

November 16, 1993

COLLEGE POLICY COMMITTEE SUPPORT FOR TEACHING TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS

Over the past 18 months the College Policy Committee has been heavily involved in the issue of teaching and learning on the IUB campus. Our interest and concern were strongly influenced by the Bloomington Faculty Council Commission on Teaching and COAS Teaching Task Force Reports. The College Teaching Task Force has recently completed and distributed a second report that focuses on the academic environment for undergraduates, and includes many recommendations. There is support on the College Policy Committee for all of these recommendations and very strong support for most of them. We submit to you three recommendations that we believe will contribute to an improvement in the academic environment.

A "more challenging academic environment" is the phrase currently in vogue that is used to describe the need for change. What this typically means is that we think students should dedicate more time and effort to their academic pursuits relative to their non-academic pursuits. Both more time and higher quality time appear to be needed. Since learning takes place primarily on the basis of student effort, these higher expectations are appropriate. Our teaching will be most productive when we inspire, induce, and--yes--demand a more focused student effort as the basis for academic success.

The responsibility for setting standards obviously belongs to the faculty. Students experience many conflicting demands on their time, including academic, social and economic pressures. While from our own experience we understand and sympathize with this universal problem, we as faculty must ensure the primacy of the learning experience. Therefore it is our responsibility to create a more challenging academic environment. On the Bloomington campus we provide over 70% A's and B's for an average of 12 hours of study time per week by full time students. Almost everyone says that the Dean of Faculties study on students' use of time has "flaws" (was there ever an empirical study that did not?) but we have not found either students or faculty willing to claim that the results clearly miss the mark. Students tell us in candid conversations that if we want more student effort we will have to set a higher standard.

When we accept responsibility for the student's success, or fail to establish a framework that expects concentrated effort from them throughout the semester, they will "game" us down to low academic standards. They have done this already and the primary fault is not their's. Much less learning goes into their degree than could have been accomplished--including less knowledge, perspective, analytical skill, self discipline, planning and organizing skills, and personal responsibility for their own success. The student suffers the most from this state of affairs in terms of lost potential. The faculty and the institution also lose substantially over a long period of time, including the loss of academic reputation, and the "sense of malaise about our commitment to teaching" (Faculty Council Commission on Teaching, Report, 2/21/92, p.1).

We are not alone in addressing these issues. There is clearly a nationwide concern with the

declining quality of undergraduate education. However, improving the academic environment, whether nationally or locally, will not come from some highly focused effort with an expectation of immediate results. Such an approach could do great harm. Neither will it come exclusively, or even importantly from exhortations to faculty to put more effort into their undergraduate teaching. We have had exhortations and guidance for many years, and most of us are putting more effort into undergraduate teaching. Improvement will come from many modest, but significant changes in policies--and time. It is in this spirit that the recommendations of the COAS Task Force on Teaching are made.

All policies have unintended consequences. It is our judgment that the unintended consequences of the FX and eight week automatic withdrawal policies are negative and sufficiently strong to override their intended positive contribution to the academic climate by a significant margin. These are policies whose real genesis was the claimed irrelevance of grades as an appropriate index of standards that grew out of the campus milieu during and after the Vietnam war. Their academic rationale was that they would complement student learning efforts. Over time they have extensively been turned into a substitute for student learning efforts that erodes standards of preparation and thus the classroom atmosphere.

The indexing proposal, known locally as the "Edgerton Proposal", may have the long term effect of slowing or even reversing the grade inflation of the last 25 years. Whether it does or not, it will have other desirable consequences described below.

1. The COAS Policy Committee recommends that the FX policy be eliminated.

Learning in the university requires from the student a serious commitment to one's courses and a sustained, responsible effort to develop skills and master material. There is widespread agreement among faculty that the current FX policy militates against such commitment and responsibility. It encourages students to withhold their wholehearted commitment to a course by leaving open until the course's end the option of cancelling the final grade from their record. Moreover, if the grade is low, but not an F, it leads students to request that faculty give them an F. Faculty find such requests upsetting and even demeaning, to them and to the students involved. The FX policy has already been eliminated by the College, the Business School, and the School of Journalism. Other withdrawal policies and academic bankruptcy remain in place for students with good reasons to withdraw from courses or to eliminate extraordinarily poor performance from their record.

2. The COAS Policy Committee recommends that the Edgerton proposal be implemented.

This grade indexing proposal for reporting grades on official transcripts states that alongside the student's final grade is printed the ratio of all those students receiving that grade or higher to the total number of students receiving final grades; e.g. 27/150 on a transcript would signify that 27 students out of a class of 150 received the indicated grade or higher.

Grades reported with ratios will provide an important context for those reading the transcripts and will better communicate the meaning of the grade in a particular class. For a variety of reasons, undergraduate admissions and scholarship organizations such as Phi Beta Kappa are

now indexing grades in different ways, sometimes by identifying grade distributions, sometimes by only counting grades in certain courses. This proposal seeks to index grades for all undergraduate courses. People who read undergraduate transcripts are generally well informed about their meaning. Under this policy they will be given information that will help them to evaluate performance in large introductory and intermediate courses; at the same time they will realize that smaller seminars and upper division-courses are more selective, and that overall higher grades in such courses are to be expected. Both faculty and students will see that easy grading will disadvantage students who attain a high level of scholarship. The results should increase student responsibility, encourage students to take difficult courses, and better reward excellence in demanding courses.

3. The COAS Policy Committee recommends that the final date for automatic withdrawal be set at the Wednesday after the end of the fourth week of classes in a semester.

Students should be in an academic climate that requires them to take responsibility for a course early and prevents the delay of commitment until midterm. Just as drop and add, although a necessary device for settling registration problems, compromises the early sessions of a class, so does late automatic withdrawal diminish the sense of mutual commitment in a class. Especially when classes require student collaboration and serious student participation, early commitment to the course is tremendously important. Four weeks should be sufficient time to make such a decision. Moreover, there will still be opportunity to apply for special permission to withdraw in extraordinary circumstances. Shortening the period for automatic withdrawal will undoubtedly create some problems (some of these are addressed below) but it will indicate our strong desire that both students and faculty make a serious mutual commitment to learning at an early point in the semester.

We should be concerned about the impact of this policy change on Freshmen. However, we do not believe the current automatic withdrawal policy is, on balance, a positive factor in the package of policies that address the trauma and uncertainties in their adjustment to college life. It allows their "naivete" and, all too often, their poor study habits to continue for at least a half semester. There should be significant feedback during the first four weeks of beginning level courses. For higher level courses feedback is still important, but we should expect students to develop self-assessment skills.

There will be numerous adjustment problems for both students and faculty with this policy change. To ease these problems we recommend that there be a phase in policy that shortens the automatic withdrawal period by one week each semester for two years.

We recognize that there is no magic to a four week automatic withdrawal period as compared, for example, to a three or five week period. An alternative policy at Penn State has an early withdrawal period of three weeks, and an extended withdrawal period of four through eleven weeks. However, a student cannot use this extended withdrawal period for more than sixteen credit hours of withdrawal during their undergraduate career. While the policy committee recommends a four week automatic withdrawal deadline, we would welcome the opportunity to discuss effective alternatives.

We believe the proposed policy changes will have both a symbolic and a substantive effect on the academic climate for undergraduates, and will provide long run benefits to both students and faculty.