Senate Instruction, Curricula and Advising Committee

S-1504: **Determination of Student Attendance**: Develop guidelines that would allow units and individual instructors to comply with U. S. Department of Education requirements that Rutgers keep records for students receiving federal financial aid that substantiate students' participatory attendance in the classes for which they are registered. Respond to Senate Executive Committee by January 29, 2016.

In response to a U.S. Department of Education (DoE) mandate, the Rutgers Office of Enterprise Risk Management, Ethics and Compliance has requested guidance from the University Senate in developing a systematic approach to address Title IV compliance issues related to class participation reporting for students receiving federal financial aid. [See: http://senate.rutgers.edu/ERMProposalForDOEAttendanceReporting.pdf]

In order to comply with financial aid requirements, the University must be able to document student participation in any one class meeting for each course in which the student is enrolled during the period for which the financial aid was intended. As viewed by the DoE, attendance must be participatory in nature. Examples they provide of academic activity include:

a) Physically attending a class where there is opportunity for direct interaction between the instructor and students;
b) Submitting an academic assignment
c) Taking an exam, an interactive tutorial, or computer-assisted instruction;
d) Attending a study group that is assigned by the institution;
e) Participating in an online discussion about academic matters; or
f) Initiating contact with a faculty member to ask a question about the academic subject studied in the course[1]

The Rutgers official attendance policy[2] merely states that "Attendance at all regularly scheduled meetings of a course shall be expected." [10.2.7A] It further defines recognized grounds for absences as:

1. Illness requiring medical attention.
2. Curricular or extracurricular activities approved by the faculty.
3. Personal obligations claimed by the student and recognized as valid.
4. Recognized religious holidays.
5. Severe inclement weather causing dangerous traveling conditions. [10.2.7D]

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[1] The DoE definition of academic attendance and academically-related activity does 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;
- Participating in a student-organized study group;
- Logging into an online class without active participation; or
- Participating in academic counseling or advising.

[2] Rutgers Policy Library Section 10.2.7: Course Attendance: http://policies.rutgers.edu/1027-currentpdf

However there are students who don't appear for classes for a variety of reasons. Some students drop out of classes but won't withdraw because they don't want to drop below the number of credits required to maintain their financial aid. Some students register for 9 credits with the intent of only participating in two of their three classes in order to receive financial aid.

The DoE has placed the burden of documenting "academic activity" or "attendance at an academically-related activity" squarely on the university. If the university is unable to supply this documentation it could result in the loss of federal funding. In some cases, large fines have been levied against public institutions that failed to document academic participation.

The question then is, is there a systematic, minimally invasive way for instructors to report such participatory attendance, or lack thereof, for students receiving federal aid? Many instructors choose to not record attendance for any students; nor would an instructor generally know if particular students were receiving federal aid. Nor, in the interest of student privacy, is it desirable that they should know.

In their discussion of this issue, the Committee tried to find a procedure that would place the least burden on individual instructors but yet be effective in both alerting students and the University of a potential problem. After our initial discussion, the Committee met with University Registrar Ken Iuso, Director of Financial Aid Jean Rash, Associate Director of Financial Aid Robert Fahy, and Manager of Compliance and Quality Assurance AnnMarie Bouse. Consensus was that the most viable solution would be to expand the Warning system, which is used throughout most of the University, to identify those students who have failed to begin participation in a particular course.

Warning Grade Notification

At Rutgers, the Rosters & Electronic Grading Information System (REGIS) provides a feature to allow instructors to send warnings to students who are in jeopardy of failing courses. During a designated two-week period beginning at the end of the fourth week of the semester, instructors in Camden are required, and in Newark and New Brunswick are encouraged, to submit "Warning" grades in the REGIS system.

Currently, the warnings that can be submitted on the Warning Roster[3] are:

> W1 = Warning for poor performance
> W2 = Warning for poor attendance
> W3 = Warning for poor performance and poor attendance

Warnings are then automatically emailed to the students. Ideally, warnings give students an opportunity to deal with whatever issues are putting their satisfactory completion of courses in jeopardy. About 10,000 students receive 12,000-13,000 warnings annually.

One solution is that an additional warning (NP) be added to the REGIS Warning Roster:

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[3] In Camden, the system also includes a "W0" to indicate that the "Student is making Satisfactory Progress."

NP = No Participation

Since instructors would not know which students were receiving federal financial aid, NP warnings would be indicated for any students whose participation did not meet DoE participatory attendance guidelines. The NP warning should be listed ahead of any W warning; an NP warning would preclude the selection of any other warning.

REGIS would be programmed to forward the names/RUIDs of those students receiving NP warnings, as well as the specific course for which the NP has been submitted, to the appropriate Financial Aid office. Financial Aid would identify those students receiving financial aid and would contact those students directly.

While RBHS does not currently use REGIS, the Banner system, which is currently used for a variety of student and administrative RBHS functions, can be programmed to serve the same function.

For this process to work, submission of warning grades via REGIS should be required, and not just encouraged, of all instructors teaching undergraduate and graduate courses.

Currently warning grades also can be submitted via Sakai; many instructors find it more convenient to use Sakai for their submissions. Warnings submitted via Sakai are automatically transferred into REGIS. The Sakai program will need to be modified to include the NP warning and instructions.

Separate "No Participation" Warning

The Committee also considered the possibility of separating the Title IV warning from the mid-semester warning system. This would require a new procedure to be set up in REGIS, wherein instructors would be required to take attendance or require some other form of participation, for the two weeks following each semester's Drop/Add period. Students with no initial participation in the course would then be identified and that information submitted via REGIS. Issuing these warnings earlier in the semester may be beneficial to students and may also be more palatable to faculty who do not generally take attendance in their classes and/or do not send out warning grades. However as the Warning Grade system is already available by the end of the fourth week of classes, there would be very little difference in terms of timing and little advantage in developing a new system for this process.

Faculty Compliance

Any implementation of an initial class participation documentation/warning system is going to require faculty cooperation. In the case of faculty who believe that the decision to participate or not participate is the responsibility of the student, this may require a culture change. All faculty need to know why this is being done, and the risk to the students and the university if it is not done. The process needs to be well-publicized initially and reiterated at the start of every semester. This is critical in order to continuously reach new faculty and PTLs.

The University Registrar currently sends out an email message to all faculty before the warning grade system is opened each semester. This message should include information explaining the NP option and include a link to the Financial Aid web page for further information. A follow-up reminder should be sent a few days before the warning roster closes.

The submission of an empty warning roster, or in Camden, a W0 roster, would indicate that there were no non-participating students in that class.

If no warning roster is submitted in a particular course, the University Registrar will alert the department chair that nothing has been submitted.

Instructors who are contacted by a student who believes that they have received an NP in error should make every effort to respond to the student in a timely fashion and contact Financial Aid promptly if they find that the student did indeed participate within the DoE guidelines.

Student Awareness

In additional in including information on the requirements for participatory attendance in the award letters sent to students, Financial Aid should send out an email at the beginning of the semester reminding students of what they need to do in order to not put their financial aid at risk.

Additional Determinants of Academic Participation

In some classes, especially large classes where the instructor may be less aware of individual students, academic participation may be determined by asking students to do a syllabus agreement. After the end of the drop-add period and prior to the opening of the warning grade rosters, students in those courses would be required to submit, either as an email or through an automated system in their Course Management System, a statement indicating that they have read the syllabus and agree to all its terms. Students from whom such a statement is not received would be deemed Non Participating and so reported on the warning grade roster.

In order for the syllabus agreement to meet the requirements for academic participation, it should be included as an assignment on the course syllabus for those instructors utilizing this option.

Some instructors may choose to use clickers to determine participation. However, even in courses where they are nominally "required" not all students choose to purchase clickers—some may elect to have their final grade lowered slightly rather than absorb the expense. Therefore clickers should not be used as the sole determinant of participation in a course.

Resolution:

Whereas: The U. S. Department of Education requires that Rutgers keep records for students receiving federal financial aid that substantiate students' academic participation in the classes for which they are registered

And Whereas: Failure to document student participation in any course during the period of enrollment for which the financial aid was intended could result in loss of University federal funding and/or substantial fines,

Be It Resolved That the Rutgers University Senate recommends that:

1. All instructors of all courses at Rutgers University (face to face, online, hybrid) be required to monitor student academic participation and identify those students for whom no instance of academic participation in the first part of the semester could be documented.
2. The REGIS Warning Grades system be modified to include a NP (No Participation) warning. NP warnings would be indicated for students whose academic participation did not meet DoE guidelines. The NP warning should be listed ahead of any W warning; an NP warning would preclude the selection of any other warning.
3. To accommodate faculty who use Sakai to submit warning grades into REGIS, the Sakai program be modified to include the NP grade and instructions.
4. For RBHS units not currently using the REGIS system, the Banner system be modified to permit the submission of NP warnings.
5. To accommodate faculty who would like to use the syllabus agreement option as a way to determine academic participation, the possibility of creating an automated syllabi agreement program in Sakai and the other Course Management Systems used at Rutgers should be investigated.
6. Where an instructor has chosen to use the syllabus agreement option, it should be included as an assignment on the course syllabus
7. While using clickers to determine participation is certainly an option, as it is likely that not all students in a course will have a clicker they should not be used as the sole determinant of participation in a course.
8. In additional to including information on the requirements for academic participation in the award letters sent to students, Financial Aid should send out an email at the beginning of the semester reminding students of what they need to do in order to not put their financial aid at risk.
9. The email message that the Registrar's office sends out to all faculty prior to the opening of the warning grades system should include information explaining the NP warning and a link to the Financial Aid site for further information.
10. The Registrar's office send out a reminder to faculty a few days before the closing of the warning grades system.
11. All instructors teaching undergraduate and graduate courses be required to submit warning rosters.
12. If a warning roster is not submitted for a particular course, the Registrar's office should alert the department chair.

13. Instructors who are contacted by a student who believes that they have received an NP in error should make every effort to respond to the student in a timely fashion and contact Financial Aid promptly if they find that the student did indeed participate within the DoE guidelines.
14. The NP warning should be available in the REGIS and Banner systems beginning with the Fall 2016 semester.
15. A process should be developed for summer session warning rosters as well with the aim to begin documentation with the 2017 summer sessions.
16. The new process be widely publicized and reiterated at the beginning of every semester so that all faculty know why this is being done, and the risk to the students and the university if it is not done.

4/07/16