

## **The College Course Withdrawal Policy: A Critical View**

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"Dropping" courses means that college students cease to be enrolled in specific courses for which they had once registered. Students usually receive full or partial tuition refund for such courses. Student enrollment notations for dropped courses are traditionally removed from permanent official college records.<sup>1</sup> Frequently, other students are allowed to enroll in classes in dropping students' places. At most schools, no particular reason is required for dropping a course; student prerogatives reign.<sup>2</sup> Most colleges have clearly defined, short drop periods at the start of terms in which student decisions must be made.<sup>3</sup> Comments sometimes emerge in conversations from faculty and administrators relevant to the drop policy's financial cost to an institution; and to some intermittent class management awkwardness. However, I am not aware of claims that college drop policies are believed to diminish or compromise academic standards.<sup>4</sup> Failure to drop courses within stated time limits requires students to exercise a school's withdrawal policy to both cease course attendance and avoid a failing course evaluation.

Students may officially cease their enrollment status and avoid suffering a failing grade after the designated drop period up to a specified date at most institutions. Such a procedure is called a withdrawal. Students withdrawing from courses typically receive no tuition refunds. Withdrawing students traditionally have withdrawals entered on their permanent academic records. Student withdrawals frequently result in those seats in courses remaining unfilled. Some schools have conservative withdrawal deadlines as short as 3 weeks into a semester.<sup>5</sup> Other institutions allow students more liberal periods to withdraw, as many as 10 weeks.<sup>6</sup>

Some academic personnel see a too liberal withdrawal policy as potentially damaging both to enrollment management and to student responsibility expectations. Some students register for more courses than they intend to remain enrolled for, clearly knowing that they may freely exercise the drop option at no risk. Enrollment management at both the institution and class levels is hampered as a result. Because of the bureaucracy and timing of dropping courses and of other students wishing to add courses, some students are discouraged from or denied access to courses for which they genuinely would attend. Some students inconsiderately wait until the end of the drop period [at many schools, the drop and add periods end simultaneously] thus prohibiting other students desiring to add that class to learn of their potential opportunity. Some students habitually over register and their transcripts

never reflect this repeated behavior. Some faculty and administrators advocate charging students an administrative fee for all adds and drops beyond a nominal initial limit to discourage repeat adds/drops.<sup>vii</sup> Such a policy undoubtedly would not totally remove the problem; however, it likely would measurably reduce the add/drop frequency, thus reducing some of its negative effects.

Withdrawal from courses after the stated date limit with no academic penalty, at least at institutions surveyed, are subject to administrative discretion. Students can be denied late withdrawal requests and late withdrawals exercised by students without administrative approval typically result in failing grades being placed on student academic records. Formal reasons for late withdrawals are required at most institutions. The late withdrawal policy is seen by some concerned faculty and administrators as ripe for abuse and potentially a diminishment of academic standards.

Allowing students to drop or withdraw from courses within reasonable time limits without academic failure penalty has merit in many cases: (1) it allows students who discover they have enrolled in courses with unknown or unrealized implicit prerequisites/sites that they do not fulfill to terminate enrollment; (2) it offers students a way to correct too heavy course loads without Draconian penalty; (3) it permits students to rectify inappropriate course choice without undue hardship; and (4) it provides a humane means of adjusting to sudden, unanticipated personal schedule changes (ie: employment schedule or work load changes, military obligations, jury duty requirements). Institutional policy recognition of such exigencies is admirable; however, too many college student withdrawals do not fit into these laudable categories. Some students manipulate withdrawals into failure prevention strategies.

Students quickly learn systemic weaknesses: (1) faculty who are lax in regards to advising about and in monitoring withdrawal practices and standards; (2) calendar stress periods and peak workload times in which close attention to detail are minimized; and (3) overly sympathetic faculty and administrative personnel likely to allow leniency to students. Such weak links in the chain of academic standards are taken advantage of by students who are in the greatest need of learning personal responsibility and accountability. It is incumbent on all faculty and administrators to remain vigilant and consistent in regards to refusing late withdrawals unless compelling reasons are presented dictating exceptions to stated policies.

Another issue related to withdrawal policies is grade inflation. Grade inflation is denied in some academic circles; however, close examination of grades posted by institutions and by professors clearly demonstrate inflation has occurred. Grade inflation becomes exacerbated by current withdrawal policies. Students have learned that they can easily drop courses within the drop period thus escaping failing or poor grades. Many transcripts are pock marked by such withdrawals. Student advisors too seldom counsel students against habitual withdrawals and warn students that their academic records would, with numerous withdrawals, reflect erratic judgment and escapism practices. While many employers do not closely examine student transcripts, some do; and such future student record examination may cost the student dearly. Advisors need to make this pointedly clear to students.

I have examined my own grade sheets for the past five years and have discovered that 37 of 41 [90%] students earning 'D' or 'F' grades toward the end of the withdrawal period exercised their withdrawal option. Such elimination of those failing and minimally passing grades from my class rolls leaves later grade analysts, without knowledge or care about the effects of withdrawals upon grade indexes, with the view that I do not register failing or barely successful grades. Such conclusions would be fallacious. Grade distribution analysis/evaluation needs to take into account withdrawal calendars and withdrawal frequencies to lessen research skew.

It is recommended that the present withdrawal period be periodically and closely examined and that unless such a period can be rigorously defended, it be shortened. Students should be able to recognize whether or not they are enrolled in classes inappropriate to their needs and abilities; and whether or not their jobs or personal lives conflict with their original enrollment strategies. Many of these decisions should be made during the drop period. Too liberal withdrawal periods only serve to encourage irresponsible student behavior; promote, for some, escape from poor grades; and reflect negatively on teacher, department, and institutional grade assignments.

Student withdrawals should reflect truly exceptional and necessary deviations from original academic plans. In addition to course content, students need to be taught responsibility by being asked to plan carefully and to accept responsibility for the decisions they make.

## Endnotes

1. Perusal of 214 college catalogues showed unanimous consistency in terms of removal from official records the original enrollment and an offering of varying refund amounts when courses were dropped.
2. In only 2 of 214 catalogues' policy statements were drop reasons required.
3. Drop periods ranged from 3-15 days.
4. This is based on the author's teaching experience at: Bryant & Stratton College; CBS Holt College; and Roosevelt University [in Chicago]; Northern Illinois University; Emporia State University [Kansas]; Louisiana State University; and the University of Maine at Presque Isle as well as discussions at various professional meetings.
5. Ball State University's 1992 catalogue reflects this time limit on withdrawals.
6. The University of Maine at Presque Isle allows students to withdraw from classes through the tenth week of regular 15 week semester classes.
7. The University of Arkansas charges students a fee for adding or dropping courses. Officials there report that initiation of the policy in the late 1970s coincided with a measurable drop in student initiated program changes.