

Grade Recorded When a Student Withdraws from a Course: A Proposal

Proposal

*The Deans of Trinity College propose to the faculty councils of Trinity College and the Pratt School of Engineering that a mark of **W** be recorded when students withdraw from courses in which they are enrolled after drop/add ends. This mark would replace the **WP/WF** grade currently recorded.*

*The Deans further propose that withdrawal from a course due to an error in registration will result in the recording of a mark of **W**. This mark would replace the grade of **WE** currently recorded to mark withdrawals due to errors in registration.*

These changes would take effect in the Fall semester 2008.

Rationale

The system currently in place for assigning a grade of **WP** or **WF** when a student withdraws from a course he or she has attended after drop/add ends is not working effectively. Though originally intended to enable faculty to distinguish on a student's permanent record whether the student was passing the course at the time of withdrawal, there is considerable evidence, anecdotal as well as quantifiable data, to suggest that many if not most faculty in fact are issuing the grade of **WF** only very rarely if at all. Instructors frequently report that they have checked the **WP** box on the withdrawal form even though the student in question is failing the course, because they don't want to blemish the student's academic record. Some students report the expectation that they will receive a **WF** and express pleasant surprise when they bring the form back with a **WP** marked on it. Other students, anticipating receipt of a **WF** if they do poorly on an upcoming exam in a course will withdraw beforehand to avoid that possibility, even though they might in fact have done better than expected on the exam. At the same time, students occasionally complain that instructors are unkind, arbitrary, biased, or even vindictive in their issuance of a **WF** grade. Indeed, it is not unheard of for a student to launch a formal grade review in an attempt to have a **WF** grade changed to a **WP**. Such accounts and reactions suggest that the current **WP/WF**-based system falls considerably short of its intended objective.

To test such anecdotal evidence, the Trinity deans examined data on the actual use of the **WP/WF** grades since the Summer of 2004. The data confirm the conclusion that the **WP/WF** distinction is not being applied at all consistently by faculty when students withdraw from courses. To exemplify this, consider the following examples drawn from Economics and Statistics:

Econ 01D/55D	#WP grades issued	#WF grades issued	Total # withdrawals	%age of WF grades
Instructor A	43	12	55	22%
Instructor B	67	0	67	0%
Instructor C	8	1	9	11%
Instructor D	1	1	2	50%
Stats 10				
Instructor A	6	2	8	25%
Stats 101				
Instructor B	2	0	2	0%
Instructor C	3	0	3	0%
Instructor D	7	0	7	0%
Instructor E	3	0	3	0%
Instructor F	2	0	2	0%
Instructor G	4	0	4	0%
Instructor H	1	0	1	0%
Stats 102b				
Instructor A (same as in Stats 10)	3	2	5	40%

Stats 103				
Instructor I	7	0	7	0%
Instructor J	3	0	3	0%
Instructor K	1	0	1	0%

The data dramatically show that the two instructors designated “A” in these examples have issued **WF**s in a relatively high percentage (22%, 25% and 40%) of cases, presumably because the students in question were failing the course at the time of the withdrawal, while other instructors in the same or similar courses appear assiduously to have avoided giving a **WF** grade to students, despite the presumed likelihood that some of them were failing at the time. It is hard to imagine that the stark discrepancy in the number and percentage of **WF** grades issued can be explained in any way other than that different instructors have different attitudes towards the **WF**. Such discrepancies among instructors as these can be found in numerous other courses in a few departments, particularly in various (but certainly not all)¹ mathematics and science courses. In the social science and humanities divisions (with a few individual exceptions) the **WF** is only very rarely issued at all. For example, since Summer 2004 the departments of BAA and Political science have issued only three **WF** grades each in any and all courses offered; Cultural Anthropology, History, English, Philosophy, and Sociology have issued a total of only two **WF**s in any of their courses since 2004; Art and Art History, Computer Science, and Public Policy have issued only one **WF** each and most of the remaining departments in Trinity have given out no **WF** grades since 2004 (*see Attachment A for complete data on WP/WF grades issued since Summer 2004*).

Overall, a total of 1692 withdrawals were issued since Fall 2004. Of these 1569 (93% of the total) were **WP** grades and 123 (7% of the total) were **WF** grades. Of the **WF** grades issued, most were issued by a very small minority of instructors (like instructors A) in a small subset of departments.

The tradition of distinguishing whether a student is passing or failing at the point of withdrawal from a course is apparently an old one but such data as those presented above call into serious question whether the Trinity College faculty of today still wants to make such a distinction. The academic deans of Trinity College have concluded that they do not. Hence this proposal to eliminate **WP/WF** in favor of **W**, which would largely formalize (with the **W**) an existing state of affairs, namely that the faculty already tend to issue a single grade (**WP**) to students who withdraw from a course.

The academic deans do not wish to propose at this time any changes to the procedures followed when students withdraw from courses. Students will continue to seek authorization to withdraw from a course from their academic dean and if they receive it will be given a form modified to reflect the new grade of **W** (*see Attachment B*). This they will take to their instructor for his or her signature before returning it to the dean’s office for final processing.

Submission of the neutral grade of **W** would effectively eliminate disputes and hard feelings between students and instructors over the grade recorded at the time of withdrawal, and it would preserve the instructor’s role in the process. A **W** grade, like the **WP** and **WF** grades recorded under the current system would have no effect on the student’s GPA or ability to repeat the course at a later date.

Withdrawals As a corollary to the main proposal, the deans further propose that we dispense with the

¹ For example, in organic chemistry 85 withdrawals have been issued since summer 2004 by a half-dozen instructors, and only one of these withdrawals yielded a **WF**.

Due to Errors in Registration recording of a **WE** grade when students withdraw from a course due to an error in registration. Instead a grade of **W** will be recorded.

Review of Other Institutions A quick Google search of institutions that use **WP/WF** (or a variation of it) is attached (*Attachment C*). It is not meant to be a complete survey but a sample of the sorts of schools that, like Duke at present, record a grade of **WP/WF**. These include mostly lower-tier and community colleges.

A review of 17 top-tier institutions with which we might wish to compare ourselves (*see attachment D*) shows that only one of them (Emory) shares our practice of indicating whether a student is passing or failing at the time of withdrawal (**WP/WU** are their marks) but this used only in medical or other emergency situations. Many more of the institutions reviewed either record a neutral **W** (or **WD** or **DR**)—Chicago, Cornell, Dartmouth, MIT, Pennsylvania, Vanderbilt, and Virginia—or expunge the course altogether—Brown, Cal Tech, and Columbia—or employ a combination of expulsion of the course earlier in the term and a **W** later in the semester—Harvard, Princeton, Rice, Stanford, Tulane, and Yale.²

As for who is charged with authorizing course withdrawals at the schools reviewed, it is the academic dean in a clear majority of institutions, though the student's academic advisor (Emory, MIT), the instructor (Virginia), the advisor and the instructor (Cal Tech), or the Registrar (Dartmouth) may instead be cast in this role. At Chicago, a student request to withdraw may not be refused, at Cal Tech (and quite possibly elsewhere) a request is in fact never refused. Finally, at Brown, students require no approval at all but simply go online and withdraw from a course anytime in the semester, after which the course is expunged.

Within this context, the proposal to replace **WP/WF** with **W** at Duke is quite modest. It would put us in good company with 7 of the schools reviewed and fall considerably short of the liberal policies in 10 of the schools that go so far as to expunge courses from the record when a student withdraws from a course.

The Registrar has indicated that he foresees no problem in using **W** to mark a course withdrawal of this sort, as it is a mark already issued by the academic dean in each course enrolled in by a student who withdraws from Duke in the middle of a semester. This proposal would merely extend the issuance of a **W** to the more numerous instances when a student is permitted to withdrawn from an individual course during a semester.

² Emory also expunges the course in the first 6 weeks of the semester, but as noted earlier records a WP or WU later in the term in medical situations.