

MEMORANDUM

To: Charles Delwiche, Chair, Senate Academic Procedures and Standards (APAS) Committee

From: Ian Chambers, Past Chair, Senate Student Affairs Committee

Date: July 21, 2015

Re: Proposed Policy on Excused Absence (Senate Document #14-15-21)

I am writing on behalf of the Senate Student Affairs Committee (SAC) regarding its consideration of the Proposed Policy on Excused Absences charged to the Senate Academic Procedures and Standards (APAS) Committee and to the SAC on February 23, 2015.

The Student Affairs Committee was asked to review current policies and procedures related to various types of excused absences, consider a proposed Student Bereavement Policy, and discuss the impact of the proposal on student success, before submitting recommendations to the APAS Committee regarding the proposed language. The SAC reviewed the relevant documents and met with the proposer in March to gain a better understanding of the issues behind the proposal. After due consideration, the SAC completed its review on April 29, 2015. I have enclosed a few specific revisions to the proposed policy language with this memo, and I have outlined the committee's discussions and findings below.

Suggestions on Specific Language Highlighted in the Proposal

In its review, the SAC considered each of the highlighted language concerns presented in the proposal, but felt that in many cases, it would be difficult to find more specific language that would still be flexible enough to cover all courses at UMD. For that reason, the SAC would generally be comfortable using language such as "whenever practicable" and "reasonable time" in the final proposed policy.

The SAC considered the appropriate timelines for students to notify an instructor of absences that are expected at the start of a semester. The proposal suggested considering revising the deadline of "within the first two weeks of the semester" to instead reference the schedule adjustment period. As we discussed this issue, students on the SAC pointed out that undergraduates do not always keep track of when the end of the schedule adjustment period is, especially if they do not frequently add or drop courses during the start of the semester. Therefore, the SAC agreed that "within the first two weeks of the semester" is more appropriate for the policy language.

The SAC discussed at length the section on written notifications in the case of a prolonged absence or an absence occurring during a Major Scheduled Grading Event. The proposal suggested reconsidering the wording that states that the notification must come from a "verifiable source." The SAC could not find terminology that would be more appropriate, and as such has no suggestions for revising this language. However, the SAC did have general concerns related to this section, since it feels that non-comprehensive lists within policy documents can often cause conflicts for students. Members considered scenarios in which a prolonged absence could not be verified by the sources listed in the policy ("Health Center, Physician, Court Summons, Death Notice, etc"), and raised concerns that students could be disadvantaged by the language if faculty are not willing to consider other types of sources. The SAC recommends that

APAS consider removing the list entirely, stating instead that an appropriate source shall be required and shall be able to verify the dates of the absence. If APAS were to decide to retain the list, the SAC would recommend adding “including, but not limited to” in order to indicate that other sources are acceptable.

Language Related to the Health Center

The SAC briefly reviewed the history of the University of Maryland Policy for a Student’s Medically Necessitated Absence From Class (V-1.00[G]), since this policy language was used in large part as the basis of the new proposed Policy on Excused Absences. The SAC recognizes that many phrases within that policy referring to the Health Center were necessary in 2011 when the policy was revised to move from requiring medical excuse notes from the Health Center to the current practice of using “self-signed notes.” However, the SAC felt that these explanations and references are no longer necessary in the policy language, since the current practice has been established for four years and the Health Center is no longer involved in granting excuses for isolated absences. Therefore, in the enclosed policy revisions, the SAC has removed language in multiple sections related to self-signed notes and the Health Center. In addition, the SAC combined some language under 1.B. to streamline information about the process for notification.

Academic Reasons for Excused Absences

As it reviewed the policy language, members of the SAC raised concerns related to the list of causes for which a student can request an excused absence. The SAC noted that the list includes “participation in university activities at the request of university authorities,” which is often used for participation in athletic events. However, members pointed out that none of the reasons explicitly allow for participation in academic activities, such as attending a conference or participating in a company site visit that is related to a class but is not held during class time. Members of the SAC strongly agreed that activities such as these enhance a student’s knowledge and academic success, and should be valued by the University. While many faculty would likely be accommodating of requests for absences for these reasons, students are not currently ensured these opportunities by the policy. After much discussion, the SAC revised the language in the beginning of the policy to state that absences for “participation in academic or university activities” would be acceptable causes for an excused absence.

Impact of Absences on Student Performance

The SAC considered at length the impact of multiple excused absences on student success. Even in cases where all absences are excused for reasons provided for by the policy, the SAC recognizes that there may come a point where a faculty member would be unable to issue a final grade because the student cannot have successfully met the goals of the course. The SAC agreed that in these cases, students likely should be advised to withdraw from the course. The SAC felt that it would be impossible for the policy to set a threshold for absences after which withdrawal would be necessary; each course should have different expectations, and only faculty would be able to make the determination of where that threshold should be for a particular course. In the enclosed revisions, the SAC added language in 1.B.2. to give students and faculty some guidance towards this idea, stating that “If prolonged absences cause a student to be unable to achieve the goals and outcomes of the course, withdrawal may be necessary.” The SAC recommends that the APAS Committee address this idea further in its final recommendations.

Absences Related to Bereavement

In addition to reviewing the suggestions in the proposed policy, the SAC also discussed a proposed Student Bereavement Policy. Bereavement is certainly a valid reason to request an excused absence, and the SAC recognized that students can currently request an excused absence within the current guidelines, since such absences can be considered under the provision for “compelling circumstance beyond the

students' control." However, the SAC also recognized that faculty may not always be accommodating, since the policy language is not explicit. After discussion, the SAC agreed that University policy should make it clear that excused absences should be granted for bereavement purposes.

In reviewed the proposed Student Bereavement Policy, the SAC considered how to best address the issue of bereavement while staying true to the intent of the original proposal on excused absences. University policies and practices related to excused absences are currently described in different places depending on the type of absence, and the proposal under review was originally intended to create one umbrella policy to apply to all types of absences, to assist students in finding and understanding all policies and procedures. The SAC is very much in support of this goal, and as such, determined that language to include bereavement should be included in the proposed Policy on Excused Absences, rather than in a separate policy on bereavement leave for students.

The proposed Student Bereavement Policy specifically delineates how many days should be excused and what types of relationships should apply in these cases. The SAC discussed these details and felt that any such specific language should likely align as best as possible with current policies and procedures related to staff or faculty. However, after much discussion, the SAC agreed that within the structure of the proposed Policy on Excused Absences, it would be best to simply add language noting that the "death of an immediate family member" would be a cause for an excused absence and allow students to follow the same procedures as for other excused absences. This simplifies and streamlines the process, so the SAC agreed to include this language in the enclosed policy. However, the SAC also considered whether "immediate family member" is appropriate; for instance, students may have individuals very close to them who may not fit this definition, such as in cases where students were raised by neighbors or previously resided with cousins. The SAC could not agree on appropriate language to address this concern, and recommends that the APAS Committee consider this issue carefully in its review.

After concluding its consideration of this charge, the Student Affairs Committee was in agreement with the above suggestions and enclosed revisions to the proposed policy language. In the enclosed document, any changes agreed to by the SAC are highlighted and commented in blue. The enclosed still shows the original proposed edits in the colors used by the proposal.

The Student Affairs Committee respectfully submits this report for consideration by the APAS Committee, and looks forward to learning more about the APAS Committee's consideration of this issue during the 2015-2016 academic year. Please contact me with any questions or concerns that you or the committee may have. Thank you for your consideration of this report.

Enclosures:

- Student Affairs Committee Revisions to Proposed Policy on Excused Absences
- Student Affairs Committee Minutes from March 11, 2015 Meeting with Proposer

IC/seh

Student Affairs Committee Revisions to Proposed Policy on Excused Absences

Proposed Policy on Excused Absence

This draft is color coded to indicate that the text draws primarily from the language of existing policy:

- Policy III-5.10(A) on religious observances (Green)
- Policy V-1.00(G) on medically necessitated absence (Black)
- Undergraduate Catalog (Purple)
- Revisions (Red)

Highlighted terms are discussed in the attached comment document.

Policy

It is the policy of UMD to excuse the absences of students that result from the following causes: illness of the student, or illness of a dependent as defined by Board of Regents policy on family and medical leave; religious observance (where the nature of the observance prevents the student from being present during the class period); participation in academic or university activities at the request of university authorities; death of an immediate family member; and compelling circumstance beyond the students control. Students shall not be penalized in any way for excused absences. Students shall be allowed, whenever practicable, to make up academic assignments that are missed due to such absences. It is the student's responsibility to contact the instructor for each course in which work is missed, provide appropriate written notification and make arrangements for make-up work or examinations.

As explained below, the procedures and the documentation a student is required to provide to the class instructor for the purpose of obtaining an excused absence differ depending on the frequency of the absence, and whether the absence occurs during a Major Scheduled Grading Event

1. Procedures

A. Excused absence timeline for notification

1. If the date to be missed is known at the start of the semester the student is responsible for providing written notification to the professor within the first two weeks of the semester.
2. If the date to be missed is not known at the start of the semester the student should make a reasonable attempt to inform the instructor in advance of the absence and upon returning to class present written notification.

B. Excused absence format for notification

Comment [seh1]: To include absences for attending/presenting at conferences, for example.

Comment [seh2]: To incorporate bereavement into the policy more explicitly, without going into too much detail.

1. Students must present written notification using the communication process indicated by the course instructor to be found in the course syllabus. The process for notification should be confidential
2. Written notification will be a self-signed note from the student. The notification must identify the reason for the absence and the date. Each notification must also contain an acknowledgment by the student that the information provided is true and correct. Providing false information to University officials is prohibited under Part 9 (h) of the Code of Student Conduct (V-1.00(B) UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND CODE OF STUDENT CONDUCT) and may result in disciplinary action. Such documentation shall be honored as sufficient documentation unless the absence results in a prolonged absence from classes and/or coincides with a Major Scheduled Grading Event. No written excuses or documentation from the Health Center shall be provided for absences from single lecture, recitation, or lab.
3. ~~Written notification for Non-consecutive absences from more than a single lecture, recitation or lab will be:~~
- 4.2. A prolonged absence from classes is defined as multiple consecutive absences from a course during a semester due to the same reason. If prolonged absences cause a student to be unable to achieve the goals and outcomes of the course, withdrawal may be necessary.
- 5.3. "Major Scheduled Grading Events" shall be identified by the instructor in the course syllabus at the beginning of each semester.
- 6.4. Students who experience a prolonged absence(s) as defined above or an absence during a Major Scheduled Grading Event are required to supplement the written notification with supporting documentation from a verifiable source. The source (including, but not limited to: Health Center, Physician, Court Summons, Police Report, Death Notice, etc) shall verify dates of absence and indicate the time frame that the student was unable to meet academic responsibilities. No diagnostic information shall be provided.

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Comment [seh3]: Combined 1 and 2 and streamlined language.

Comment [seh4]: Unnecessary because of shift away from requiring Health Center notes.

Comment [seh5]: The committee recognizes that if students miss a large portion of a course for an excused reason, faculty may need to advise that a student take a leave of absence or withdraw.

Comment [seh6]: The SAC recommends considering removing this list from the policy, as incomplete lists can cause confusion in policy documents.

2. Examinations and Assignments

The make-up examination or substitute assignment must be at a time and place mutually agreeable to the instructor and student, cover only the material for which the student was originally responsible, and be at a comparable level of

difficulty with the original examination. In the event that a group of students requires the same make-up examination or substitute assignment, one time and place may be scheduled. The make-up assessment or substitute assignment must not interfere with the student's regularly scheduled classes or in-class final examination.

3. Class work

Students are responsible for information and material missed on the day(s) of absence. Students absent for an excused absence may request any materials given out during the absence. Students shall be given a reasonable time to make up class assignments.

4. Resolution of Problems

A student who wishes to contest a decision not to grant a medically necessitated an excused absence should first try to resolve the issue with the class instructor. If the issue is not resolved with the instructor, the student should seek the advice of the instructor's Department Chair; the Dean's Office of the Department's College; ~~the Health Center Director;~~ or the Department of Disability Support Services (DSS) Director, if the student is registered with the DSS, in order to identify the proper procedure for resolution.

Comment [seh7]: The SAC agrees that this language is unnecessary.

Comment [seh8]: The SAC also feels this is no longer necessary.

If the student believes his or her final grade was affected by the filing of a complaint, recourse is available under UMCP Policy III-1.20(A), Procedures For Review of Alleged Arbitrary and Capricious Grading.

5. Religious Observance and the Academic Schedule

The President may specify certain dates within the academic calendar which, for reasons of religious observance by a large number of student and faculty, may not be used to administer examinations or tests, and may not be set as due dates for assignments. To avoid the likelihood of religious observances scheduling conflicts, it is recommended that professors avoid scheduling exams or field trips on major religious holidays. During orientation period, advisors and students should work together to avoid religious observances scheduling conflicts. When planning their classes, students should consider the likelihood that they might be absent multiple times from a given course. Students should choose lab and discussion sections accordingly.

Student Affairs Committee Minutes from March 11, 2015 Meeting with Proposer

STUDENT AFFAIRS COMMITTEE MINUTES

MARCH 11, 2015

10:00AM - 11:00AM

1310B MARIE MOUNT HALL

Members Present: Ian Chambers (Chair), Benjamin Bengfort (Graduate Student), David Bigio (Faculty), Josiland Chambers (Non-Exempt Staff), Cynthia Hale (Ex-Officio Provost's Rep), Rebecca Kenemuth (Exempt Staff), Marc Limansky (Ex-Officio Administration and Finance Rep), James McShay (Ex-Officio VP Student Affairs Rep), Pamela Orel (Faculty), Ravali Paidipati (Undergraduate), Dennis Passarella-George (Ex-Officio Resident Life Rep), Kourtney Klein Temple (Ex-Officio University Relations Rep), Austin Trupp (Undergraduate), Andrew Williams (Graduate Student).

Members Absent/Excused: Kellie Achstetter (Undergraduate), Joseph Baier (Undergraduate), Ellen Cesewski (Undergraduate), Mihili Gunaratne (Undergraduate), Ori Gutin (Undergraduate), Mary Hummel (Ex-Officio VP Student Affairs Rep), Kevin Lafrancis (Undergraduate), Michael Lee (Undergraduate), Mark Leone (Ex-Officio Graduate School Rep), Stephanie Okhagbuzo (Graduate Student), Bryan Pfeffer (Undergraduate), Piyush Ramachandran (Graduate Student), Patrick Ronk (Ex-Officio SGA Rep), Gareth Vaz (Ex-Officio GSG Rep), Gary White (Faculty).

Senate Staff Present: Sarah Heidt (Committee Coordinator).

Guests Present: Ann Smith, Assistant Dean for Undergraduate Studies and Undergraduate Student Ombudsperson.

Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 10:09am.

Approval of the Minutes

The minutes from February 23, 2015 were approved unanimously without correction.

Report of the Chair

There was no report of the Chair.

Proposed Policy on Excused Absence (14-15-21)

Chambers introduced the charge and explained that the bill was submitted by Ann Smith, Assistant Dean for Undergraduate Studies and Undergraduate Student Ombudsperson, who was joining the committee today to discuss her proposal. He noted that he and Heidt had provided many background documents on the committee's webpage, and noted that the committee would consider the questions in the proposal in more depth at the next meeting.

Smith noted that for the past three years, she has been working as the ombudsperson for undergraduate students, and in her role, she has become aware of the interpretations of many policies across campus. She found that many policies are confusing for students, and in the case of excused absences, the information is spread across three different sources and not all aspects of excused absences are codified in policy. Because of differences in interpretations, implementation of excused absence policies and procedures are inconsistent across campus. The goal of the proposal was to represent in policy each type of excused

absence and create uniform procedures related to each type of absence for how the instructor is informed of the absence, the type of documentation needed, and when documentation is needed.

Smith explained that most of the proposed policy comes from existing language in the Undergraduate Catalog, the Faculty Handbook, or University policy. She noted that the language on the implication of the absence comes from the religious absence policy, which provides that students cannot be penalized for absences if they are excused, and sets expectations related to makeup and substitute assignments. Documentation for absences is discussed in the policy on medically necessitated absences.

Smith noted that piecing the information together into a coherent policy was difficult, and she made a few changes to improve the proposed policy. She noted the committee should also consider the bigger picture related to implementation of the proposed policy. She suggested that if students miss many classes with excused absences, there comes a point where absences affect success in class, so the committee's work will likely need to acknowledge that there should be a balance between allowing excused absences and ensuring student success. Nothing in the proposed policy discusses that idea, but Smith suggested the committee consider that issue during its review.

Smith noted that the message of the policy should be that students need to inform their instructor as soon as possible when they know they will miss a class. She noted that the proposed policy distinguishes between planned absences and unexpected absences, and allows procedures for both. The key for both types of absences is to inform the instructor as soon as possible.

The language on format for notification of the instructor comes from the medically necessitated absences policy. Smith raised concerns over whether the notification should be written or whether the course instructor should say in the syllabus how absence notifications should be communicated. She suggested that methods of communication are personal decisions, and perhaps should not be dictated by policy. Likewise, the self-signed note for medical absences could be given in various ways. Smith noted that the self-signed note is not appropriate for prolonged absences or for absences that coincide with major scheduled grading events.

Smith noted that in current practice the procedures for non-consecutive medically necessitated absences vary widely across campus. Faculty are currently responsible for describing their written policy for non-consecutive medical absences in the syllabus. Smith recommends removing this procedure and instead relying on self-signed notes for isolated medical absences throughout the semester. She noted that the ability to rely on self-signed notes comes from acceptance of the honor code and academic honesty, and noted that faculty need to be able to trust that students are being truthful in situations like this.

A committee member pointed out that the proposal requires students to inform the instructor of expected absences within two weeks of the beginning of the semester. He raised concerns, and suggested that two weeks prior to the absence might be appropriate. Smith noted that she suggested either two weeks or at the end of the schedule adjustment period. She noted that it may be helpful for faculty to know in advance if multiple students will be missing a graded event due to a religious observance, so they can consider changing the syllabus if needed. A few student members commented that the deadline incentivizes students to think ahead. A student also noted that he does not know when the schedule adjustment period is, so it may be more clear to simply give two weeks after the course begins. Smith also noted that there are benefits to having common approaches in all courses.

Smith noted that she did not include anything in the proposed policy related to in-class participation. The Catalog stipulates that if in-class participation is a significant part of the work of the course, absences shall be handled by the instructor according to the policy of the academic unit. She noted that there are courses, such as lab courses, where if a student misses more than three activities or labs, the student fails

the course. She noted that the purpose of this provision is because in some courses, absences can add up so that the faculty member cannot guarantee that the student has successfully completed the course.

A committee member made a comment about the statement that students should be allowed to make up assignments “whenever practicable”. Smith explained that UMD has recently had a large transition in the way classes are taught, where students are now doing much more when they come to class other than taking notes on a lecture. With active learning, blended courses, flipped classrooms, and other innovations, there is often an activity going on or some work that has points assigned to it. She noted that it can be difficult for faculty to determine how to provide makeup assignments for each of those points. She noted that this will be difficult to resolve, and suggested the committee should discuss and make a recommendation on to APAS on how students think makeup work for these types of points could work. Smith did note, however, that the Catalog states that students cannot be given points simply for attendance, so if a student misses a class and there is no measurement of participation on that day, no makeup work would be required.

Smith also discussed the proposal to add bereavement leave to the list of permissible excused absences. She noted that faculty have often considered bereavement under the stipulation of “compelling circumstances beyond the students control.” She noted that the proposal submitted by the SGA is very specific as to who passed away and how many days of leave are allowed. She raised concerns with the proposal, noting that if the individual who passed away was very close to the student but not on the list of relations, students could be harmed by the policy. She also noted that the proposal suggests that students should have five days of leave, but Smith suggested this may counter the notion that it is best for students to come to class when they are able to do so.

A committee member asked whether the Excused Absence Policy would cover parental leave for undergraduate students, and noted that he just reviewed the policies for graduate students. Members noted that there are adult undergraduate students who could need such leave. A member noted that the policy for graduate students was meant to handle issues related to the guidelines for the time to completion of an advanced degree. He suggested that if undergraduates were to need parental leave, they would likely need to be absent for a good portion of the semester. Smith noted that in these circumstances, students would typically withdraw for the semester with the help of an advisor. The committee member who raised the question noted that graduate students are allowed six weeks and need to be allowed to make up work. He suggested that the Excused Absence Policy should not cover parental leave, but perhaps should refer to other mechanisms for withdrawing or taking a leave of absence for parental duties.

A committee member noted that the first two points under 1.B, “Excused absence format for notifications” is confusing, and he suggested finding a way to streamline the information to be more clear. He noted that the intent of the two sections seems to be that the instructor should identify a process and format for receiving excused absence notifications, but the language is unclear. Smith noted that this is an area the committee could consider revising, since much of the language was written before email was frequently used. Members agreed that consolidating the language would be helpful. One member noted that in revising the language, the committee should ensure that it links back to the honor code and academic honesty in the idea that the student acknowledges that the self-signed note is accurate. He noted that a dishonest self-signed note would be a violation of the Code of Student Conduct. Smith noted that whatever language is included in policy should be language that will last through technological changes.

Coordinator Heidt asked whether the policy should refer to procedures for withdrawal or long-term absences from class. Smith noted that this information should be a part of the implementation of the new policy through information given to advisors, but suggested that the policy might not need language related to withdrawals. She noted that the idea of student success should be a focus of the committee’s discussions, and that students should speak with advisors if they need to take prolonged absences. A

committee member asked what would happen if a student missed a lot of classes but still wants to be assigned a grade. Smith noted that this would depend on the course and the circumstances, but noted that there will be a point where a faculty member would not be able to give an accurate grade if a student has missed too much coursework.

Smith also pointed out the section of the policy discussing makeup assignments and noted that the policy does not discuss the format of makeup work. She explained that students assume that faculty are required to provide makeup work that is identical to the assessment that was given in class, but the policy does not require that. The makeup work must cover the same material and be at the same level of difficulty, but faculty are able to choose any format that is appropriate.

Chambers thanked Smith for attending the meeting to discuss the proposal. He reminded committee members to review information available on the materials page before the next meeting.

New Business

There was no new business.

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 11:00am.

Submitted by: Sarah Heidt.