

The Withdrawal Policy – Revisited

Some of you have been at this institution for multiple iterations of this policy revision, for others of you it may be your first pass. Whatever your personal history is with this policy, we sincerely thank you for taking the time to weigh in on this topic.

Historically, as our committee has come to understand, this has been a fairly polarizing topic at SCCC. This W Policy subcommittee has worked to try to understand both sides of the argument and to understand the strengths and weaknesses of prior proposals. As part of that process we are inviting you to engage in this blackboard discussion. We have separated this forum into five separate threads which allow you to provide insight on each element of the proposal as well as the proposal as a whole.

Why now? Why again?

Excellent questions! Because we don't think we've gotten it right quite yet. In addition to engaging in discourse with all of you, we have also been hard at work culling together relevant data at our institution and researching the policies at the other 29 SUNY Community Colleges.

Simply put, in 2019 our current policy does not align with that of other institutions. For example, upon examination of the other SUNY CCs, only five others allow for faculty to sign a withdrawal form until the end of the semester. Of those five schools, three of them require some sort of documentation for an extenuating circumstance to correspond a withdrawal that occurs after the student-initiated period. Therefore, the policy at these three schools which allow end-of-semester withdrawals, states that students are not automatically withdrawn for failure to attend or due to a failing grade (**W policies – CC research**).

Also, education evolves! Maintaining the status quo, in part, means we are not evolving in step with the shift in educational practices, funding changes, and the other complexities of higher education.

What's the harm in our policy? We've done this for so long. Why change?

Well, that one we don't have a simple answer for. It's complex. There are many potential harms as outlined below:

1. For many of our students we are a transfer institution, and our transcripts are legal documents. If the standard of a W in our SUNY CC system is that it is student-initiated and happens roughly between midterm to the 11th week of the semester (as per CC research above), then we are not in line with that standard. The very schools our students apply to are reading those W's as student-initiated and by a reasonable cutoff point in the semester. That is not what our W's mean --- a W on a SCCC transcript can mean any of the following:
 - a. Student initiated by mid-semester

- b. Student initiated anytime before the end of the semester
 - c. Student stopped attending (NA during enrollment verification roster)
 - d. Medical Withdrawal or Withdrawal for no vaccination
 - e. Faculty initiated from the drop down menu (which from face-to-face discourse with faculty means anything from the student asked the professor to do so ["student initiated" but the registrar has no written proof of that], to the faculty initiated a W for student non-attending "disappearing student", to the faculty initiating a W instead of a F). For 2016 first-time, full time students (FTFT), 41.6% of all W's that semester were initiated by the student drop down menu. In fact, the majority of W's received in all 3 samples assessed (FTFT Fall 2008, 2016, and 2018) were submitted via the faculty drop-down menu (**W Policy Subcommittee_OPIE data, pp 2-4**).
2. The W affects a lot of students. Of Fall 2016 FTFT students, 24.8% received at least 1 W on his or her transcript (**W Policy Subcommittee_OPIE data, p 1**).
 3. According to verbal correspondence with Nancy Brewer (11/28/18), the majority of SCCC students lose their financial aid to lack of completion (2/3rds standard), rather than due to low GPA. Please note that receiving a "F" in a course is considered a completion for financial aid standards. Although faculty cannot decide to withdraw students based on financial aid implications, it should be noted that some of our students have been negatively impacted by faculty members who have initiated the W at the end of the semester.
 - a. Further, when the students ask faculty to sign the Registrar Withdrawal form, the last date of attendance MUST be inputted. In the case where it is not inputted, the registrar is forced to put the mid-semester date for reporting purposes. At times, this leaves students with bills they were not expecting to receive, as they often have to pay back part of their financial aid.
 - i. This subcommittee has been informed of several student cases where students try to return to SCCC at a later date and are denied until they pay their remaining debt. Some of our students go into collections due to their unpaid financial bills
 - ii. Other student cases that our committee has heard include the fact that the student transfers to a 4-year school and they run out of aid with one year left and are crippled by school debt.
 - b. To circle back to the "why now?" question – As the college is difficult financial situation due to changes in FT and PT student funding from the state and low student enrollment, we would want to minimize this debt as much as possible. The college writes off an average of *one million dollars* of unpaid student financial debt per year (W Policy Subcommittee meeting, 11/28/18), some of which stems from the financial aid payback as outlined above.
 4. This policy also has had some adverse consequences for certain sub-populations of students (ex: Veterans, ACCES_VR). For students who may be not only receiving financial aid for schooling, but also housing aid, there are guidelines that prohibit these students from being withdrawn on the last day of class. It is reasonable to expect that in some situations faculty do not know the student's aid and they initiate a withdrawal for lack of

attendance or a failing grade, and then the student not only would likely have to pay back part of their aid, but also part of their housing allowance.

You're taking away our academic freedom!

1. First, we hear you and we are listening. However, as a committee, we wholeheartedly do not believe this policy falls under the purview of academic freedom. Faculty maintains the right to apply a fair grading policy to his or her students. Faculty have the right to weight their assignments as s/he deems fit and appropriate to the course. Faculty maintain the right to assign an Incomplete in those end-of-semester situations where a student cannot complete the semester and where it may be beneficial for that student to be afforded more time to complete that task. A "W" is not a grade. It's an action. A student earns the grade they receive. A student doesn't *earn* a W. Rather, they *initiate* a W; it's a *process*.

A "F" is worse for student retention than a "W"!

1. Research would actually say that it depends on the student. There are a multitude of factors that impact retention. For some students, when they are faced with needing to persist at a task to avoid a consequence (i.e., complete a course and try to pass), they rise to the occasion and pass. For others, this may not serve beneficial. In order to provide support for the statement above, we'd have to conduct a quasi-experimental design to begin to explore the causal relationship between course outcomes and retention. That goes beyond the scope of this subcommittee; however, descriptive analysis provided by OPIE *does not support* the idea that an F would have a greater negative impact on future performance compared to a W. We asked OPIE to calculate the outcomes for students that either had a W or F (R or U) in a course on their first attempt. 60.3% of students who withdrew on the first attempt received a passing grade on their last attempt in the same course; whereas 62.7% of students who received a F (R or U) on the first attempt received a passing grade on their last attempt in the same course (**W Policy Subcommittee_OPIE data, p 7**).