Recommendations for Changes to Add/Drop/Withdraw and Overload Policies

November 30, 2016

DRAFT FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY

CMU Student Experience Task Force

Academic Policies and Practices (APP) Working Group

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Academic Policies and Practices (APP) Working Group was tasked with examining university policies that might negatively contribute to the CMU student experience. In this first document, we consider factors that contribute to course overloads and dropping of courses and make the following recommendations for policy change. We recommend that the university rethink our shared goals for drop/withdraw and redefine them to be more in line with peer schools.

1) **Move up the Drop and Withdraw deadlines to limit students carrying of extra courses late into the semester.**
    - Move the withdraw deadline to 10-11 weeks after the start of the semester.
    - Maintain the current Add deadline and adopt one of two new Drop deadlines
        - Add and drop on the same date, approximately 10 days after the start of the semester
        - Add within 10 days of the start of the semester, drop within 5 weeks of the start of the semester
2) **Make overloading the exception, rather than the rule. Change practices to limit the number of students who overload to ensure that students who do overload are positioned to successfully manage the workload.**

    - All overloads must be approved by associate deans. Overloads will be the exception rather than the rule.
    - Remove the automatic bump in units at the end of each semester.
    - Undergraduates: Students in their first undergraduate year will not be permitted to overload; Undergraduate students in the second year and beyond who are in good standing (as defined by their degree program) can **request** an overload.
    - Graduate students: Students in their first graduate semester will not be permitted to overload; Graduate students in the second semester and beyond who are in good standing (as defined by their degree program) can **request** an overload.
    - Amendments to this policy may be needed to address double majors, dual degrees or 3-2 programs.
    - Programs that have a more stringent policy may retain it, if they so choose.

The following pages provide background information and discussion on each of these recommended proposals.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Carnegie Mellon students cite an achievement-oriented culture and heavy academic workload as factors that cause stress and challenge their work/life balance. The Task Force on the CMU Experience was formed to identify specific areas for improvement and created a set of Working Groups that address all aspects of our students' academic and extra-curricular life. The Academic Policies and Practices (APP) Working Group is tasked with identifying those policies, procedures and practices that could be improved to create a learning environment that leads to greater levels of academic and personal fulfillment for students.

Both anecdotal and quantitative data point to problems related to students taking course overloads, dropping courses late in the semester, and other students not being able to get into courses from waitlists that later have room after drops occur. This situation is not good for the students who are overloading (overloads are stressful and grades in their courses can be negatively affected), not good for the students who cannot get into the courses, and not good for the departments who end up with unfilled seats and students who would like to have filled them.

Compounding this problem is the shortage of classroom space that prevents increasing the capacity of a given class or the number of sections of that class that can be offered. When students drop classes late and classroom space is limited, it prevents other students from accessing courses they want or need for their education.

Students experience heavy workloads for a variety of reasons: they take more units than advisable, they do not adequately balance their loads with their extra-curriculars, and they enroll in classes for which they may not be fully prepared. Contributing to this problem is that some courses require far more time and effort than the assigned units would dictate, making it difficult to plan for workloads.

Issues of academic integrity also result from many factors, but one of them is certainly an untenable workload that puts students in a position in which they feel that cheating is the only option. Ensuring that students maintain workloads that reduce this level of pressure also may reduce their reliance on academic misconduct as a strategy.

The APP Working Group recognizes that a number of policies and issues affect student workload and stress. In this document, we address two specific policies and intend to turn our attention to others later in the spring 2017 semester (e.g., grading policies including pass/no pass, replacement grades, plus/minus grades, and the effect extra-curricular activities places on student schedules, among others).

With this document, the APP group seeks feedback on options for 1) Course add/drop/withdraw and 2) Course overload policies. During the fall semester, we reviewed data on CMU students' course loads, course drops and related information, benchmarked peer schools' policies and began gathering feedback from students and faculty.

COURSE ADD/DROP/WITHDRAW

CMU's current policy allows students to add classes within the first 10 days of the semester, drop classes within the first 70 days and withdraw until the last day of the semester (102 days). **In this section we present two alternative models used by our peers that we believe are superior to our current model. We propose that CMU adopts one of these two models. The discussion below lays out the current state and the pros and cons of each alternative.**

Definitions

Add deadline: The last day in the semester at which students may add a course into their schedule after classes have begun.

Drop deadline: The last day in the semester at which students may remove a course from their schedule with no indication on the transcript that they had ever enrolled.

Withdraw deadline: The last day in the semester at which students may remove a class from their schedule with an indication (W) on the transcript that the student had been enrolled in the class.

Benchmarking

We reviewed policies from two groups of peer institutions that are on the semester system: schools of similar size (UAA) and schools to which CMU undergraduates are also often admitted (Cross-Admission) (see Table 1).

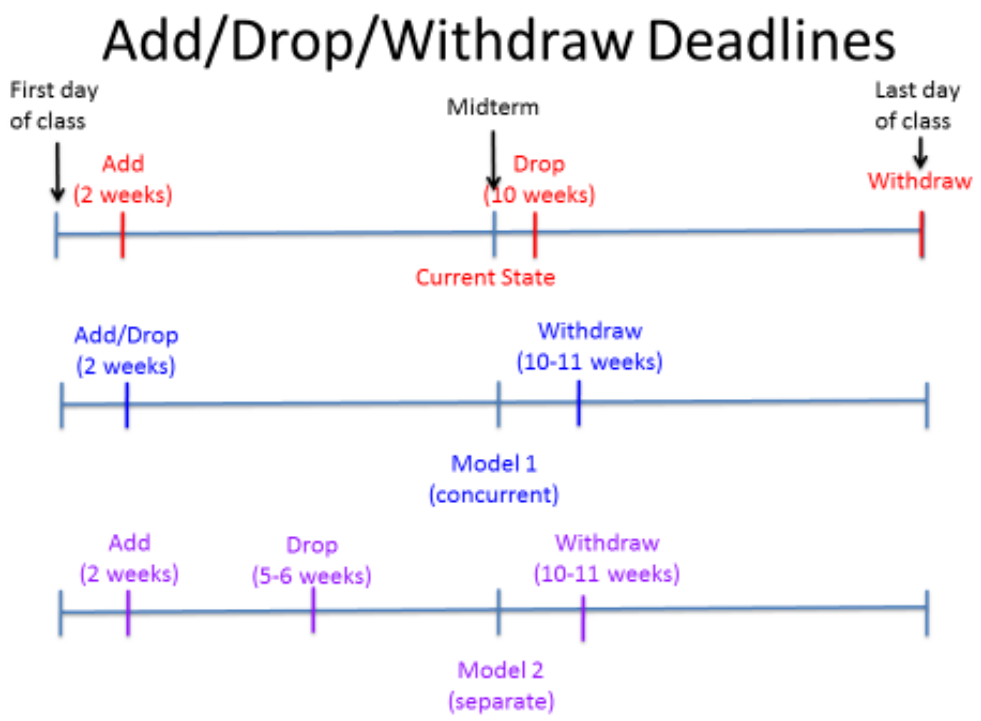
TABLE 1
Benchmarking Schools

UAA (similar size)	Cross-Admission
Brandeis University	Cornell University
Case Western University	University of California - Berkeley
Emory University	Massachusetts Institute of Technology
New York University	University of Pennsylvania
University of Rochester	Georgetown University
Washington University	

Within these peer schools, two overriding models exist (see Figure 1) with the main difference being in the timing of the drop deadline. In both models, the withdraw deadline is around week 10-11.

- Model 1 ("Concurrent"): Add/Drop early (within 2 weeks) and on approximately the same date (Emory University, Washington University, Case Western University, Georgetown University, New York University); withdraw by 10-11 weeks
- Model 2 ("Separate"): Add within 2-3 weeks, Drop within 4 – 8 weeks. (Brandeis University, Cornell University, University of Pennsylvania, University of Rochester , University of California-Berkeley); withdraw by 10-11 weeks
    - There is one outlier: MIT (Add = 30 days, Drop = 77 days)

FIGURE 1



In both of the peer school models above (Model 1: Concurrent, and Model 2: Separate), the decision to **drop** a course is based only on information about the class (e.g., content is different than what students first thought, workload is much heavier than expected and doesn't balance with other classes' workloads and semester responsibilities, class doesn't fit students' learning objectives). In both these models, students **withdraw** from classes when performance or other issues (health, family issues, etc.) impede the student's progress and likelihood of success.

Current Model and a Proposal for Change

Our current model, with later deadlines, changes the decision-related factors for both drop and withdraw decisions; because our deadlines are so late (drop after 10 weeks into a 15-16 week semester, withdraw at the last day of classes), many students are **dropping** classes based on performance issues and are **withdrawing** from classes as a last resort or to manage their GPA.

The earlier deadlines in both of the alternative models will provide students with a decision-making structure that curbs a culture of taking on too much. They also provide an opportunity for students to define their individual learning goals each semester and to commit to them early on. By having such late deadlines, we may be sending the unintended message that we are encouraging students to take on burdensome workloads and not completely commit to their final course load until late into the semester.

We recommend that the university rethink our shared goals for drop/withdraw and redefine them to be more in line with peer schools. *Important to note is that as for any policy, exceptions can (and*

should) be made for individual students who have unique circumstances. Additionally, any program that has a more stringent policy than those proposed can maintain its current policy, if it so chooses.

The success of these new policies will depend heavily on providing students with much more information about course content and their individual performance. Faculty will need to provide detailed syllabi and related course information at the time of registration for the succeeding semester. This material will be posted in the HUB's schedule of classes and should also be made available within program websites.

Faculty will need to incorporate meaningful, substantive evaluations within the first half of the semester and submit mid-term grades. At present, this is not uniform practice. Students will need to understand that mid-term grades serve as an indication of current performance (at most 50% of their potential grade for the course) and do not predict performance for the remainder of the semester. Never-the-less, students can who are doing poorly at the mid-term will have a harder time receiving high grades in a given course and this information can be useful to them in deciding whether to stay in a class or withdraw.

Moving up the Withdraw Deadline

Moving the withdraw deadline (and shortening the drop deadline) is the most substantive recommendation in this proposal as it decreases the amount of time students will carry courses in which they may not be succeeding.

Both peer models move the withdraw deadline from the end of semester to two weeks after midterm grades are made available to students (which is the current CMU drop deadline).

In our current system, students who withdraw between 70-110 days into the semester receive a W on their transcript. In the Fall of 2015, only 1% of grades recorded were withdrawals from courses.[1] Although systematic data is not available, advisors and faculty note that the majority of these students are withdrawing late in the semester. Moving up the withdraw deadline will affect these students. The current state allows those students to delay decision making to a point that adds significant stress for an entire semester. By recognizing that withdrawals are driven by performance, we want to reduce the effect that poor performance in one class can have on the student's entire schedule.

Below we lay out the Pros and Cons for this change from the perspective of the student and of the faculty/administration.

Pros and Cons

- Student perspective
    - Con:
        - Students who wait until late in the semester to withdraw (missing the new, earlier withdraw deadline) will receive an actual--and potentially poor--grade on their transcript, rather than a W.
        - Given the culture amongst some students (and within some colleges) that anything lower than an "A" is unacceptable could lead risk-averse students to

[1] Based on data obtained from IR&A.

withdraw from courses in which they are doing well (earning a "B"), but not excelling (earning an "A"). However, we believe this is not likely to occur because a "W" is less desirable than a "B" from a student's perspective.

- Mitigation strategies:
  - Make this change campus wide so that all students are equally impacted.
  - Work with colleges, advisors, and recruiters to understand how the change in policy may affect final grades and the increased appearance of "W's" on transcripts.
  - Clearly communicate these changes to our deadlines so students (especially continuing students) can adjust their schedules within the time frame.
  - Provide adequate performance feedback to students prior to and at midterm. Require mandatory midterm grades based on substantive assessment.
  - Offer more micro or mini course options for students who would need to add units to continue making progress toward graduation requirements.
  - Consider changing the CMU policy regarding pass/fail grades to allow students to change to Pass/Fail later in the semester as a grade management strategy
- Pro:
  - Provides the incentive to withdraw from courses in which students are struggling earlier in the semester (after midterm grades). This will give them more time to focus on the remaining courses in their load, reduce stress, and potentially be more successful in those courses.
  - Earlier feedback will be available via mandatory, meaningful midterm grades.
  - More balanced workload and assessments throughout the semester, potentially lessening the intense end of semester pressures.

- Administrative/faculty perspective
  - Pro:
    - Less grading and monitoring of students who would otherwise have dropped the course late in the semester
    - The potential for greater commitment and engagement of focused learners in classes
  - Con:
    - Requirement for submitting substantive mid-term grades for all students and providing enough assessments prior to mid-term to make those grades meaningful.
    - More effort needed to communicate changes in timing/deadlines to students.
    - More effort needed to communicate changes to recruiters, parents, and others vis a vis W grades.

Moving up the Drop Deadline

As noted above, dropping a course before the drop deadline removes the course from the student's transcript with no indication that the student had ever been enrolled. Course drops should be made based on course information/content and not on performance. Because the current timing of our drop

deadline is after midterm grades are posted, students are making decisions based on performance in the course. All but one of our benchmarking schools use the drop deadline as a decision based on course content and student interest.

Data available from the Fall of 2015 (see Appendix 1) shows that 27% of enrolled students dropped units after the enrollment census was taken. Because enrollment census is taken 3 weeks after the start of the semester, this number under-represents the actual number of students who might have dropped courses.[2] All of these drops are what other schools would consider late drops, as they occurred after a more traditional add/drop period had ended. Students who dropped courses in the Fall of 2015, consistently dropped one course (or approximately 9 units).

Two Alternative Drop Deadline Models

In this section, we present the pros and cons of moving to each of the two models used by our peers.

Pros and Cons of Concurrent model (drop/add deadline on approximately the same day)

- Student perspective
  - Pro:
    - Easier to get into courses from waitlist (new students add as others drop).
    - Easier to balance individual schedule of drops with adds--ensuring that required semester units can be achieved and that student doesn't drop below full-time load requirement.
    - More stability in project group membership.
  - Con:
    - Not enough information about class workload and requirements at week 2, especially for courses offered for the first time.
    - No safety valve (without penalty) if the class turns out to be more challenging than expected.
  - Mitigation strategies
    - Make more course information available prior to registration (i.e., recent syllabi, pre-requisite courses or skills, Principedia, FCE's).
    - Create culture of researching courses beyond getting advice from peers.
    - Have advisors assume bigger role in being sources of information.

- Administrative / faculty perspective
  - Pro:
    - Ensures classes can reach enrollment targets and reduces empty seats.
    - Provides equity to students on wait lists.
    - Prevents advisees from falling below required units and needing interventions to address them.
    - More stability in class enrollment/team assignments.
    - Class achieves a stable enrollment level earlier in the semester.

[2] CMU does not have a mechanism to track adds and drops before the enrollment census is taken.

    - Con:
        - Faculty do not uniformly provide adequate course information prior to the start of the semester.
        - May require more time and effort from faculty and faculty advisors to provide more comprehensive information on classes.

Pros and Cons of Separate model (add is early, drop is later)

- Student perspective
    - Pro:
        - Provides more time for students to understand work load and course requirements before dropping.
    - Con:
        - Students may not have much performance information at week 5, so drops could be used to balance work load, but not to address performance issues.
        - Students can't "even up" units when dropping because add period is already over, but they can add mini courses offered in the second half of the semester.

- Administrative/faculty perspective
    - Pro:
        - Faculty would have more time to provide feedback to students.
        - Students who drop later will not be able to add into other courses, reducing the number of students who attempt to add a course after it starts.
    - Con:
        - Students who are on the waitlist will not be able to enroll after another student drops.
        - Actual enrollment isn't certain until almost a third of the way through the class, making group projects challenging.

OVERLOAD POLICY

Current Policy (from CMU Undergraduate Catalog, section on Undergraduate Academic Regulations)

> "The University is committed to insuring that each degree candidate has access to a normal course load before it permits other students to register for a greater than normal number of units. A normal course load has been established by each academic department. Students should check with their academic advisor, department head, or dean's office for the definition of a normal course load. Individual colleges may have overload policies that are more restrictive, therefore students should consult with their advisor when considering an overload. Students may register for an overload up to 12 units with the approval of their academic advisor if they have demonstrated their ability to successfully complete a normal course load. Successful completion of a normal course load is defined as having earned at least a 3.00 (3.50 for students in ECE) cumulative QPA through the preceding semester or at least a 3.00 (3.50 for students in ECE) semester QPA in the current semester (in which case all final grades must be recorded before the student can register for the overloaded class). Overloads greater than 12 units or other exceptions must have the approval of the student's Associate Dean. Freshmen and transfer students are limited to a normal course load in their first semester of attendance."

Current State of Overloads at CMU

The APP committee reviewed data on the number of units in which students enroll. We were unable to directly assess the number of students taking overloads because there is no standard across campus for what constitutes a normal course load or an overload.

Limits to course loads (or to maximum units) are set by colleges, but then can be increased in two ways. First, as noted in the policy above, maximum units may be increased by advisors on a case-by-case basis. Second, maximum units are increased using an automatic bump for all students in good standing (as defined by the college). Note that this bump does not require approval from an advisor in all but one college however, schools may differ in how they implement the automatic unit increase (bump.)[3]

Approximately 25% of undergraduate students take a course load that could be considered an overload. For example, in Fall 2015 for second year students and above, the 75th percentile unit load was **54** at census and was **51** at the end of the semester (approaching six 9-unit courses). The 90th percentile unit load was **58** at census and was **57** at the end of the semester (six 9-12 unit courses). Thus, over 600 students carried more than 57 units, or six 9-12 unit courses, in the Fall of 2015. This held for all class levels (first year through fourth year). In addition, at census, the 90th percentile load was **60** units for upper class students, suggesting that some of these students are taking 7, 9-unit courses). This workload hurts students' commitment to each of their courses, prevents deep thinking and learning and encourages them to drop classes. Students told us that the personal effects of overloading result in an increased level of stress, less time for participation in extra-curricular activities, and an inability to maintain work/life balance.

[3] More information is needed regarding how much approval is needed in each college for students to take advantage of the automatic bump to max units.

Students and their advisors need to determine whether and when an overload is advisable given the student's level of performance, work load, etc. Therefore, any changes in the overload policy should allow for greater consideration of individual student parameters through a consultative process.

Proposed Change to Overload Policy

Change practices to limit the number of students who overload and to ensure that students who do overload are positioned to successfully manage the workload.

We propose the following policy for all students:

- All overloads must be approved by associate deans. Overloads will be the exception rather than the rule.
- Remove the automatic bump in units at the end of each semester.
- Undergraduates: Students in their first undergraduate year will not be permitted to overload; Undergraduate students in the second year and beyond who are in good standing (as defined by their degree program) can **request** an overload.
- Graduate students: Students in their first graduate semester will not be permitted to overload; Graduate students in the second semester and beyond who are in good standing (as defined by their degree program) can **request** an overload.
- Amendments to this policy may be needed to address double majors, dual degrees or 3-2 programs.
- Programs that have a more stringent policy may retain it, if they so choose.

Pros and Cons:

- Pro
    - Removes the expectation that overloads are the norm.
    - Ensures that students who overload can handle the additional work in that semester.
    - Allows students to be more thoughtful and consultative in their decisions to overload.
    - Provides students with more time to devote to the learning in each class and to think more deeply about the topic.
- Con
    - There could be a heavy administrative burden on advisors and associate deans who must discuss and approve all requests.
    - Limiting overloads for freshmen, may prevent "genius" incoming students from accepting a CMU offer and encourage them to choose another school.
- Mitigation strategies
    - Put forms online to streamline process.
    - Set a minimum GPA required to request overload from advisor.

APPENDIX 1

UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT UNITS DROPPED AFTER CENSUS: FALL 2015

COLLEGE	DEPARTMENT	TOTAL # STUDENTS	# STUDENTS WHO DROPPED UNITS AFTER CENSUS	PERCENT OF STUDENTS WHO DROPPED UNITS AFTER CENSUS	AVERAGE # UNITS DROPPED, FOR STUDENTS WHO DROPPED
TOTAL		6091	1624	0.27	8.83
CFA		811	177	0.22	7.85
CFA	ARC	194	21	0.11	10.76
CFA	ART	133	29	0.22	8.31
CFA	DES	141	42	0.3	8.52
CFA	DRA	211	42	0.2	5.6
CFA	F00	9	3	0.33	6.67
CFA	MUS	122	39	0.32	7.82
CIT		1740	419	0.24	8.69
CIT	C00	517	53	0.1	5.91
CIT	CEE	85	17	0.2	8.41
CIT	CHE	201	52	0.26	8.54
CIT	ECE	479	165	0.34	10.32
CIT	MEG	337	100	0.3	7.89
CIT	MSE	121	32	0.26	7.88
CMU		632	164	0.26	9.27
CMU	BCA	16	5	0.31	15.4
CMU	BHA	56	12	0.21	8.25
CMU	BSA	17	4	0.24	12
CMU	QBA	161	30	0.19	9.2
CMU	QBS	55	3	0.05	9.67
CMU	QCS	80	51	0.64	9.04
CMU	QIS	100	19	0.19	9.79
CMU	SHS	147	40	0.27	8.63
DC		1149	315	0.27	8.8
DC	ECO	70	24	0.34	9.17
DC	ENG	62	6	0.1	6.5
DC	H00	345	83	0.24	9.28
DC	HIS	35	13	0.37	8.77
DC	HSS	207	55	0.27	8
DC	IPS	24	9	0.38	9.11
DC	ML	5	1	0.2	3

DC	PHI	23	9	0.39	7
DC	PSY	105	30	0.29	9.17
DC	SDM	2	1	0.5	21
DC	SDS	103	19	0.18	9.26
DC	STA	168	65	0.39	8.74
MCS		730	228	0.31	8.96
MCS	BSC	158	46	0.29	7.33
MCS	CMY	78	24	0.31	8.46
MCS	M00	208	44	0.21	10.05
MCS	MSC	208	95	0.46	9.45
MCS	PHY	74	19	0.26	8.58
MCS	SDC	4	0	0	N/A
SCS		574	200	0.35	9.28
SCS	CS	574	200	0.35	9.28
TSB		455	121	0.27	9.21
TSB	BA	455	121	0.27	9.21