

ACADEMIC POLICIES COMMITTEE

March 19, 2021

Zoom Meeting from 1-2 p.m.

Members Present: Keith Goyne (Chair), Robin Panneton, Kimberly Smith,
Susan Sumner, Keith Thompson

Members Absent: Cassandra Garcia

Invited Guest Present: Chris Flynn, Lara Khansa, Kim O'Rourke, Michel Pleimling, Natasha
Smith, Rick Sparks, Ellie Sturgis, Vivian Yamoah

Invited Guest Absent: Kathryn Albright, Beth Armstrong, Nikeshia Arthur, David Clubb,
Kanitta Charoensiri, Paul Deck, Rachel Holloway, Byron Hughes, Dan Thorp

Recorder: Arlice Banks, Executive Administrative Assistant, College of Natural Resources
and Environment

Keith Goyne, Chair, called the meeting to order at 1:00 p.m.

I. Review

- A. Keith Goyne presented a brief overview of the draft Academic Relief Policy, highlighting some of its main components. He then welcomed comments and questions.

II. Discussion

- A. Confidential information, medical and academic records, FERPA/HIPAA Privacy Rules, and academic holds concerns

Comment 1. I don't think that a student's medical or mental health information can legally be reviewed by anyone other than the supporting campus unit. Can the supporting campus unit review confidential information without it being attached to the relief request?

Response 1a. The Compassionate Relief (CR) Committee needs a letter of recommendation from the campus unit that supports the relief request. The CR committee does not need to review the student's medical records.

Response 1b. How information is distributed is controlled by an automated flow process. Documentation and statements pertinent to Cook will only go to Cook.

Comment 2. If a student applying for relief has an ongoing relationship with Cook, it's not necessary to attach confidential information because Cook already has the student's records.

Response 2a. The provider may not always be Cook in every case. We may have a student who saw an external provider. The prototype form will populate with the questions required by Cook, allowing the student to upload documentation from an external provider directly to Cook.

Comment 3. If a student was sexually assaulted and is uploading information to be directed to Cook, that information can't become part of the student's academic record. HIPAA Privacy Rules cover Cook, Schiffert, and Services for Students with Disabilities records.

Response 3a. Any third-party software product, such as Enterprise Systems, must meet all university policy and procedures regarding privacy. Therefore, these concerns will be addressed when the system is designed.

Comment 4. The policy states that, "The procedure to remove academic holds on student accounts that are associated with the approval of compassionate relief is provided below. The completed self-assessment forms and any ancillary documentation shall be sent to the academic dean for review." This section gets into a student's medical or mental health diagnosis. If ancillary documentation means a note from a medical provider, that note would go to the academic dean and become part of the student's academic record instead of part of their medical record.

Response 4a. The self-assessment and ancillary documentation language will be revised to ensure that information is sent to the unit supporting the request, not to the academic dean.

B. Title IX issues

Comment 5. If a student tells an advisor that they were raped two years ago and that incident affects them now, the advisor as a mandated reporter must report the assault to Title IX. It gets complicated how to approach students about this issue. I suggest a consultation with Kelly Oaks, Title IX office, to obtain her feedback.

Response 5a. When a student reaches the section of the form where they select the supporting office, a confidentiality statement applies to the information they provide. That statement is linked to supporting the unit's confidentiality policy on the website. The Dean of Students (DOS) office has a limited confidentiality policy that may require evaluation. When Byron Hughes was asked about the Women's Center and Title IX, he replied that he would expect those requests to go to DOS.

Response 5b. This scenario allows DOS to become more involved in relief requests because they already interact with the students and may be aware of their relief request details. Also, Katie Polidoro, Director for Title IX Compliance and Title IX Coordinator, can coordinate efforts on the student's behalf without disclosing confidential details.

Response 5c. Rick Sparks will contact Kelly Oaks and provide her with a preview of the policy before Keith Goyne extends a meeting request.

C. Grades and transcript issues

Comment 6. I think it's helpful for students to have their enrolled courses removed from their transcript because they could explain to an employer why they were absent a semester. However, since a student could have more than one request for relief, it could be confusing when an employer sees multiple classes missing on a transcript without any context.

Response 6a. Most institutions use their standard withdrawal or resignation code. Virginia Tech has chosen to use a "W" for a different meaning, so the university doesn't have a broad, overarching withdrawal code that we use. We can develop a designation that isn't a glaring "this is why a student left." Still, our current practice is to erase the enrollment for that semester, which is not accurate. We have to find a way to list relief on a transcript because we must keep records, regardless of why a student left. If a student starts a term, we have to maintain that record on the transcript.

Comment 7. Do we need to record how many credits the student was taking when the relief request was initiated? If we need to protect what the "W" grade signifies, couldn't we use a different grade designation for all the courses?

Response 7a. Virginia Tech has a specific "W" grade policy that states that there can only be three "W" grades on a transcript. Therefore, the use of the "W" becomes problematic because an entire semester of "W's" attracts attention because it is counter to our policy. I wonder if anything that we are currently doing for students who are leaving could be continued with this process so an employer would have no idea why a student left.

Response 7b. Other institutions are using a notation associated with relief on the transcript that the student had some extenuating circumstances, medical or otherwise.

Comment 8. Rick, is it also your intent to consider something like this for students that resign? You indicated that you want a notation for students who resign and aren't thinking about academic relief. Would you want to continue listing all classes those students were enrolled in, and anything that is a resignation or a relief is graded as an "R?"

Response 8a. The "R" would maintain the term, which is essential to the Department of Education reporting criteria because the enrollment is maintained, yet there are no courses that are maintained. We could change this entire process by designating all students leaving with an "R," and here is where they were academically when they left.

Comment 9. Would this approach work if a student didn't drop all classes? The "R" represents they resigned.

Response 9a. It would help in those cases where you would maintain the original enrollment in the course—you would still have the normal A-F or P/F grade in the completed course. However, one of the helpful things is potentially helping international students because the “W” grades are still considered a grade and don’t drop a student below full-time status.

D. Miscellaneous comments

Comment 10. If the request for a recommendation goes to the wrong supporting office, is there a process where it can be rerouted?

Response 10a. Yes, materials can be routed to another office.

Response 10b. It is expected that students will begin this process in consultation with their advisor; therefore, students receive assistance selecting the appropriate support unit.

Comment 11. Any thoughts on this policy being identified as compassionate relief? I worry if we don’t approve a student’s request, it leaves the impression that Virginia Tech is not compassionate as an institution.

Response 11a. Chris Flynn: I like the idea of calling it compassionate relief. I think the committee has found that many institutes use the term Compassionate relief (CR) Policy. I like the title.

Response 11b. Ellie Sturgis: I like the title, and I think it suggests that the university is trying at being better together—being compassionate.

E. General discussion among Rick Sparks and Academic Policies Committee members

1. Most comments are procedural, with a few minor edits to the policy to address concerns that have been raised.
2. Rick will contact Enterprise Systems to initiate thoughts regarding the technology for this policy.
3. Rick suggested not delve into the process in such detail. Writing in more generic terms allows for flexibility should there be additions later. Rick also suggested that when referring to a software system in the policy, to say that “it meets all university policy and procedures around privacy.”
4. Representatives from DOS, SSD, and Schiffert weren’t present. These offices are significant partners in this policy, so the committee wants confirmation that everyone is on board with the policy as written.
5. Rick will provide Chris Wise, AVP for Student Affairs, with a broad-scale policy overview. Chris will provide comments to the committee.

III. Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned at 2:01 p.m.