AAAC Response to Changes in the Late-Drop and Withdrawal Procedure  
20 June 2018

The members of the AAAC share the Registrar’s concerns regarding the uneven and sometimes capricious nature of the process by which student late-drop or withdrawal petitions are decided. Members support the integrity of student records and transcripts and support a more disciplined process whereby students across all schools and colleges who petition to drop a class or withdraw their registration after the deadline receive a fair and ethical hearing and a just decision. Accordingly, the centralization of that process offers clear advantages. At the same time, this change will have a profound effect upon the way students experience the university. The members of the AAAC, a committee which represents faculty in all schools and colleges and student government urge the registrar, the vice provost of enrolment management, and the provost to revisit some of the elements of the new procedure.

The committee finds that the process used to change this important procedure runs counter to any spirit of collaborative decision-making on campus. This decision was made in relative isolation in administrative offices and was announced to the individuals and groups of people whom it would affect (faculty and students) ten days before its implementation. The faculty and students of the AAAC do support a change to the current procedure by which late-drops and withdrawal petitions are handled; however, the committee finds that the new procedure, made without collaboration with faculty or students, will set in motion a set of intended or unintended negative consequences.

Firstly, the site at which late-drop and withdrawal decisions are made has been moved from faculty with staff consultation to staff. The staff members of both the previous and the future committees have valuable knowledge of policy and logistical matters that affect late-drop and withdrawals, but very little meaningful knowledge of the student-petitioners themselves, a condition exacerbated by the new policy disallowing student interviews and the narrow scope of the new petition form. This move participates in UM-Flint’s movement towards becoming a policy-centered university rather than a student-centered university. The committee recommends that the newly formed committee contain faculty members from across colleges and schools in equal numbers to staff and that all members of the committee have equal voting rights on the committee.

The new petition form, which resembles in many ways the existing forms used in each of the schools and colleges, can be improved by considering the following:

- The tone of the new form assumes bad faith on the part of petitioners who are asked to verify and document a very specific set of statements. A more humane administrative response to student hardship is to create a form that balances such authentication devices with a clear sense that the committee wishes to hear what the student has to say, to hear the student’s story. Certainly some students are requesting consideration in bad faith, but assuming as much of all petitioners alienates already vulnerable students.
• This new form points to a far more limited set of circumstances under which a petition can be filed: a medical condition and the death of a family member. This narrowing of the scope of crisis events that might take precedence over following university drop and withdrawal procedures does not reflect the complex lived experiences of UM-Flint students, a circumstance that emerges consistently within long-term faculty-student relationships.

• The committee finds that further discussion is warranted regarding the request for a physician’s specific diagnosis and the implication that a physician have declared that the student was unable to attend classes. These requirements significantly narrow the range of circumstances under which a student might wish their petition be heard, and they do not reflect the ways that many UM-Flint students experience illness and medical treatment. Having a physician, for instance, is a privilege not accorded to all. Having an ongoing and meaningful relationship with a physician such that one’s life issues such as class-work enter into the conversation regarding medical care is a privilege accorded to very few.

• The committee finds that further discussion is warranted into the definition of “immediate family member.” The definition is currently limited to “spouse or other qualified adult, son, daughter, grandparent, grandchild, brother, sister (or the spouse of any of them), of the student.” This definition is based upon a cultural understanding of “family” as defined biologically and legally. The members of the AAAC find that our everyday interactions with the students of UM-Flint would indicate that “family” is defined in a far broader way and often the most significant people in a student’s life are not biological or legal relations, but are the assembly of people who function as family for students whose biological or legal families do not serve that function.

• Other details of the petition form also merit a larger group discussion and the AAAC recommends that the Registrar convene a gathering of the members of the committees currently making these decisions and other interested members of the faculty and student body in a good-faith discussion of the tone and contents of the petition form through which UM-Flint communicates with students facing serious challenges.

Any errors in the AAAC’s understanding of this change in procedure result from the fact that faculty and students have had no clear and written communication of the change or the process by which it has been made. Our review of the new petition form was possible only because a copy of the new form was released in a non-faculty group and sent by a member of the faculty to the AAAC. The faculty was not given the opportunity to help create the form and has not officially seen the form that is slated to take effect on July 1, 2018. AAAC members from the professional schools and colleges were unaware that any change in this procedure was underway. Some faculty members had heard cryptic mention of a “new committee” on campus, but were unaware of the nature and membership of that new committee. In effect then, our response is based upon the lived experience of faculty members and students inside an institution that struggles
with transparency and clear communication. Some of our perceptions may be based upon an erroneous understanding of the decision-making process, a failure we see as the result of the absence of a centralized and open communication forum that reaches across central administration, student affairs, and academic affairs; and the reluctance of many people on campus to solicit broad input into the workings of their office and to allow the campus as a whole to see and participate in improvements that are underway. Decision making of this kind engenders distrust and has prompted several members of the faculty at large to ask AAAC to procure evidence of the specific federal regulations that have informed this change, a request we hereby make of the provost.