

The Withdraw-Fail, Withdraw-Pass Process:
Pedagogical Implications and Procedural Difficulties

Report on Discussion
Feb. 16, 2006

Twenty-two people attended the discussion session on the WF and WP policy, held Thursday Feb. 16 from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m. in Room 107 of Building 10. Eighteen faculty members from all schools and centers, one student, and essential staff were present. Special thanks for their input go to Dr. Hicham El Barri of the Health Services, Ms. Latifa Ouanaim, Director of Enrolment Services, and Mr. Rachid El Guerdaoui, Registration Officer.

The following points regarding the Withdraw-Fail process and the Absence/Attendance policy were raised and discussed:

WF-WP policy as it stands

- “A student exceeding three unexcused absences may be administratively dropped from the course and assigned the grade of ‘WF’.” (AUI Catalog, 2005-2007, p. 65)
- “Students may be readmitted to the class only with the permission of both instructor and dean” (ibid, p. 65)
- “Except for absences authorized by the university, the degree to which classroom participation is required and whether or not work missed by a student during an absence may be made up is at the discretion of the instructor.” (ibid, p. 64)

Absences

- “Absences for health reasons have to be certified by the University physicians within 24 hours of the first absence and reported to Enrolment Services.” (ibid, p.65)

Question: How can certain illnesses be documented within 24 hours? The physician was able to clarify that “the first absence” is related to health and distance issues. If the student is in another city, then s/he has 24 hours from the day of return to AUI to notify the Health Services for certification. If the student is bed-ridden, allowances are made for ability to get to the Health Services.

The physician raised the important point that the Health Services could alert professors to the health conditions of certain chronically ill students, for whom class absences needed special consideration. At the same time, he mentioned that there are some students for whom we can not provide the requisite treatment, and who therefore need encouragement to seek health options elsewhere.

WF-WP problems for faculty

1. The right of appeal
2. Recording absences on POISE

3. Inability to master course content due to absence
4. Flawed understanding of “making up work missed”

These points were discussed with the following comments:

- #1 prevented many faculty members from using the system at all;
- #1 turned the decision into a negotiation, after the fact, which is time-consuming and ultimately dismissive of the instructor’s decision.
- #2 was recognised by all as a source of frustration and explained as the reason for non-compliance with the system.
- #3 was referred to repeatedly as the problem at the base of the excused absence policy, and one which prevents faculty members from reinstating most long-term absentees.
- There was disagreement on #4: certain courses have no viable options for the work missed; there is no way to compensate for a missed class discussion or developmental stage of group work, upon which a next stage depends; other courses have compensatory tasks which can represent that which was covered in the missed class.

WF-WP Suggestions for improvement

1. Remove the right of appeal
2. Give control for learning to the instructor
3. Make students who are there the focus of our energy
4. Reinstate the WF for disciplinary reasons

These points were discussed with the following comments:

- #1 provoked disagreement among faculty member on the necessity for the right to appeal.
- #2 brought forward the recognition that students may need to be treated differently, as determined by their course proficiency. Thus, absences were counted more leniently for those who could be absent but keep up with course requirements. Problems raised included the fairness issue; perception of uneven treatment by students; and potential for abuse of power by faculty members.
- #3 yielded no comments
- #4 brought up that, in fact, WF for disciplinary reasons has been deleted from the Withdraw Fail form, and relegated to a Disciplinary Action – complete with review by DSA and a committee.

WF-WP-AW

The suggestion was made to change the existing policy to include Administrative Withdrawal, for reasons of attendance or comportment, and to re-define withdraw-fail as the course of action for students who, at a certain point during the term, are not making satisfactory academic progress to warrant continued enrolment in the course. Withdraw-Pass would remain as it currently stands.

Absences -- Suggestions for Improvement

1. missed classes result in points deducted
2. too many missed classes result in automatic withdrawal, at the discretion of the teacher and without accompanying medical excuse (number to be determined)

This proposal, made by the AUI President, during the Advising Workshop of November 18, 2005, would produce 3 desired results:

1. physicians spend less time on students requesting bogus medical certificates
2. enrolment services spend less time entering excused absences
3. faculty spend less time recording absences and filling in forms

In order for this proposal be accepted as policy, two features are essential:

1. Faculty input to the procedures and implications of the new attendance policy is necessary before enacting it.
2. The number of actual absences to be set as the limit for withdrawal should be determined at the subject committee level, as different courses may have different thresholds for attendance.

If a faculty committee were convened to help develop the policy, several of the evening's discussion participants offered to join! AUI faculty would like to support any measures for progress and improvement that would leave them time to devote to their teaching and their students.

Summary

These proposals should be followed up for improvement:

1. Health Services has a system whereby they alert faculty members to the chronic or special medical conditions of specific students, each semester.
2. Health Services stop issuing medical certificates for use as excused absences.
3. Enrolment Services stop collecting and recording excused absences for illness.
4. Instructors take primary responsibility for student absence decisions, while
5. Course teams decide on the acceptable number of absences and institute these course-wide
6. Faculty take part in any policy change or improvement decisions