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**Proposed Revision of CSU Academic Policies on Course Credits:  
Incompletes, Withdrawals, and Repeats**

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## I. Introduction

In December 2002, a CSU Task Force on Facilitating Graduation released a report entitled “Facilitating Student Success in Achieving the Baccalaureate Degree.” In addition to reviewing preparation for college study, student engagement, and student services, the task force also recommended a review of academic policies, specifically on drops, withdrawals, incompletes and repeats (DWIR).

This recommendation took on added energy when Clifford Adelman, formerly Senior Research Analyst at the U.S. Department of Education, released, in 2006, a follow-up to “The Toolbox Revisited” (1999). The new report, “The Toolbox Revisited: Paths to Degree Completion from High School through College,” demonstrated clearly that students who accumulated excessive withdrawals and repeats cut in half their chances of earning a degree. According to Adelman:

Both the original *Tool Box* and *The Toolbox Revisited* revealed that one of the most degree-crippling features of undergraduate histories is an excessive volume of courses from which the student withdrew *without penalty* and those the student repeated. . . . The withdrawals counted here are not “drop” grades that apply during standard drop-and-add periods at the beginning of terms. They are the result of institutional policies that allow withdrawals without penalty after the drop-and-add period. No-credit repeats are standard fare in remedial courses, but when they reach destructive levels the question arises as to how many times an institution allows a student to repeat a course. Think of it this way: Every non-penalty withdrawal and no-credit repeat means that a seat in a course is not available to someone else. Add those seats up, and admission to an institution may not be available to someone else. Excessively lax withdrawal and repeat policy, then, ultimately blocks general access. And in terms of degree completion, such policies do students no favors.

Generally, CSU policies have not been restrictive and punitive. We have embraced second chances – as well as third and fourth and fifth. This relaxed approach works well when money flows freely and when all qualified students who want to be enrolled can be enrolled in the CSU. However, in 2007, that condition doesn’t exist. Today students who accumulate excess units via withdrawals and repeats are also denying a spot in the CSU to other qualified students.

To address the issue of drops, withdrawals, incompletes, and repeats, the CSU Chancellor's Office convened a task force of faculty, students, student services administrators, provosts, and C.O. staff to review CSU academic policies. In addition, the Task Force chose to look at fees as a way of encouraging student progress to a degree.

The Task Force reviewed two key documents: (1) "Executive Order No. 792, Grading Symbols, Assignment of Grades, and Grade Appeals" (November 12, 2001), and (2) "Executive Order No. 213, Academic Renewal" (December 16, 1974). The general consensus of the committee was to give CSU campuses as much flexibility as possible while trying to develop system policy recommendations that could serve as a framework for campus policy.

## **II. Regarding Incompletes**

The Task Force agreed that the policy is sound, but that the policy is likely to be unevenly enforced. Administrators and faculty should work together to ensure that system and campus policies are understood and enforced.

The Task Force proposed that this statement be added to E.O. 792, Item #2: "A student cannot re-enroll in a course for which he or she received an "I", until the "I" is converted to a grade."

## **III. Regarding Withdrawals**

The Task Force agreed that the policy is sound but may be unevenly enforced.

The Task Force proposed that E.O. 792, Item #6, be revised to include these statements:

- A. Students may withdraw from no more than 18 semester units (27quarter units).
- B. In only one semester (quarter) term, students may withdraw from multiple courses and can elect to have that term count for at most 6 semester (9 quarter) units of withdrawals.
- C. Withdrawals accumulated at other colleges by transfer students will count towards this limit, but only up to a maximum of 10 semester units (15 quarter units).
- D. Withdrawal from a course beyond the limits specified will result in a grade of "F" or "WU."
- E. This policy specifies CSU system maximums only. CSU campuses are free to develop more restrictive policies if they choose to do so.

## IV. Regarding Course Repeats

“E.O. 213, Academic Renewal,” promulgated over 30 years ago puts no limits on the number of courses that students can repeat. The Task Force agreed that this was perhaps an overly lenient and tolerant policy, especially from a public policy point of view. Today students who accumulate excessive repeats are denying a spot in the CSU to other qualified students. With this in mind, many CSU campuses have limited the number of units or courses that can be repeated. CSU repeat policies, as described in campus catalogs, show that there are basically two types of repeats:

*Repeats with grade forgiveness:* Students can repeat a course with the intention of earning a higher grade. In most cases, the original grade is deleted, and the repeat grade is used in calculating the GPA. This is sometimes called “repeat and cancel,” “repeat and delete,” “repeat with grade substitution,” “academic renewal,” and “discounting of a grade.”

*Repeats with grades averaged:* A student repeats a course. Both the original grade and the repeat grade are calculated into the student’s overall GPA.

The CSU Task Force studied CSU campus policies as well as the policies of more than 20 peer universities across the nation. On the basis of this work, the Task Force recommends that the language below replace the text on repeats in E.O. 213:

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- A. This policy does not apply to certain courses such as independent study, practicum, or other courses specified in the catalog as “may be repeated for credit.”
  - B. The policy specifies CSU system maximums only. CSU campuses are free to develop more restrictive policies if they choose to do so.
  - C. Undergraduate students may repeat up to 24 semester-units (36 quarter-units) on a state-supported basis. Beyond these limits, students would not be eligible to enroll in the class by paying the normal state-assisted fee.
  - D. The campus can determine the appropriate balance between “grade forgiveness” repeats and “grades averaged” repeats, so long as there are no more than 16 semester-units (24 quarter-units) with grade forgiveness. (See F.1)
  - E. Undergraduate students may repeat courses only if they earned grades lower than B-.
  - F. Course repeats with “grade forgiveness”:
    - 1. Undergraduate students may repeat no more than 16 semester-units (24 quarter-units) with grade forgiveness.
    - 2. Undergraduate students may repeat an individual course for grade forgiveness no more than two times.

3. In computing grade point averages, only the most recently earned grades and grade points will be used for the 16 semester-units (24 quarter-units) repeated.
4. Courses repeated at other colleges before transferring to a CSU campus count toward the 16 semester-units (24 quarter-units) maximum.
5. A grade awarded as a result of academic dishonesty cannot be repeated for grade forgiveness.

G. Course repeats with “grades averaged”:

Beyond the allowable units for grade forgiveness, the repeat grade shall not replace the original grade; instead all grades shall be calculated into the student’s overall grade-point average.

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## **V. Enforcing Existing Policy**

In reviewing the CSU policies surrounding DWIR, the Task Force noted that, with the exception of the academic renewal policy, the current policies on drops, withdrawals, and incompletes are sound. The Task Force also found that these sound policies were sometimes unevenly enforced, perhaps because faculty and students did not fully understand the meaning of an “I” or a “W.” For example, the “I” should be used when students cannot complete work “for unforeseen reasons.” Similarly, a withdrawal after the census date and prior to the last 20 percent of instruction is granted “only for serious and compelling reasons.” That these grading symbols are sometimes misunderstood and misused is no surprise. Executive Order 792 consists of seven single-spaced pages, and few faculty and students would want to pore over the document. Therefore, a few CSU campuses have developed “plain English” ways to educate faculty, staff, and students. At CSU Chico, for example, at the end of every semester, the registrar sends to faculty members a “plain English” explanation of the grade options for students who never withdrew from class but stopped attending during the term.

## **VI. Considering Incentives and Disincentives**

In order to serve future students, all current students will have to be more focused and purposeful in their coursework. To encourage these behaviors, the CSU might consider the possibility of incentives and disincentives. For example, the CSU could give a financial reward to students who complete their studies without incurring any withdrawals or repeats. Or, on the other hand, students who drop a course could be charged a fee.

## **VII: Conclusion: Considering Public Policy**

Academic policies that involve course credits pose true dilemmas for university faculty and administrators. On the one hand, we want students to succeed, and we want them to have the freedom to choose majors and the initiative to be ambitious and over-achieving in their course-taking. Therefore, if the students do overextend themselves, the punishment for these lapses in judgment is fairly gentle; the penalty for drops and withdrawals is no course credit awarded—a statement of “no harm done.” On the other hand, we have to be good stewards of faculty time and university facilities. When faculty teaching a course see the same faces reappear term after term, year after year, because these students have dropped or withdrawn or are repeating to get better grades, these professors are increasing their workload and circumscribing their freedom to teach other classes. In addition, a student who sits in a course until midterm only and then withdraws effectively prevents another student from sitting in that same seat for the entire term and earning credit. The balance between “no harm done” and the stress on faculty and physical resources must be considered.

**Attachments: Executive Orders - Grading Symbols, Academic Renewal**