

BACKGROUND & RATIONALE

For Student Choice & Responsibility

regarding

P/NP, Audit, W, IW, NS, and I OPTIONS:

Background:

This package of nine proposals evolved from ideas first suggested for EAC Policy Committee consideration in February of 2005, by Linda Bastian on behalf a motion passed by the Math SAC on January 28, 2005. Over the following two years, extensive discussions with various stakeholder groups and within the EAC Policy Committee have lead to these refinements.

Specifics:

While deadlines (3rd week, 8th week) have been official PCC policy for years, what is proposed here involves shifting responsibility for making these choices exclusively to students as well as adjusting the deadlines to the end of the 2nd and 8th weeks. We believe this change would encourage students to make informed choices in consultation with financial aid counselors or others appropriate to their realities. Information regarding a student's options would be

1. available on-line,
2. posted at registration offices,
3. advertised in all PCC catalogs and schedules of classes
4. added as an element of all course syllabi

Under the current system, individual faculty must be consulted before any student adopts a P/NP or Audit option. They may deny either of those options in their course while another faculty member teaching the same course may approve of those options. This flexibility contributes to both inconsistency and confusion. Moreover, there is evidence of widespread noncompliance with current PCC policy which requires that an Audit be arranged by the end of the 3rd week of classes (or equivalent) and that a P/NP option be arranged by the end of the 8th week (or equivalent). This further compounds the inconsistency and confusion when some faculty grant changes in the grading system while disregarding all deadlines. Faculty abiding by the deadlines are then seen by students as unfair. Finally, current policy allows for faculty members to assign an "NP" course grade to a student even when there has been no arrangement made between the student and faculty person during the time period that such a request could be made. Such an assignment might be neither desired by the student nor in the best interest of the student; how are faculty to know?

Inconsistency and confusion also abounds regarding the use of the "IW" (Instructor Withdrawal) option. Originally established to remove students from the roster of a course which they have never attended, the "IW" evolved to be used for any student as an escape mechanism (as long as some date of last attendance was recorded when the grade was submitted). So it is that one faculty member might assign an "IW" to a student whose last day of attendance was even the last day of class in the term – thereby removing the need to assign that student a low letter grade. The old "X" grade (intentionally abolished as a matter of policy many years ago), has thus been resurrected by such use of the "IW". As with various instructors' use of Audit and P/NP, variations in use of the "IW" lead students to conclude that some instructors will help them avoid consequences of poor academic performance while others will not – with some faculty even willing to disregard PCC grading policies entirely.

When policies for use of Audit, P/NP, and "IW" grades may not be intentionally disregarded, they may simply be unknown. Although available electronically or by hard-copy in any PCC catalog, many faculty are not aware of current policies. Sadly, the problem is not merely one of lack of communication, but also one where even those faculty who do know of the policies are often confused by the ways they are employed in the practices. referred to above.

Note:

Collectively, this package of nine proposals will

1. simplify the deadlines students will be responsible to meet: the end of weeks 2 and 8
2. simplify the deadlines that faculty will be responsible to meet: the end of weeks 2 and 8
3. allow for a very flexible “I” incomplete option with a clear deadline and noncompliance consequences.

These proposals reflect a basic orientation regarding student and faculty responsibilities that may be summarized as follows:

1. An instructor sets grade criteria, which are clearly explained in the course syllabus.
2. A student chooses his or her grade option (A-F or P/NP or Audit) by clear deadlines, unless such options are restricted by SAC policy for a particular course or program.
3. A student chooses whether or not to withdraw from a course by clear deadlines.
4. At the end of the term, each instructor assigns an appropriate grade based on the grade criteria and each student’s chosen grade option, exercising discretion regarding the use of “I”, “CIP”. Or “CIPR” options.

Regarding Good Intentions:

It has become clear that instructors are not expert with regard to the intricacies relating to PCC student probationary policies, let alone federal and other financial aid requirements – and are not likely to become expert enough to understand what may be best for the particular circumstances of each student enrolled in a course. In this context, well-intentioned instructors often have shown their compassion by assigning an “NP” grade rather than an “F”, an “IW” (even though the student has been attending class), or by giving an Incomplete (even without a student’s consent). In many cases, such good intentions help pave a way to academic probation or worse, including potential disqualification for continued financial assistance.

Example: a student needs 12 credit hours completed in order to qualify for federal financial aid next term. A well-intentioned instructor gives the student an “IW” instead of a low grade. The result may be suspension of financial aid and a collection agency seeking some repayment of financial aid already dispersed.

Example: a student who is not on financial aid is given an “IW” instead of a low grade, which lowers the number of credits successfully completed to below 12. Some instructors have been doing this for this student also in the past, helping the student to achieve an artificially high GPA. This student finally applies for financial aid but is denied it on the grounds that a pattern of successful completion of courses has not been established or maintained. Now the student has a good GPA but no financial resources to continue progress towards a degree.

Example: a student on probation needs a 2.0 GPA this term in order to be allowed to enroll at PCC next term. A well-intentioned instructor gives the student an “NP” instead of an “F”, not knowing that even with an “F” that student’s other courses might have resulted in the 2.0 GPA. The NP, effectively, may have the same result as a “W” or “IW” upon the student’s financial aid package (as noted above). Now the student may not be able to afford the costs associated with enrollment next term.

Example: a student is not doing well in a class and will be getting a “D”. The instructor doesn’t want the student’s GPA to be damaged and, without asking, gives the student a “No Pass.” Financial aid does not accept “No Pass” as a grade, and this drops the student’s credit load into financial aid disqualification status. Ironically, a “D” grade would have been accepted by financial aid and the student could have then remained in good standing.

Example: a student fails a class. To avoid damaging the student’s GPA, the instructor gives the student a grade of “Audit”. According to PCC, an “Audit” grade means that the student intended from the beginning of the term to take the course for no credit, yet because this was not reported until the end of the term financial aid had been issued for the course. Now the Financial Aid Office has to backdate their records in order to correct this – and must collect the money back from the student because it should not have been allocated in the first place. Had the instructor issued the “F” grade, the student may have been disqualified for financial aid the next term, but would have had the option to appeal to have it reinstated.

The bottom line is that each student needs to be aware of their own particular circumstances and, in consultation with academic counselors and financial aid personnel, make grade system and/or withdrawal choices best suited to their needs. Educating each faculty member regarding the nuances of each student's reality is not realistic. Thankfully, there is no need for faculty to carry that responsibility. Such knowledge can be expected to be available through others within the PCC community who are specialized to address any example that our imagination might dream up.

Rather than have students suffer the unintended consequences of uninformed choices made by well-intentioned faculty, PCC should give to students the right to make their own grading system choices and whether or not to withdraw from a course by clearly established deadlines. With these rights, will come the responsibility for each student to be aware of their own circumstances and to seek specialized advice, when needed, regarding what action on their part is most beneficial to them.

Regarding Instructor Flexibility:

Instructors and SACs will continue to exercise great flexibility with respect to a wide range of issues relating to whether students are likely to successfully complete a particular course or program. Such issues include attendance policy, types of performance evaluations in use, policies relating to late assignments or make-up exams, and how much a crises affecting any given student may be taken into account by providing options for incomplete "I" grades (or CIP or CIPR options).

When, however, instructors have "flexibility" to ignore PCC Board-approved deadlines and grade-option policies there are many adverse unintended consequences. Whether the non-compliance is a function of ignorance regarding the existence of the rules, misinformation about them, or is done intentionally with the encouragement of PCC staff or others, haphazard compliance is:

1. unfair to students who assume policies are followed and do not try to circumvent deadlines and other policies in ways that benefit themselves.
2. unfair to students who do try to circumvent deadlines and other policies, thereby learning to manipulate others to benefit themselves at PCC in ways unlikely to succeed elsewhere.
3. unfair to faculty who follow the deadlines and policies, but appear to be somehow less kind or generous in the eyes of students and may receive poor performance evaluations from them.
4. unfair to faculty who do not follow the deadlines and policies, as they become more subject to pressure from students or others and may be concerned about poor evaluations if they stop.
5. a contributing factor to grade inflation, as students may manipulate the good intentions of faculty to help them avoid the consequences of poor performance evaluations for students.
6. a factor reducing the respect that transfer institutions have for the integrity of PCC grades, thereby affecting adversely the prospects for admittance of our highest-performing students.
7. fuel for a culture of confusion and misinformation which increases frustration among all who are concerned about the overall credibility of academic standards within the PCC system.