

Senate Committee on Distance Learning and e-Learning
Roger Brown, Chair
November 20, 2017

PROPOSAL

To change SR 5.1.8.3, SR 5.2.4.2, and SR 9.1

SR 5.1.8.3 Permissive Withdrawals

A student may withdraw from a class, or from the University, after the withdrawal period in Rule 5.1.8.2.A but through the last day of classes for the semester/session/term upon approval by the dean of the student's college of a petition certifying urgent non-academic reasons including by not limited to:

1. Illness or injury of the student;
2. Serious personal or family problems;
3. Serious financial difficulties; or
4. Having excused absences in excess of one-fifth of the ~~class contact hours in a course~~ required interactions for the course in a course where ~~attendance~~ such interaction is required or is a criterion for a grade, pursuant to SR 5.2.4.2.

Before acting on such a petition, the dean will consult with the Instructor of Record of the class. The dean may not delegate the authority to approve or deny a petition to withdraw to the University Registrar or to any other agency external to his or her college. If such a petition is approved by the dean of the student's college, the dean shall inform in writing the Instructor of Record of the class of his/her action, and the student shall be assigned a grade of ~~W~~ "W".

SR 5.2.4.2 Excused Absences

~~If an attendance policy is not stated in the course syllabus and attendance is~~ If the course syllabus does not require instructor-student or student-student interactions and if such required interactions are not a criterion for a grade in a the course, then the Instructor of Record shall not take any account of a student's excused or unexcused absences from ~~class~~ such required interactions when assigning a grade.

If the course syllabus ~~defines either policies that require class attendance or a grading standard that determines a student's grade based in part on class attendance,~~ does require instructor-student or student-student interactions or if such required interactions are a criterion for a grade in the course, the following rules apply:

1. Excused Absences: If a student has excused absences in excess of one-fifth of the ~~class contact hours~~ required interactions for that course ~~(participation activities for an online courses, as defined in 5.2.4.1.A),~~ the student shall have the right to receive a "W", or the Instructor of Record may award an "I" for the course if the student declines to receive a "W". Instructors of Record shall specify in the syllabus the total number of required interactions for the course and the time or due date for each required interaction (SR 6.1.1).

2. Unexcused Absences: The Instructor of Record shall define any course policy relating to unexcused absences in the course syllabus. If a policy is not stated in the course syllabus or the policy does not allow for a penalty to the student, the Instructor of Record shall not penalize the student for any unexcused absences.

For reference, but not to be included in the proposed rule change, SR 6.1.1 (Information about Course Content) reads, in relevant part: "Whenever factors such as absences or late papers will be weighed in determining grades, a student shall be informed."

SR 9.1 Definitions

Absence: failure to ~~be present for a scheduled class~~ participate in a required interaction at or by a specified date and time.

RATIONALE:

The rationale for changing SR 5.1.8.3, SR 5.2.4.2, and SR 9.1 is the same.

First, the "presence" or "absence" of a student is simply not assessed for some online activities (e.g., watching a pre-recorded video lecture) even though those online activities often "count" towards the total contact hours/minutes required for the course. In traditional lecture courses, all activities that "count" as "contact hours" are or can be assessed for "presence" or "absence" because those activities all occur in a physical classroom where "presence" or "absence" can be easily assessed.

Second, the quantity of contact hours associated with some online course activities (e.g., for online discussions) are not traditionally specified and therefore hard for students to know. Whereas, in traditional lecture courses, the quantity of contact hours that are associated with any in-class activity (e.g., an in-class discussion) are easily known; the number of associated contact hours is simply the amount of class time devoted to that activity.

Third, SR 10.3 defines "What is a credit hour" for different types of courses, but the specified number of required minutes (usually 2,400 minutes for a three credit course) are not attainable in many traditional courses given current semester calendars. For example, a 50 minute MWF course in the fall semester will have a maximum of 2,320 contact minutes and a 150 minute Monday only course will have a maximum of 2,220 contact minutes. To fix this problem, we need to modify SR 10.3 or the Registrar's calendar.

But, even if the third problem is fixed, the first two problems remain. It's not reasonable to expect that all distance learning course activities that count towards a course's required contact hours/minutes will be (1) assessed for a student's "presence" or "absence" and (2) will have a known number of associated contact hours/minutes. Number (1) isn't a reasonable expectation (e.g., all pre-recorded lecture videos would have to track whether any particular student watched them or not). Number (2) is probably feasible, but in practice it would look arbitrary and contrived (e.g., "Your required participation in this online discussion counts as one contact hour").

Thus, if we can't sensibly resolve the first two issues above, another option (proposed here) is to measure the level of absences using some metric other than contact hours. In 2016, the Senate Admissions and Academic Standards Committee (SAASC) attempted this, resulting in the current language that uses "participation activities for an online courses" (sic) along with a definition of what

those activities are. However, the definition at SR 5.2.4.1.A was never approved, so that reference that the current rule points to doesn't exist. So, the current rule is confusing because it is incomplete (i.e., it has a broken reference).

We propose to use “required interactions” rather than “contact hours” as a better way to measure whether a student’s excused absences in a course are numerous that the student should be allowed the option of a late withdrawal or the forced receipt of an “I” grade.

NOTE:

As proposed, these rules would require instructors to specify clearly the total number of required interactions in a course. For a traditional course, the instructor may simply accomplish this by stating in the syllabus, “Required Meeting Schedule: MWF 10:00am – 10:50am”. For hybrid and online courses, the instructor simply needs to indicate what the required interactions are and when they occur (e.g., “The required interactions for this class include the 44 regularly scheduled class meeting plus the six online homework submissions via Canvas”).

NOTE:

Be aware that a course may have “required interactions” that are not used “as a criterion for a grade”. That means that, for the purposes of these rules, the instructor may “require” attendance at each regular class meeting (i.e., take attendance) even though absence from a regular class meeting is not a grade criterion.

NOTE:

The biggest impact of this proposed rule change would be that the twenty-percent rule would be more easily triggered for courses that have fewer “required interactions” (i.e., interactions where participation or not is assessed). So, consider an online course that only requires five exams. If a student has an excused absence for one of these five require exams, the twenty-percent hurdle would be breached, and the student “shall have the right to receive a ‘W’, or the Instructor of Record may award an ‘I’ for the course if the student declines to receive a ‘W’.” (SR 5.2.4.2).