

An Outline for the Arts and Science Review of the Academic Consideration Process

June 2018

Review Team Members

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Introduction

In April of 2017, Senate approved the *Policy on Academic Consideration for Students in Extenuating Circumstances*.

The policy recognized that students may have extenuating circumstances temporarily affecting their ability to fulfill their academic obligations. The policy provided for three distinct processes for supporting students in these circumstances – Self-Declaration for a Brief Absence (up to 48 hours), Short-Term Extenuating Circumstances (more than 48 hours but less than 3 months) and Excused Absence for Significant Event. Due to the low volume of requests, this review will not include Excused Absence for Significant Event process.

Students requiring short-term consideration from academic requirements (up to 48 hours) may self-declare and are not required to provide documentation. Students requiring support beyond 48 hours but no longer than 3 months may submit a request for Academic Consideration for Extenuating Circumstances accompanied by documentation relevant to both the request and the timeframe.

The policy on academic consideration was not intended to replace support for students with on-going accommodation requirements. While academic accommodation is beyond the scope of the review, the cumulative impact of academic consideration and accommodation on instructors is acknowledged.

Key elements of the policy included:

- a) Unless there is compelling evidence to suggest otherwise there is an assumption of good faith;
- b) After submitting a request, students are required to contact their instructor to make arrangements for any missed work;
- c) Privacy and confidentiality are to be respected, protected and maintained throughout the academic consideration process;
- d) The University is committed to responding to students in a fair and consistent manner with the understanding that consideration may be individualized due to the nature of each student’s specific circumstances, and differing program requirements. Faculty/School Offices can exercise discretion in responding to requests for academic consideration in extenuating circumstances; and

- e) Providing false or misleading information or to delay or avoid fulfilling academic requirements will be subject to the University's Academic Integrity regulations.

In order to support the implementation of the policy centrally, the role of Academic Accommodation Counsellor was developed. Initially, the counsellor was to devote approximately 50% of their time to academic consideration with the remaining resource available for academic advising.

In order to manage requests, an Academic Consideration Request Portal went live in November of 2017. The portal allowed students to submit requests and documentation (where required) on-line. The portal is unique to the Faculty of Arts and Science as Smith School of Business, the Faculty of Health Sciences (including Nursing), the Faculty of Engineering and Applied Science, the Faculty of Education, the Faculty of Law and the School of Graduate Studies elected to develop their own processes.

Prior to the policy and the portal, students would make arrangements with individual instructors, requiring those instructors to make judgement calls based on the information provided which may or may not have included documentation. The portal is a means of ensuring consistency, fairness and accessibility as well as compliance with the Faculty's regulations.

In order to ensure a broad understanding of the policy and the Faculty's response a presentation was prepared and delivered to key stakeholders (Faculty Board, Undergraduate Chairs and Assistants and all individual departments) by the Associate Dean (Studies), the Assistant Dean and the Academic Accommodation Counsellor.

The Faculty Office committed to track requests, verify documentation (as required), redirect students who required longer term accommodation to the appropriate support(s) and in the event of a possible departure from Academic Integrity refer the matter to the Associate Deans (Studies).

[Pre/Post Portal Statistics and Comparisons](#)

As there are no centralized records prior to implementation of the new policy and accompanying portal, gathering data for a pre-post comparison is not possible.

Given that the intention was for the policy to be widely known among students, requests for academic consideration should naturally increase as awareness of the option rises.

Relatedly, it is possible, prior to implementation of the portal, that requests for academic consideration may have been underreported as students may have been reluctant to approach an instructor directly (for a variety of reasons – the confidential nature of the issue, mental health, shyness, language barrier, etc.). Launching the portal may have increased accessibility, allowing students in extenuating circumstances to request consideration where they may otherwise have unsuccessfully attempted the work or exam.

It would be reasonable to assume increasing mental health issues among the student population and a less stigmatized environment would also result in an increase in the number of requests

Finally, there is anecdotal evidence that some students misunderstand the nature of the extenuating circumstances the policy is meant to address and believed they could use the self-declaration to request time away to attend a family event or because of last minute text anxiety.

The First Cycle

The portal was successfully launched and requests for academic consideration, which had previously been the responsibility of individual faculty members to address, were channeled through a single site. The Faculty Office assisted students in submitting supporting documentation, re-directed students to other services and generally ensured the policy was properly implemented.

Portal demand quickly exceeded the capacity for one individual to centrally manage requests. Overtime totaled 142 hours for February, March and April – the equivalent of 4 weeks in person-hours. (This time was divided between an Academic Accommodation Counsellor and a number of other employees volunteering to assist at the peak periods.)

Commensurately, departmental resources (instructors, TA's, departmental administrative office) were taxed with addressing the need for deferred exams and making individualized arrangements to mark assignments on an on-going basis as requests arrived.

Large classes have been identified as a particular issue given the volume of requests that one or two faculty members must process individually.

By March of 2018 it became apparent that due to the volume, the Faculty Office could not follow up with students who had utilized the portal on multiple occasions for self-declarations. This was communicated to stakeholders on the understanding some form of intervention would be in place for the fall and a full review of Arts and Science procedures and practices would be conducted over the summer months.

Identified Concerns

A number of substantive concerns have been identified by Department Heads, Faculty members and Student Services staff:

- Self-Declaration of Brief Absence
 - Multiple declarations
 - Students potentially accessing the wrong resource
 - Misuse/Academic Integrity concerns
 - A lack of intervention by the Faculty Office
- Self-declarations during the mid-term and exam periods (volume, potential misuse)
- Communication to students regarding appropriate use of the protocol
- Lack of distinction between academic accommodation and academic consideration

- Students are unclear on the correct pathways to access the different student support services (Counselling, QSAS, Health Services, academic advising)
- Portal upgrades
- Resource requirements

[The Need for Review](#)

During the summer months, two distinct review processes will be initiated:

[*Advisory Committee on Academic Consideration*](#)

The Advisory Committee on Academic Accommodation supports the Queen's Student Accessibility Services (QSAS) in accommodating students with disabilities. It also supports Student Health Services, Counselling Services and Faculties and Schools in responding to students who require temporary accommodation for other issues and to those requesting deferrals for any reason.

Jennifer Dods, Executive Director, Student Wellness Services has committed to a review of the Academic Consideration for Students in Extenuating Circumstances policy on behalf of the committee. The review will include focus groups to gather information and will involve key members of the advisory committee.

This review will focus on the policy and procedure level. The Faculty office will ensure that Department Heads and Undergraduate Chairs are notified of the consultation schedule via the newsletter.

[*Faculty of Arts and Science*](#)

The Faculty of Arts and Science review will focus on addressing workload, Faculty-level procedures, practices and ongoing management of the portal.

There are a number of upgrades and automated features which, if added to the portal's functionality, could significantly increase efficiencies within Student Services and alleviate a number of departmental concerns.

Other portal upgrades will focus on reporting and statistical analysis to support intervention, planning and resource decisions.

[Immediate Steps](#)

A number of immediate steps have or will be initiated as, regardless of the outcome of the review, there will be resource requirements and support needs:

- Student Services has hired an additional position to address academic consideration with the objective of also increasing academic advising resources;

- The Faculty Office will explore opportunities for additional resources at the departmental level such as increased academic assistant support; and
- The Faculty Office will begin discussions with Exams Office regarding capacity to implement centralized/ Faculty-wide deferred exams including funding requirements.

Review Activities

- Survey instructors to receive feedback, identify challenges and solicit suggestions for improvement;
- Review Arts and Science practices and suggest changes where appropriate (e.g., intervention, additional information or support to students);
- Initiate upgrades to portal analysis and response capabilities;
- Review the communication strategy to ensure that students understand when it is appropriate for them to make requests for academic consideration and which request to submit [i.e. Self-Declaration of Brief Absence (up to 48 hours) vs. Short-Term Extenuating Circumstances (more than 48 hours, up to 3 months)];
- Identify any additional resource requirements resulting from the review;
- Explore the role of universal course design in reducing the need for individual academic consideration; and
- Explore the use of a centralized service for deferred mid-term, mid-year and final exams.

Timeline

May 2018

- Initiate the review
- Begin cross-Faculty discussions regarding intervention strategies

June 2018

- Discuss upgrades to the portal
- Release the survey to instructors
- Discuss specific intervention strategies for multiple self-declarations
- Develop a communication plan for students and instructors

July 2018

- Review survey results
- Final decision on intervention strategies
- Review any resource implications

August 2018

- Implement recommendations

September 2018

- Report to stakeholders