ACADEMIC POLICY REVIEW COMMITTEE REPORT

FALL 2018

The Academic Policy Review Committee (APRC), an ad hoc committee of the Academic Governance and Policy Committee (AGPC), has a mandate to review five academic policies and make its recommendations to AGPC, which then makes recommendations for policy revisions to Senate. The academic policies under review by the APRC are:
- 134: Undergraduate Academic Consideration and Appeals;
- 135: Examinations;
- 145: Course Management - Undergraduate;
- 151: Course Management – Yeates School of Graduate Studies; and
- 152: Graduate Student Academic Consideration and Appeals.

To date, Senate has approved Policy 162: Grade Reassessment and Grade Recalculation (formerly part of Policy 134 and Policy 152) as well as a revised Policy 135: Final Examinations.

This report summarizes the findings of two pilots that the APRC initiated during the 2017-2018 academic year: a pilot of an online system for requesting academic consideration on health grounds, and a pilot of student self-declaration of extenuating circumstances to request academic consideration. The report also outlines the APRC's recommendations based on the results of each pilot.

Pilot of Academic Consideration Request (ACR) Online System

Background Information: In its report to Senate (January 2017), the APRC summarized its findings from stakeholder consultations regarding the policy and procedures for requesting academic consideration for missed work based on medical grounds. One of the issues raised in the consultations was the need for clear and consistent procedures for processing requests for academic consideration. At the time, one Faculty was using an online system designed in-house to process students' academic consideration requests, and another Faculty was planning to develop its own online system for processing such requests.

Given the growing interest in an online system and the advantages of a single, central system that could be used by all Ryerson students, the APRC worked with Ryerson's Computing and Communications Services (CCS) to develop a customized online system for students to submit their requests for academic consideration.[1] In October 2017, the Ted Rogers School of Management (TRSM) volunteered to pilot the academic consideration request online system with all undergraduate students in their Faculty. The Faculty of Engineering and Architectural Science joined the pilot in Winter 2018.

Description of the Online System: Students log into the system using their Ryerson student number and select the term for which they are requesting academic consideration. Because the system is integrated with RAMSS (Ryerson's Administrative Management Self Service), all of a student's courses that term appear, along with the instructors' names, allowing the student to select the courses in which an academic obligation will be missed. Students are also able to

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[1] The APRC acknowledges and thanks the CCS team of Ayu Er, Paul Harding, Yaghoub Soltanpour, and Mithura Jeyarajan for the development and ongoing refinement of the academic consideration online system and for training faculty and staff to use the system.

select the evaluation they are missing in each affected course and are given the option of uploading documentation (e.g., a Ryerson Health Certificate) to support their request. When students submit their online request, a notification email is automatically sent to their program department and to the instructors of courses for which they are requesting academic consideration. After the program department receives and reviews students' health certificates or other relevant documentation, the department sends an automated email notification to the students and their instructors, informing them as to whether the documentation has been verified.

Advantages of the ACR Online System. The online system has a number of advantages.

1. Administrative Efficiency
   The system eliminates errors, illegibility, and missing information that often occur when students complete the hard copy academic consideration request form. It saves students time because they do not need to notify individual instructors and their program department that they will be missing an academic obligation. The system also allows program departments to process student requests in an efficient and timely manner.

2. Getting Needed Help for Students
   The system allows program departments to readily identify students who may be experiencing challenges that are affecting their academic studies. It automatically records, per term and over a student's academic career, the total number of requests a student submits for academic consideration. When students submit a second request for academic consideration in a term, an automated email is sent to inform them of on-campus support services (centrally and at the Faculty level) to help them overcome any academic and/or personal challenges that may be affecting their studies. The automated email message also informs students that, if they have repeated requests for academic consideration, they may be required to meet with the Chair/Director of their program department to ensure that they are aware of available supports appropriate for their needs.

3. Tracking Correlations
   Because the system integrates with RAMSS, it is possible to assess whether requests for academic consideration are correlated with other variables (e.g., difficulty of course, grade in a course, GPA, etc.).

Results of Pilot: A survey was sent to TRSM students at the end of the Fall 2017 term to assess their experience with the online system. Feedback was also solicited from TRSM staff and faculty. The student survey results revealed that the majority strongly agreed that the new automated system was easier to use and allowed for academic consideration requests to be processed faster than the previous process used in TRSM. They also rated the new online system as more secure because it required them to log into RAMMS. The most frequent suggestion for change was to allow students to submit their health documentation online rather than being required to submit a hard copy to their program office. The overwhelming majority of student respondents (91%) recommended that the online system be available to all students at Ryerson. The feedback from TRSM staff and faculty was equally positive. TRSM staff were particularly pleased with the administrative efficiency of the online system.

The TRSM study had implications beyond the question of whether to implement an online system across the University. Because of the system's amenability to tracking correlations, it provided interesting evidence on how requests for academic consideration are correlated with other variables such as the difficulty of a course, a student's grade in a course, the student's

GPA, etc. The TRSM data analysis revealed that health certificates were used more frequently in academically challenging courses and that students with CGPAs at or near the minimum requirement for a Clear academic standing were more likely to submit requests for academic consideration, regardless of the difficulty of the course in question. Even after providing academic consideration, 35% of those students either failed or dropped the course.[2] We will return to these issues at the end of this document.

Recommendations

Based in part on the results from the TRSM pilot, APRC recommends the following changes to the procedures for requesting academic consideration:

1. **That undergraduate students in all programs be required to submit their requests for academic consideration based on health grounds via the online system**. As of Fall 2018, undergraduate students in TRSM and FEAS are joined by those in the Faculty of Arts and the Faculty of Science in being able to access the online system. The plan is to implement the online system for undergraduate students in the remaining Faculties and the Chang School by the end of Spring/Summer 2019. Consultations with programs will determine whether the service should also be available for graduate students.

2. **That students' uploaded documentation be accepted without the requirement of submitting the original hard copy document to the program office.** If this procedure is adopted, students would be required to retain the hard copy document, in the event that the program department and/or instructor ask to see it or for random audits (which program departments could conduct periodically). In addition, students would be warned that misrepresentation of facts may constitute academic misconduct and would be subject to the processes, penalties and consequences, as outlined in Ryerson's Policy 60: Academic Integrity. Such a procedure would provide advantages of both efficiency and consistency. With a single, campus-wide system, processing times for academic consideration requests will be much faster, valuable staff time spent handling hard copy documents will be saved, and it will be far easier to retrieve documentation and to ensure that it is being universally managed in ways that comply with Ryerson regulations governing the protection and retention of private student records.

   The APRC will work with Faculties that are interested in piloting this procedure in Winter 2019.

3. **That the online system be expanded to allow students to request academic consideration based on compassionate grounds as well as to request academic accommodation for student religious, Aboriginal and spiritual observance.** Currently, the online system allows students to request academic consideration for health reasons only. However, the system was designed, and can be readily adapted, to include requests based on other grounds.

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[2] The APRC acknowledges and thanks Dr. Allen Goss, TRSM Associate Dean, Students, for the analysis and summary of the TRSM academic consideration request data from October 2017-June 2018.

Pilot of Self-Declarations

In its report to Senate (January 2017), the APRC highlighted the numerous concerns raised during the consultation process about the policy of requiring a health certificate to document health grounds for academic consideration. For example, Ryerson's current policy on academic consideration allows students to submit the health certificate three days after the missed evaluation. By the time students make their medical appointment, they often show no signs of illness, so health care professionals must base their assessment on students' self-report of illness. In this respect, the current system is a self-declaration system, but with a health care professional as intermediary. More generally, doctors aren't always able to 'verify' certain illnesses. Many illnesses have few or no objective signs, and thus many medical certificates have no real value as the doctor can only repeat what the patient says.

An additional concern is that the use of health certificates places significant burdens on the public health care system, which is paying for an office visit for each health certificate completed; on the student who is usually paying an additional fee to the health professional; and on the faculty and staff who must process them. Medical associations in some provinces (e.g., Ontario, Alberta, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland and Labrador) have criticized employers' and universities' requirement of 'sick notes'. They claim that the practice clogs medical offices with people who aren't sick or who are sick but don't need treatment, and they suggest that it represents a wasteful use of resources in the medical system. There are health-related concerns expressed by these medical associations as well. Requiring students to visit a physician's office when they are sick but don't require treatment, unnecessarily exposes vulnerable populations (the elderly, the immune-compromised, and the young) to illnesses.

Given these concerns, some Canadian universities allow students, under certain conditions, to self-declare illness or other extenuating circumstances rather than obtain a health certificate. The APRC saw the usefulness of a pilot of self-declarations, and the Department of Mechanical and Industrial Engineering (MIE) volunteered to undertake such an initiative. During the 2017-2018 academic year, undergraduate MIE students who were seeking academic consideration were allowed – under defined circumstances – to use a self-declaration form rather than a Ryerson Health Certificate or other documentation if health or personal circumstances significantly impaired their ability to meet their academic obligations.

MIE students could use a self-declaration form if: (1) it was their first self-declaration that term; (2) the extenuating circumstances were acute, lasting for three days or less; (3) academic consideration was being requested for no more than two academic obligations; and (4) the missed academic obligation was not a final exam or group work. If additional requests for academic consideration needed to be made in a term, students were required to meet with their program director and submit standard documentation (i.e., a Ryerson Health Certificate in the case of health-related circumstances).

The results showed that, during the 2017-2018 academic year, 104 self-declarations were used, in addition to 490 health certificates.[3] Of the students who submitted self-declarations, 27% submitted only self-declarations with no subsequent health certificate(s). The remainder of these students who submitted self-declarations (73%) also submitted health certificates.

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[3] The APRC acknowledges and thanks Dr. Jacob Friedman for the analysis and summary of the 2017-2018 self-declaration data in the Department of Mechanical and Industrial Engineering.

The total number of requests for academic consideration in the department during the pilot period represented a 20% increase over the previous academic year. This seems like a very substantial increase, considering enrolments only increased by approximately 3%. But when breaking down the data based on the way consideration requests were submitted, it was revealed that the number of health certificates submitted was the same number as the previous year, suggesting that self-declarations did not displace health certificates, but added to them.

A close analysis of the data revealed more as well. There was no change in the number of students who submitted one or two academic consideration requests prior to and after the introduction of self-declarations. However, the number of students who submitted three or more requests increased substantially in 2017-2018. Since students could have submitted a maximum of two self-declarations, the majority of academic consideration requests submitted by students who made multiple requests were health certificates. Specifically, students who submitted more than three requests for academic consideration in a year were the ones most likely to use self-declarations and were the ones most responsible for the 20% increase in consideration requests over the year. The department suggested that the availability of self-declarations had limited impact on these students as they would likely have submitted health certificates if self-declaration had not been an option.

The department met with students after two academic consideration requests were submitted in a term to express their concern for the students' well-being and to suggest on-campus resources. However, the department acknowledged the need for guidance on how to conduct these meetings and how to respond to students who continue to submit multiple requests for academic consideration.

The department noted some limitations with the data. The self-declaration pilot began mid-way through the Fall 2017 term, and the online academic consideration request system began mid-way through the Winter 2018 term. Department staff noted a submission spike when the online system went live, which may have affected the results. It was also noted that the department was working with only half of a semester of online data, which limited the range of possible analysis. For these reasons, the department is continuing the self-declaration pilot for the Fall 2018 term, which will result in a full set of data that can be assessed in detail.

Summary

Both the TRSM pilot of the ACR online system and MIE's self-declaration pilot have yielded valuable results as the APRC considers recommended policy revisions. The data from both pilots indicate a high number of academic consideration requests. In TRSM, 20% of undergraduate students submitted at least one request for academic consideration during an eight-month period, with over 6,000 academic obligations requiring alternate arrangements (e.g., make-up tests). The majority of requests for academic consideration were for health issues lasting between two to four days. In MIE during Fall 2017/Winter 2018, 24% of undergraduate students submitted at least one request for academic consideration, with 837 academic obligations requiring alternate arrangements.

In the APRC's view, such numbers have two main implications. First, there are significant benefits to be gained in ensuring the effective management of academic consideration requests of all sorts. Second, there is room for further study of how best to deal with students who, for whatever reason, submit multiple requests during a single semester.

Recommendations

Based on these observations, the APRC makes the following two additional recommendations related to the management of academic consideration requests. The APRC recommends that:

1. **in defined circumstances, verification documentation not be required for students seeking academic consideration due to extenuating circumstances.** Instead, students experiencing extenuating circumstances would, in defined circumstances, self-declare by notifying their Program Department and instructors. Adopting self-declarations would support students who have legitimate extenuating circumstances that affect negatively their ability to meet their academic obligations.

    The APRC will produce, for community consultation and feedback, a discussion paper that outlines various models for self-declarations, and the advantages and disadvantages of each.

2. **the use of health certificates – and, if adopted, self-declarations – be monitored over the next two years as more Faculties join the ACR online system.** This monitoring will allow us to assess whether there are cross-Faculty differences in the percentage of students submitting requests for academic consideration during an academic term/year. More importantly, it will facilitate the rational assessment of the extent to which students benefit from the combination of academic consideration and related advising (see #3 below).

3. **Schools/Departments/Faculties be encouraged to develop strategies to address the inappropriate use of requests for academic consideration—either health certificates or (if adopted) self-declarations.** Such strategies could take a range of forms. For example, departments and schools with a high number of requests for academic consideration related to courses seen as challenging should explore ways to support students in those courses. Where the number of requests for academic consideration reveals students who are struggling academically, strategies should be developed to ensure that those students are aware of relevant campus services. Such initiatives will benefit from the added student-specific information that will be provided by the ACR online system as it is extended across campus.

    Departments and schools may also consider training for chairs/directors and program staff to ensure that requests for academic consideration are addressed consistently and fairly. This is especially important in the cases where different personnel meet with students who have submitted more than two academic consideration requests in a term, to ensure consistency of the advice being provided.

Respectfully submitted,

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