

## REPORT

### Senate Distance Learning and e-Learning (DL/eL) Committee

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### PROPOSED CHANGES IN SENATE RULES DEALING WITH ABSENCE FROM DL/HYBRID COURSES

There are many references in the Senate Rules to “absence” or “attendance” or variations on these terms. However, only three references call for *quantifying* the amount of absences. Two of these instances are related and deal with Permissive Withdrawals (SR 5.1.8.3) and Excused Absences (SR 5.2.4.2). A third instance relates to Unilateral Removal for Failure to Attend First Two Class Period (SR 5.1.8.1). Our committee proposes changes to these three Senate Rules plus related changes to SR 9.1 (Definitions) and the Senate document titled “University Senate Syllabus Guidelines”.

In general, we propose rule changes that better recognize the diversity of teaching methods and technologies (e.g., distance learning approaches). In our discussions, we noted the challenges of measuring student learning and the particular shortcomings of using ‘seat time’, contact hours, and the ‘Carnegie unit’ for this purpose. Rather than be constrained by these legacy measures of student learning, our committee sought rule changes that recognize emerging pedagogies (e.g., competency-based learning).

#### **SR 5.1.8.3** (Permissive Withdrawals)

##### Proposed changes:

*A student may withdraw from a class, or from the University, after the withdrawal period in Rule 5.1.8.2.A but through the last day of classes for the semester/session/term upon approval by the dean of the student's college of a petition certifying urgent non-academic reasons including but not limited to:*

1. *Illness or injury of the student;*
2. *Serious personal or family problems;*
3. *Serious financial difficulties; or*
4. *Having excused absences in excess of one-fifth of the instructional units for that course (e.g., contact hours or modules) ~~class contact hours in a course~~ where attendance is required or is a criterion for a grade, ~~pursuant to SR 5.2.4.2.~~ [SREC: 11/20/87]*

##### Rationale:

First, the “one-fifth rule” cannot be “pursuant to SR 5.2.4.2” because that rule references this one. Thus, we propose to let this rule (SR 5.1.8.3) be the “source” rule (i.e., strike the words “pursuant to SR 5.2.4.2”).

Second, while “contact hours” has the advantage of being a relatively objective measure (e.g., see the Senate approved document “What is a Credit Hour?”), there are other instructional units (e.g., modules and competencies) that are pedagogically appropriate for measuring student learning. We propose to generalize the wording. The words “*instructional units for that course (e.g., contact hours or modules)*” is more inclusive and allows for these additional ways of measuring student learning.

No other wording changes are needed for this rule to work in the context of online and similar instructional methods. For two reasons, instructors of courses that have distance learning activities (e.g., online assignments that students must complete or submit at times or locations other than the traditional meeting places and times) are already required to quantify the instructional units (e.g., contact hours or modules) associated with such activities. The first reason is so instructors can judge whether “the majority of the instruction (interaction between students and instructors and among students) in a course occurs when

students and instructors are not in the same place” (SACS definition of distance learning). The second reason is so instructors can determine the appropriate number of credit hours for the course. The Senate approved definition of a credit hour is specified in the document “What is a Credit Hour” (i.e., “how much contact time and other effort should be used to determine the equivalent of one credit hour”). This document says that contact time in a DL course is a sum of “student engaged learning time (excluding homework)... devoted to instruction, online tutorials, discussion, student presentations, and other methods.”

While instructors should already know how instructional units (e.g., contact hours or modules) align with their online course activities, those associations may not be well known or transparent to students. For this reason, our committee makes the following related proposal:

We propose changing the wording of two items on the Senate approved document titled “University Senate Syllabus Guidelines”. The first proposed change applies to the fourth box under “General Course Information”:

Proposed changes:

- ~~☐ *Scheduled meeting day(s), time and place.*~~
- ~~☐ *Tentative course schedule that clarifies topics, specifies assignment due dates, examination date(s).*~~
- ☐ *The number of course meetings including days, times, and locations (e.g., MWF, 9:00 - 9:50 in POT 123) or specify the number of instructional units (e.g., 40 contact hours or 8 modules) including delivery methods and locations (e.g., asynchronously via the Internet)*
- ☐ *Planned alignment between the course meetings or instructional units, the course topics, and the course due dates for assignments and exams.*

**SR 5.2.4.2** (Excused Absences)

Proposed changes:

*A student shall not be penalized for an excused absence.*

...

*If an attendance policy is not stated in the course syllabus and attendance is not a criterion for a grade in the course, then the Instructor of Record shall not take any account of a student’s excused or unexcused absences ~~from class~~ when assigning a grade. [US: 2/8/16]*

*If the course syllabus defines either policies that require ~~class~~ attendance or a grade standard that determines a student’s grade based in part on ~~class~~ attendance, the following rule interpretation applies:*

*Excused Absences: If a student has excused absences in excess of one-fifth of the instructional units (e.g., contact hours or modules) ~~class contact hours~~ for that course, the student shall have the right to petition for a “W” as a Permissive Withdrawal (SR 5.1.8.3), or the Instructor of Record may award an “I” for the course if the student declines to petition for a “W” [US: 2/9/87; SREC: 11/20/87: US: 2/8/16].*

*Unexcused Absences: The Instructor of Record shall define any course policy relating to unexcused absences in the course syllabus. If a policy is not stated in the course syllabus or the policy does not allow for a penalty to the student, the Instructor of Record shall not penalize the student for any unexcused absences. [US: 2/8/16]*

Rationale:

First, we propose to remove two references to “class” attendance since attendance for online activities does not require physical presence in a classroom.

Second, we propose to substitute the simple reference to “contact hours” with more general wording that references “instructional units” of which “contact hours” is merely one example.

### **SR 5.1.8.1** (Unilateral Removal for Failure to Attend First Two Class Period)

#### Proposed changes:

*Students who miss the first two class periods of a course, without notifying the department of their intention to attend may be reported by the department. If between the first day of class and the drop/add date students neither show evidence of participation in the course nor notify the Instructor of Record of their intent to complete the course, the Instructor of Record may report these students to the dean who shall remove the students them from the class role roll and notify the Registrar that the student has students have been removed from the class roll.*

#### Rationale:

The purpose of this rule (apparently) is to allow instructors to remove from a course those students who do not intend to complete the course before time expires to add other students who want to enroll but are currently excluded for lack of space in the course. If correct, the committee proposes language that seems simpler given the ubiquitous ways (e.g., email or phone message) that students now have to express their intentions to instructors.

The committee further recommends that if instructors think this policy may apply to their course, instructors should (but not be required to) add a note to the information that appears when students register for the course that references SR 5.1.8.1 and/or explains the specific relevant expectations. For example, a note might read: *Students must... [e.g., “attend the first class on” or “complete the first assignment by”] August 25, 2016, or they may be dropped from this course as per SR 5.1.8.1.*

### **SR 9.1** (Definitions)

#### Proposed changes:

*Absence: failure to ~~be present for scheduled class~~ complete a scheduled course activity at, within, or by the time prescribed by the Instructor of Record.*

*Attendance: completion of a scheduled course activity at, within, or by the time prescribed by the Instructor of Record.*

#### Rationale:

Many instructional methods do not require students to be physically present in a classroom. Our proposed change would still allow instructors to require students to be physically present “at” their scheduled course activities (e.g., class discussion and lecture on MWF from 9:00 – 9:50 at POT 123). But it would also allow the word “absence” to apply when students miss (i.e., fail to complete) activities as prescribed by the Instructor of Record.