November 12, 2021

Re: Attendance Policies Effective Spring 2022

Colleagues:

As we continue to make progress toward a more normal academic environment on campus, we recognize that experiences from the pandemic reinforce the need to continue clear and practical policies that will help students succeed in the semesters ahead. With these factors in mind, the Academic Affairs Task Force and the Provost hereby provide an updated attendance policy.

Both the Faculty/Administration Manual (VIII.A.9) and the Catalog emphasize the importance of attendance, stating that “students are expected to attend all classes and laboratory meetings of each course in which they enroll.” In practice, of course, students may miss class for any number of legitimate reasons, including the need to isolate or quarantine because of COVID-19. Instructors have primary authority to determine the best way to address absences in their classes but must provide reasonable accommodations in certain circumstances. In addition, all absence and late-work policies should be provided in the syllabus and are subject to the approval of the department chair.

1. **The Absence Memo process will not be reinstated.** Historically, many instructors relied on absence memos to decide how to handle a particular absence. In recent years, however, it became clear that the process was more burdensome and less effective than intended. Students frequently sought out memos for conditions that were not externally verifiable (such as migraines) or better managed by self-care at home (colds). Worse, when students sought absence memos for contagious illnesses, they exposed other students to infection—a concern not only during COVID-19 but also during a regular flu season. Ultimately, absence memo requests overwhelmed Student Health Services, potentially contributed to the spread of disease, and yielded a deluge of memos of uncertain value. Eliminating this process was consistent with the practice at other institutions across the country.

2. **Instructors should adopt policies that address occasional absences or late work.** Departments may also adopt policies that cover some or all of their courses. These policies may include grade penalties, including failure for excessive absences. (Note that the Faculty Senate eliminated the WA grade option on January 14, 2020; students who violate these policies should be given an F instead.) Instructors may also decide not to record attendance at all except as required for attendance verification.

3. **Instructors should endeavor to provide reasonable accommodations for major life disruptions.** Occasionally, students will experience an event that causes a significant and sustained disruption to their progress in a course—a disruption that goes beyond the occasional absences noted above. Examples include serious illness or injury (including the need to quarantine or isolate because of COVID-19), victimization, legal obligations, or military service. The precise implementation of “reasonable accommodations” will naturally differ from course to course, but generally speaking, a reasonable accommodation provides a student with the opportunity to continue making progress in the course but does not compromise the course’s goals and learning objectives. Students may directly notify instructors of these disruptions; notification may also come from the Dean of Students’
Office. Some examples include hospitalizations, victimizations, death of a family member, military service, or other unpredictable life emergencies handled on a case-by-case basis. Regardless of any accommodation granted, students are responsible for satisfying all academic objectives, requirements, and prerequisites as defined by the instructor and the College. If a particular situation cannot be accommodated during the course of the semester, students can withdraw from the class, request an incomplete (if the instructor agrees), or petition for a late withdrawal under some circumstances.

4. **COVID-related absences might require different accommodations.** Given the need to quarantine or isolate, a student or group of students might be absent from a course for an extended period of time. In these situations, instructors have several options. They may move the entire course online for the duration of the quarantine period, record class periods and share them with the quarantined students, or choose some other accommodation that provides students with the opportunity to continue in the course. Instructors, in consultation with their chairs, have the discretion to choose the approach that works best for their course.

5. **Instructors must provide reasonable accommodations in certain circumstances,** including representation of the College at academic, artistic, or athletic events and disability accommodations that allow for a reasonable number of absences. Students representing the College are required to submit documentation of their College representation-related commitment from the appropriate College authority at least one week prior to the scheduled absence in order to be eligible for reasonable accommodations by the instructor. Students with disability accommodations must provide the instructor with the appropriate Professor Notification Letter (PNL) in a timely fashion.

6. **Limit requests for documentation.** In some situations, such as a missed final exam, instructors might wish to request some sort of documentation. These requests should be made judiciously. Instructors should refrain from requesting detailed medical information and keep in mind that some exigent circumstances cannot be documented. If instructors have cause to believe that a student is being dishonest about the reason for an absence, they may report that potential Honor Code violation to the Dean of Students.

7. **Use the FAST system.** As always, instructors are encouraged to use FAST to notify appropriate College personnel of any student who seems to be struggling, whether because of excessive absences, personal circumstances, or any other cause.

Sincerely,

Suzanne Austin