Academic Policies Committee Meeting Minutes
2/20/19 from 3:00 – 4:30 in NEC 4302

Attendees: Caroline Leeth, Robin Panneton, Ellie Sturgis (Cook Counseling Center), Brittany Boitnott, Kim Smith, Anya (sitting in for Susan Sumner)

The charge to this committee from Rick Sparks is to do their best to try to write a policy for academic relief (AR) by end of spring semester. This policy will go into governance for approval.

Throughout the semester, Robin has invited different guests to attend the meetings so that we can gather their thoughts, hear their perspectives, and concerns. Members of the committee are free to invite others if they would like. Robin has reached out to all the Academic Deans and has secured a visit from each of them (or their representative) at least once this semester.

February 20, 2019: Guest is Ellie Sturgis (Cook Counseling Center)

- March 6, 2019: Guests are Phyllis Smith and Kanitta Charoensiri (Schiffert Health Center); Katie Wells (Advisor; PCOB)
- March 27, 2019: Guests are Byron Hughes and Tara Frank (Dean of Student Office); Kathryn Albright (AD, CAUS); Katie Wells (Advisor; PCOB)
- April 10, 2019: Guests are Michael Brown and Colleagues (Services for Students with Disabilities); Katie Wells (Advisor; PCOB)
- April 24, 2019: Guest are Dan Thorp (Associate Dean CLAHS) and Keith Goyne (Associate Dean CNRE); Susan Haymore (Director of Advising, COS); Annie Laib (Advising, Neuroscience); Katie Wells (Advisor; PCOB)

Currently, there is no formal policy on academic relief (academic relief is often called compassion relief at other institutions). Originally, academic relief started from the bottom up, evolved in different colleges, and then Cook Counseling, Schiffert Health Center, Women’s Resources and others became involved to lend their expertise and to try to better serve the students. The other involved units are Dean of Students and Services for Students with Disabilities. As we develop the policy on academic relief, we will also consider additional supports outside of academic relief to better support our student.

Ellie Sturgis presented Cook Counseling Center data for last 4 years: Applications for academic relief are growing (52% increase in last three years). Students want excuse letters for multiple days (Cook only does one week at a time), treatment letters (used for an extended period of time), course drops, additional probationary semesters (this was requested more frequently in the past), incompletes, and total withdrawal. The students that are counted in the numbers presented are not necessarily unique students.

Ellie started a policy about two years ago where if a student asks to drop 50% or more of enrolled hours, then they have to (1) complete five or more sessions of therapy (can’t be from Cook) and (2) take the subsequent semester off. There are some exceptions to this such as if the request is early in the semester or during the spring semester as the summer would allow time for...
the student to receive treatment. There is also an exception if the student is a graduating senior, due to how their classes are set up and what they need to graduate. Students must provide documentation that they had treatment and then Cook decides whether they can return. Students often do not want to take the semester off so they wait until they are in the subsequent semester and apply for AR retroactively. Students are also trying to AR two courses out of 5 so that they don’t have to take a semester off.

International students seem to seek academic relief quite often but don’t want to drop over 50% of their courses because they do not want to sit out the next semester due to immigration implications (i.e., deportation). However, for their visa, the student just has to be enrolled as a student in the U.S. So many international students could enroll in a community college for the semester to be able to stay in the U.S. Any courses they take at the community college might not count toward their Virginia Tech degree but this does allow them to stay in the country. The student should be enrolled in 12 credits at the community college. The problem is that the student often repeats the same thing the next semester.

Academic relief teaches no new skills and as it is used in these types of situations, doesn’t really help the student. Virginia Tech seems to be a lot more generous than other institutions. Cook Counseling would like to be able to meet with each student requesting academic relief but they are so overwhelmed with the number of students seeking help. In the fall 2018, they were 3 weeks behind on intake appointments and the number of students seeking academic relief are too much for Cook to handle all the students.

How are special population students are affected? Can we do something different for SSD students? In general, who helps student prepare paperwork seems to have an effect. Talk with SSD because what they are doing is working.

**Process to apply for Academic Relief:**

1. Fill out form from Cook Counseling (general identifying information, GPA, how many classes missed, have you sought help, describe condition, strategies used to try to resolve the problem, what are you doing now, and type of relief requested)
2. Go to academic advisor and/or Associate Dean for advice on implications for progress toward degree; AD signature needed to move application forward to evaluative unit
3. Student takes form to Cook who reviews and makes recommendation on whether the student should receive academic relief; one problem stems from the students seeing this recommendation as an approval; but only the colleges have the authority to approve AR.
4. Cook sends letter to AD with recommendation
5. AD decides whether to take recommendation or not.

Students sharing circumstances for why they are applying for AR: The student is not required to share the circumstances for their poor performance with the AD but at some point students started coming to the AD saying that they had been told not to share. This is incorrect; sharing of specifics is not required at the AD level, but it is required at the level of Cook or Schiffert. Students are saying that the Cook Counselors are telling them that they need to apply for AR for specific courses and if they just fill out this paperwork then it is a guaranteed thing. Cook is
hearing same thing about advisors. To help with this problem, we need to clarify policy and educate everyone on the process (and policy) to make things clear.

**Outcomes:** Students who are denied AR are unhappy, especially given that it has evolved into a request for relief for one or a few specific courses during a semester. Normally students have either used all of their Ws or are trying to hang on to their Ws for future use. If a student does receive AR for only a few classes it results in those classes disappearing from the student’s transcript. Students are concerned with how the W (indicating withdrawal) will look on applications to professional school (vet school or med school). However, it seems that these schools are really looking at whether you can explain the reason for the W as this indicates resilience which is something that more schools are starting to look for.

Something about the process isn’t working (repeated requests for AR from the same student): Some people are looking at the recommendation as “Who am I to say that the third time a student requests academic relief is not as legitimate as the first ones since I am not an expert in this area?” If we have policy where students can only apply AR to a whole semester or none of it but cannot pick and choose classes, then this could solve this problem. All or nothing would make students more likely to use their W but also if there was a legitimate problem with just one class. Challenge with all or nothing is SSD students because their problems can be very course-specific. What we do not want to do is support student success at any cost. There are consequences for your actions. Why do people not use academic letter of support? They have to finish their coursework and take the grade.

**Retroactive academic relief:** We can go back up to 1 year and retroactively grant academic relief. If student files paperwork and has a 2.5GPA the next semester, then they can drop previous semester. In the past, Cranwell would not allow us to drop things retroactively because it has immigration implications but now they will allow it as long as the student understands the immigration implications. Retroactive AR is generally caused by the student leaving without notice and then returning to continue their education. For example, in some sexual assault cases, the student will just leave, get help, and then come back. If we grant academic relief retroactively, then we can’t enforce the semester off. Cook is telling students there is no reimbursement for tuition, etc if they academically relieve a class or semester. Students seem to be fine with this but the parents really have a problem with it. However, there are other scholarship issues with refunds such as if a student was on scholarship for the semester that was then academically relieved retroactively, does that money go back into the scholarship account? This causes problems for the Bursar’s Office as they try to keep their books straight and close out fiscal year, etc. However, students are consuming resources so they really shouldn’t get a refund.

Should academic relief recommendation go before a committee like Academic Appeals so it will be consistent across colleges? All or nothing will help but this might be second step. Don’t want to box us in with all or nothing so that we are unable to help students that have a legitimate reason for only needing academic relief for just a few classes a semester. Could we make students explain more if want to drop only one or two classes? Yes, but some will get better coaching and help from advisors on what they need to say. Other institutions have a stricter
policy with academic relief where it is only used for catastrophic events that are unforeseen. Academic Appeals has tightened things up so that they do not have as many Academic Appeals coming through. The committee has done this by denying more appeals- just because a student is entitled to the process doesn’t mean that if they pursue the process they will automatically have their appeal granted. The fact is that some of their grounds for appeal are very weak and they do not need to have the appeal granted. Since Academic Appeals has fewer cases, they have time to take on being consistent body reviewing Academic Relief.

Further concern over if we do all or nothing: Looks like we need something else for depression and anxiety instead of academic relief. Demand for mental health services are increasing. The pace is so fast, especially in the STEM areas, that if a student loses two weeks of a semester trying to get help then their semester is usually lost. Mental Health should be separate from academic relief issues. We think having more W’s would help but they need to show up on the student’s record.

Do other colleges do late drops? They do. Could we use this to help relieve the burden on Academic Relief? How does late drop differ from W? Students have to exhaust all Ws before they can use late drop.

Withdrawal policy: One thing that could help is to change the use of W practice so that students can use W after final grades are posted. In the past, students could do that for “freshmen” rule (for first 30 hours) but some professional schools were calculating the F back into the GPA. Additionally, instructors are supposed to have grades posted before final exams to enable students to make a better decisions about where they are in the class and decide whether to withdraw or not. However, instructors often do not have the grades posted in time and some instructors wait until the very end to curve grades. Also, some colleges are not following the current resignation rule deadline and allowing students to resign later in the semester after the deadline has passed.

Why is withdrawal policy written the way it is? First the freshmen rule came into existence but students were using all their Ws during the first semester or year so then the number of Ws allowed was increased. They didn’t want students to know final grades before using W. Engineering seems to have issues with students knowing grades before they use W. Another factor is that Policy 91 has allowed many departments to put minimum grades on courses.

Suggestion: Re-start freshmen rule for first 30 credits and then have W to use later.

Response: This is very generous. There needs to a balance.

Of note: It has been found that students will rise to the occasion when standards are increased or made stricter like they did when the 2.0 GPA requirement was instituted.

Do we have to have a limit on W? If class is required for major then they will have to retake. Maybe we need to write an in tandem recommendation for courses that students use the most Ws in to provide extra support so student doesn’t use W to start with. Work with faculty to better understand how to help transitioning students.
Academic relief of semester with W in it: If we academically relieve a semester and there was a W in, then the student gets the W back but we would like for them not to get the W back. Currently, we have no way to trace whether there was a W used in that semester because academic relief makes the semester disappear so record of W use disappears. If we can make it where the academic relief doesn’t make things disappear but instead is a designation on the transcript, we would be able to record the use of academic relief and W would still be there.