

Attendance Policy

Executive Summary of Feedback Received from the Portal

Thank you to everyone who took the time to comment on MCC's draft policy and draft procedure on Student Attendance. The MCC comments portal closed on June 15, 2019 with 52 separate commenters submitting thoughts, concerns, and suggestions for both the draft policy and procedure. We also received written comments from the Chairs' Network and Faculty Senate.

The comments generally reflected either philosophical differences or raised concerns/questions about procedural issues with the policy and procedure. Most of the comments (45) were from individuals identified as faculty and adjunct faculty members. Some of the comments illuminated misunderstandings not only with the intent of the policy but with other functions of the college, such as how attendance is related to financial aid.

Themes of concerns that emerged from the feedback included: (1)the threshold for withdrawal, (2)the need to accommodate exceptional circumstances, (3)the perceived burden of the attendance-taking process itself, (4)the potential for increased bad debt, (5)the perception that the implementation team's recommendation deviated from those presented to the Faculty Senate, and (6)specific concerns with procedural elements. Those concerns are summarized below. In addition, to help in addressing some of these questions and concerns, we are developing a Frequently Asked Question (FAQ) document for distribution. Some of these FAQs are included under bullet #6.

1. Threshold for withdrawal

With respect to using a threshold of 30 percent for the withdrawal of students—most, but not all, comments expressed concerns that this percentage might be too high. Some suggested a threshold of 10 or 20 percent before being withdrawn from class. Some respondents worried that the threshold meant that students would be encouraged to miss up to 30% of class meetings. On the other hand, some respondents said that students should not be withdrawn no matter how many classes were missed. While one faculty member commented that most of the students in their class routinely miss 50 or more percent of the class and still pass the course, this perspective was not widely expressed.

Administrative Response:

In responding to the recommendation from Faculty Senate, the implementation committee wanted to use a percentage that was high enough to assume nearly all students would have missed enough class to fail the course if they remained enrolled, i.e. to no longer be able to "mathematically pass the course" as the Faculty Senate's recommendation specified. The committee wanted the number to be high enough to link poor attendance with course success and settled on 30 percent. Although the committee did not formally consider published research in arriving at that threshold, a study by John Colby¹ found that if students do not attend at least seventy percent of class sessions, they have a two in three chance of failing.

¹ John Colby (2005) Attendance and Attainment - a comparative study, Innovation in Teaching and Learning in Information and Computer Sciences, 4:2, 1-13, DOI: 10.11120/ital.2005.04020002

Some comments suggested that MCC is encouraging students to miss class. Statements such as, “I think it is absurd that the college is promoting missing this many classes” and “Encouraging such a high number of classes to be missed will hurt us . . .” represent a misinterpretation of the intent of the policy. No school would ever *promote* student absenteeism. The policy clearly states, “Students are expected to attend each meeting of their registered courses.” Likewise, in the procedure, making the connection between attendance and (course) success more visible and less arbitrary is highlighted as one of the benefits of the policy. Further, the procedure does not in any way state students are encouraged to miss 30 percent of their classes, it states students missing a number of classes equal to 30 percent will be withdrawn from the course. To clarify this to our students and faculty, we can change the language in the background to include a reiteration of the policy goal that students are expected to attend each meeting of their registered courses. We can also restate it again within the procedure as part of the “description of process” section. We can also bolster the policy sentence on why attendance is expected so that it will help students understand the importance of attendance. Taking attendance in class is not about the instructor, it is about the student. Unlike one commenter’s assertion that, “Attendance is not critical to understanding,” there is clear evidence that attendance is important not only to student success in a course but their overall degree performance. Please see the following studies for more information:

<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.3102/0034654310362998>

<https://www.mnsu.edu/cetl/teachingresources/articles/classattendance.html>

<http://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/1101/tips.html>

2. The need to accommodate exceptional circumstances

Some commenters were concerned that the automated withdrawal feature of the policy would afford instructors no flexibility to acknowledge when the student and faculty member are engaged, but the student may not be physically attending class or participating in an online course.

Another respondent asked, “Why would MCC want faculty to “lie” about attendance in Starfish when reporting on students who are making academic progress, but might not be physically attending the course?”

Administrative Response: We are actively working with Starfish representatives to accommodate our need for an attendance category that includes a selection for students who may not be attending class but are working with the instructor and making academic progress. This would allow faculty the option of not marking a student “absent” and triggering the tally that might lead to withdrawal.

This is not asking faculty to “lie,” as Title IV regulations specifically allow for reporting of participation in an academically related activity as evidence of attendance.

Under Title IV, academically related activities include but are not limited to the following:

- physically attending a class where there is an opportunity for direct interaction between the instructor and students;
- submitting an academic assignment;

- taking an exam, completing an interactive tutorial, or participating in computer-assisted instruction;
- attending a study group that is assigned by the school;
- participating in an online discussion about academic matters; and
- initiating contact with a faculty member to ask a question about the academic subject studied in the course.

Academically related activities do not include activities where a student may be present but not academically engaged, such as:

- living in institutional housing,
- participating in the school's meal plan,
- logging into an online class without active participation,
- participating in academic counseling or advisement.

3. The attendance-taking process itself:

Comments were submitted asking about training in entering attendance information in Starfish and indicating concern about the workload of entering attendance. There were a few comments that taking attendance will increase workload for faculty members and is not contractually required.

Administrative Response: As an institution that grants Financial Aid, faculty have always been required to keep and report accurate attendance records in compliance with Title IV regulations so that they can retrieve the last date of attendance when required to do so. Entering attendance in Starfish is relatively simple and does not typically require any separate training. The system enters a default response that indicates the student is attending, so the faculty member just needs to mark those who are not present. The link to Starfish on our MyMCC page has a half-page tutorial on how to take attendance. If further information is needed for some faculty members, we can add to this information. We can also prepare a training video on how to report attendance in Starfish, if this would be helpful.

Starfish was selected for attendance to allow MCC the opportunity to send students alerts about their attendance. We also use this system to send reminders about academic progress, attendance, and to offer accolades to students through the kudos process. This program should be familiar to the majority of MCC faculty as we require these touch points occur with students throughout the semester. Roughly 100 faculty used Starfish to take attendance during the Spring 2019 semester for 246 different classes.

Of the four comments on workload, only one raised a specific concern pointing out that "in classes where a proportion of a student's grade is based on attendance, faculty generally enter daily class attendance into an Excel spreadsheet. As a result of the proposed policy, faculty will now need to record that information a second time each week in Starfish." We are looking into whether Starfish attendance could be downloaded to an Excel spreadsheet format.

4. The potential for financial implications, including increased bad debt:

Another misunderstanding reported by portal commenters was, “If we become an attendance reporting school and this does not have the desired affects [sic] of increasing student success and retention we can not [sic] go back to being a non-attendance reporting school” and “This has the potential to increase bad debt, as the last date of attendance will now be what is in Starfish and not a date at which students withdrew from the class.”

Administrative Response: According to Jerome St. Croix, the decision to become an “attendance-taking” institution is reversible. Additional clarification provided by our financial aid office on this topic does not suggest increased risk of bad debt and includes:

- The regulations surrounding schools required to take attendance may be considered stricter, however, the documentation is much better. While it may require more detailed work to perform a Return to Title IV Calculation (R2t4), there is less risk that any portion of the calculation (including last day of attendance) could be wrong or that aid could have disbursed after the student was considered withdrawn. In either scenario, we only have to return aid in R2t4 when the student has withdrawn or been withdrawn from all their classes.
- The primary difference for attendance-taking schools is related to the student’s withdrawal date. We will use the last date of attendance for withdrawal date if we are considered to be a school to take attendance. As a school not required to take attendance, we have been allowed to assume the midpoint for attendance for students who do not do an official withdrawal, unless we verify they attended past the 60 percent point of the semester. Additionally, for students who do process a total withdrawal, we have been able to use the date of withdrawal.
- As a withdrawal institution, students who withdraw early or who stop attending at an earlier date than the midpoint, would have a higher percentage of Title IV aid returned and may owe larger balances to the school when they have an R2t4 performed. However, student disclosure should be much clearer, and students would know up front the definitive impact of non-attendance. Also, currently, the students who do not withdraw themselves but stop attending have the R2t4 performed up to 45 days after grades are in. With the new proposal, most of the R2t4’s would be performed with 45 days of the withdrawal date. This enhances the communication to students and provides greater options for balances owed at the school.

5. The perception that the implementation team’s recommendation deviated from those presented to the Faculty Senate:

There were a small number of comments suggesting the implementation committee did not fully consider the three senate recommendations for the FIW process.

Administrative Response:

In looking at the recommendations presented to the Faculty Senate, the first recommendation was favorably endorsed by 25:3 voting Senators, and the other two models received far fewer favorable

votes. That recommendation was to allow a faculty member to choose if and when to withdraw a student subject to required parameters that:

- a) a student cannot be withdrawn if the student can still mathematically pass the class,*
- b) attendance and participation can be included in grade calculations*
- c) a student cannot be withdrawn for missing less than 20% of the classes or 10% of the classes if the absences occur consecutively.*

A withdrawn student may appeal to the faculty for reinstatement. The decision whether or not to reinstate the student rests solely with the faculty. Reinstatement can be done via email to greenslip.

Prior to the Faculty Senate vote, as requested by the FIW Committee Chair Emily Putnam and by Faculty Senate President Amanda Colosimo, the College conferred with legal counsel, and provided them with a memo informed by that consultation. With regard to the above proposed recommendation, it states:

In Model #1, Faculty Initiated Withdrawal with Parameters, we appreciate that it addresses consistency by imposing a minimum number of classes a student can miss before a faculty member may take steps to withdraw the student. That element is essential in establishing a fair policy that provides a minimum threshold and notice to students College-wide. However, we are concerned that the language in the first line, "if and when," might support an argument that the application of the policy by individual faculty members, even with the minimum threshold defined, is arbitrary. For example, once a student has missed either 10% of all class meetings consecutively or 20% of class meetings non-consecutively, what kind of standard is the individual faculty member applying before the student is subject to faculty-initiated withdrawal? Students in different sections of the same course, or students within a single section, could be treated differently in this model. Additionally, Model #1 does not set forth adequate notice to students about the overall standard before action might be taken by the faculty member. Furthermore, for purposes of appealing a faculty-initiated withdrawal, it is fine to have the initial appeal go to the faculty member, but best practice would be that the next and final phase of the appeal process should establish someone else as the arbiter of said appeal; this ensures due process and offers less risk.

After the vote was forwarded to Provost Wade, she responded to Faculty Senate President Colosimo to say that, "As Dr. Kress and I explained in our memo, in order for the College to implement your recommendation, there will need to be modifications to the recommended process to address the issues of consistency and due process." Faculty Senate President Amanda Colosimo later communicated to Provost Wade that "the Executive Committee discussed participation in the FIW Implementation Group and agreed the Senate concluded its role in that discussion with the recommendations provided in June." A separate implementation committee was formed and charged with recommending an implementation plan.

In order to implement this process with consistency and equity for each student, the implementation committee was cautioned to ensure the following items were considered with respect to designing a mechanism to implement this desired recommendation:

With respect to the first sentence, the application of the process will be consistent from course to course and instructor to instructor, so that students will be withdrawn in a uniform manner and that student expectations surrounding attendance can be established prior to student registration.

Adoption of parameter “a” by the committee would require that all instructors make grades and current course grades available to students in a timely manner, along with Course Information Sheets and other detailed information about the course in order to inform students of their ability to mathematically pass the class.

Adoption of parameter “b” would need to be consistent with the stated course learning outcomes and not implemented as a punitive measure.

Adoption of parameter “c” would require all instructors to take daily class attendance and make this information readily available to students enrolled in their course.

With respect to the statement on reinstatement, any recommendations from FIWC will include a process that provides due process beyond the faculty member issuing the FIW.

Finally, the committee will explore reinstatement processes to either recommend that the greenslip process or another viable alternative be used for the FIW Process.

In looking at the draft policy and procedure, the implementation committee respected both directives presented to them in creating a system that equitably allows for withdrawal of students who are grossly negligent in attending classes, while also acknowledging that there will be events in our students’ lives that result in the need for accommodating situations where a student is making progress, but not actually attending class. These were compromises achieved by the committee.

6. Specific concerns with or questions about procedural elements:

Q. Can attendance be considered in assigning grades in my course?

A: Faculty can still have appropriate academic consequences for absences, typically by assigning credit for participation in discussion, in-class assignments, laboratory exercise, internships or clinicals, experiential learning, or other activities that support the course learning outcomes. The policy in no way encourages or stipulates instructors change their current classroom management policies to a “you can miss 30 percent of my classes” policy. The 30 percent threshold only relates to being withdrawn from the class for poor attendance.

Q. What about excused absences?

There were a number of questions on when to use the “excused” attendance category. As stated in the policy, the instances when absences MUST be accommodated include: (1) absences due to pregnancy/related conditions, (2) absences directly related to a disability where an accommodation is flexible attendance and (3) absences due to religious observance.

We do not, as a college, “excuse” students for extra-curricular activities. The policy asks only that faculty consider accommodating non-classroom activities to promote a well-rounded student

population. How an instructor wants to code a student for an absence related to, for example, an athletic event, is up to the instructor. MCC does not technically excuse those absences; we just ask that you consider working with those students to allow for a chance to succeed in the course.

Q. What about students who complete FLEX courses early?

From Jerome St. Croix: Treat the course as if it were a fifteen week course, it is not any different - flex instructors would report that student attended so [financial] aid could disburse at census; then if student received an F, they would report the last date of academic activity. If student successfully completes early, instructor submits the final grade for the student, making further attendance unnecessary.

Q. What about students who arrive late or leave the class early? Should they be marked as “absent?”

For the purposes of this attendance process, they are present. Faculty can have appropriate academic consequences for both situations, since they fall under the responsibility and scope of the instructor’s classroom management.

Q. Can attendance records for individual students be changed at a later date? For example, an instructor marks the student absent, but after class the instructor discovers the student missed class due to an emergency but continued to work on the lessons.

In general, yes, they can be revised. We will not know exactly how changing the attendance records impacts the automated messaging and withdrawal processes. This will be checked during the soft launch in the fall of 2019.