whether they preferred to handwrite or type their notes. A proposed solution was to designate a section of the class for those with laptops, to minimize distraction for those who prefer not to see the screens.

Key Themes and Findings

Given these findings, what can we say about student's experiences with assessments here at McGill? Four themes that emerged were concerns with the Faculty of Law's enforced average, the importance of student autonomy, the need for flexibility, and the necessity of confidential and effective access to accommodations.

Concerns with the Faculty of Law's Enforced Average

As noted above, the Faculty of Law does not adhere to the standard numeric grading scale. Indeed, "letter grades [awarded by the Faculty] have no percentage equivalent. No student should be told, officially or unofficially, of any "percentage" mark awarded."²⁷ In awarding marks, "professors are warned against awarding excessive numbers of either fail grades or high marks unless there are unusually cogent reasons which an examiner is prepared to support."²⁸ This system, colloquially known as an "enforced B average", generally results in students receiving grades in the B range. Law courses with an enrolment of 25 or higher generally have an average grade of B- to B, while courses with smaller enrolments generally have an average of B- to B+.²⁹

Students expressed concerns with the impacts of this system on themselves and their classmates. Two students noted that students may try to "game the system" by taking classes with professors who tend to give higher grades. Another characterized it as "contribut[ing] to an unhealthy environment of competitiveness for some and for others a learned apathy. If you can put in little effort and get a B- but then put everything you have into a course and maybe get a B+ it disincentives trying." Elsewhere, a student expressed that this apathy resulted from students feeling that their grades were predetermined, no matter how much they study or how well they knew the material.

It should be noted, however, that the enforced B average is not unique among Canadian top-tier law schools. Osgoode Hall imposes a strict formula to the distribution of grades in courses with an enrolment of 30 or above. 60% of students receive a B or B+, with only 15% receiving an A- or A.³⁰ The Allard School of Law imposes an average of 70-79% (B- to B+) in all classes, depending on enrolment.³¹

27. McGill Faculty of Law Student Affairs Office, "Handbook of Academic Regulations, Resolutions, and Policies" (2020) online (pdf): *McGill University* <<https://www.mcgill.ca/law-studies/courses/policies>> at Regulation 20.

28. *Ibid* at Regulation 19.

29. McGill Faculty of Law Student Affairs Office, "Grading Standards Letter" (2020) online (pdf): <https://www.mcgill.ca/law-studies/files/law-studies/grading_standards_0.pdf>.

30. Osgoode Hall Law School, "Academic rules" (2020) online: *York University* <<https://www.osgoode.yorku.ca/academic-rules-of-osgoode-hall-law-school/academic-rules/>>.

31. Allard School of Law, "Examination and Grading Rules" (2018) online (pdf): *University of British Columbia* <http://www.allard.ubc.ca/sites/www.allard.ubc.ca/files/uploads/JD/grading_rules.pdf>.

Importance of Student Autonomy and Flexibility in Assessment

Students indicated a strong preference for greater autonomy and flexibility in assessments. This came through most clearly in the questions regarding the weight of final exams. As noted above, results strongly suggested lowering the cap for the weight of final exams, and moving more towards in-term assignments. However, students also indicated that they greatly appreciated when professors gave them the choice to submit assignments, or transfer the weight to the final exam. This flexibility allowed them to better balance their schedules and priorities.

Necessity of Confidential and Effective Access to Accommodations

For the purposes of this report, “Accommodations” includes both those organized through the OSD and more informal accommodations that students may request from their professors. Results strongly suggest the need for students to have a confidential mechanism to request accommodations, without the automatic need for a medical note. Students noted their discomfort in disclosing medical information to their professors. As well, students who did not have a medical diagnosis noted that they would not have been able to obtain a note anyways - despite needing the support and understanding of their professors and/or SAOs.

Students spoke favourably of the pilot program allowing for one “free” exam deferral without needing to provide medical documentation. This gave them the peace of mind that they needed at that particular time.

Mechanism to Address Violations of USAP

As noted above, students were not comfortable addressing violations of USAP directly with their professor, particularly when they could not do so in a confidential manner. While USAP 1.4 does note that a referral should be done confidentially, it does not provide guidelines to maintain confidentiality while the issue is being resolved (something that students noted was critical in smaller departments).³²

This speaks to a wider theme that was present throughout the results of this survey: The power imbalance present between students and professors. Many students spoke of how they were unsure of their rights under USAP, or were not comfortable speaking out - particularly in a non-confidential manner - because they were scared of possible ramifications for their grades, or their reputation within their departments. Indeed, the USAP does not explicitly protect students who report issues.

32. USAP, *supra* note 1 at 1.4: “Students may come forward in cases of perceived violation of the University Student Assessment Policy. The matter may, as appropriate, be confidentially referred to the Professor, Department Chair, Director or Associate Dean to ensure the spirit of the University Student Assessment Policy is respected.”

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Appendix A: Survey Questions

Part 1: Demographic Information

1. Are you a McGill student?
2. If you are not a current McGill student, what is your status with respect to McGill University (eg. alum, instructor)? If you are a current McGill student, please respond "N/A".
3. What is your year?
4. In what Faculty/School do you take most of your classes?

Part 2: General Questions on Assessment Experience at McGill

5. Before taking this survey, had you heard of the McGill University Student Assessment Policy?
6. It is important that students enter university knowing what to expect of the years ahead. With that in mind, we want to know: how close to what you expected before you joined McGill have your exam experiences (and assessment experiences more generally) been? Note that this does not relate to the grades you obtained, but to the process of obtaining them.
 - a. My experiences have been more difficult / rougher than expected
 - b. My experiences have been reasonably within the expectations I had before joining McGill
 - c. My experiences have been better / smoother than expected
 - d. Other
7. From 0 to 5, how often do you feel the grading process in your courses can become arbitrary or biased (eg. getting along with the grader or professor might lead to more generous grading)? (With 0 meaning "I have never been in such a course" and 5 meaning "I feel like that's every course in my department").

8. Sometimes, students at McGill feel like grades up to 85 are achievable, while grades over 85% require much more effort. Some believe that this seems to defeat the purpose of not needing perfect, 100% scores in order to get an A, leading to perceptions of the scale artificially seeming to range from 0 to 85. Have you ever been in a course where you felt an A was borderline impossible to achieve?
9. If you feel comfortable doing so, please use this space to elaborate on your feelings and/or experiences regarding the above questions.

Part 3: Maximum Weight of Final Exams

10. Have you taken a course at McGill in which a final exam was inappropriately weighed at more than 75%?
11. What do you think the maximum reasonable allowed weight for a final exam should be at McGill?
12. From 0 to 5, how much do you agree with the following statement: "I would prefer having more graded assignments and midterms throughout the semester and having less of my grade depend on final exams." (With 0 meaning that you would prefer more weight on the final exam and 5 meaning that you would prefer having more assignments)
13. Regardless of how you feel about the maximum final exam weight rule, how clear do you find this rule as is? (with 5 meaning "very clear" and 1 meaning "not clear: 13). Version française: Oui ou non.
14. If you feel comfortable doing so, please use this space to elaborate on your feelings and/or experiences regarding the above questions.

Part 4: Curving and Enforced Averages

15. Making the average grade of a class conform to a pre-determined average is often referred to as "curving." In this sense, in the Desautels Faculty of Management, for example, the grades of all courses are curved. Curving may lower or raise a class' average, and some argue that curving the same courses to the same average every semester would make students more easily "comparable" through time. From 0 to 5, how positively do you see curving? (With 0 meaning "Very negatively - students should keep the grades they originally get" and 5 meaning "Very positively - average grades in a course should never be extremely inflated or deflated")

16. Alternatively, SSMU has heard anecdotes of professors who will, instead of curving, tell graders in advance the number of each letter grade that students in a class can be awarded for assignments and exams. This could distort the distribution of grades in a class. Have you ever been in a course where you knew or had strong reason to believe that only a certain number of some letter grades was allowed to be distributed, regardless of how many students might have been handing in excellent work?
17. If you feel comfortable doing so, please use this space to elaborate on your feelings and/or experiences regarding the above questions.

Part 5: Receiving Accommodations

18. Have you faced problems trying to secure accommodations or alternative arrangements for an assessment, even if providing the required documentation?
19. In requesting an in-term academic accommodation for personal health reasons, were you forced to present your instructor with a medical note?
20. If you feel comfortable doing so, please use this space to elaborate on your feelings and/or experiences regarding any of the above questions.

Part 6: The Right to Receive Feedback on Your Grades

21. Have you ever requested a re-assessment of an assignment, midterm or final exam?
22. Have you ever considered requesting a re-assessment of an assignment, midterm, or final exam, but decided against it?
23. Has a professor ever declined to give you requested feedback on an assignment or exam?
24. If you feel comfortable doing so, please use this space to elaborate on your feelings and/or experiences regarding any of the above questions.

Part 7: Presence of Instructors During Examinations

25. Have you taken a final exam in which the instructor, the associate examiner or a designate (such as the TA) was not present, hindering your chance of asking clarifying questions?

26. If you feel comfortable doing so, please use this space to elaborate on your feelings and/or experiences regarding the above question.

Part 8: Maximum Weight of Participation

27. In your opinion, what should be the maximum weight allocated to participation?
28. If you have taken a course where participation was valued higher than 10%, did your course outline include a sufficient rubric (explained above)?
- The USAP (3.1.6) establishes that “[n]ormally, participation will not exceed 10% of the final grade. If participation (which may include attendance) is to exceed 10%, instructors must include a clear rubric in the course outline.”
29. Regardless of how you feel about the maximum participation and rubric rules, how clear do you find these rules? (Where 0 means “unclear” and 5 means “clear”). Version française: Comment box.
30. If you feel comfortable doing so, please use this space to elaborate on your feelings and/or experiences regarding the above question.

Part 9: Reporting a USAP violation

31. Who would you feel comfortable reporting a perceived violation of the USAP to? (select all that apply)
- The Professor
 - The Chair of the Department
 - The Director of your program
 - The Associate Dean
 - The Office of the Dean of Students
 - Student Association Representative
 - Legal Information Clinic at McGill
 - None of the above
 - Other

32. Given that there is no confidential mechanism for addressing violations of the USAP, would you feel uncomfortable raising a violation to a faculty member non-confidentially?
33. Regardless of how you feel about the procedures surrounding the reporting of perceived USAP violations, how clear do you find these procedures? (Where 1 meant “unclear” and 5 meant “clear”)
34. If you feel comfortable doing so, please use this space to elaborate on your feelings and/or experiences regarding the above questions.

Part 10: Miscellaneous Pedagogical Questions

35. Have you ever taken a class in a room compatible with lecture recordings (eg. professor uses a microphone), yet were denied the ability to access these recordings?
36. Have you ever taken a class with a laptop ban?
37. If you answered “Yes” to the above question, how did the laptop ban influence your ability to succeed in the course(s)?
38. If you feel comfortable doing so, please use this space to elaborate on your feelings and/or experiences regarding the above questions.

Conclusion

39. Let us know if you have any other concerns!