

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY


MEMORANDUM

To: Senate

From: Allan MacKinnon, Chair
Senate Committee on Undergraduate Studies

Subject: WE (Withdrawal under Extenuating Circumstances) Proposal
(SCUS Reference 02-19)
(Rev. 1)

Date: June 19, 2002



Action undertaken by the Senate Committee on Undergraduate Studies at its meeting of June 18, 2002 gives rise to the following motion:

Motion:

“That Senate approve the changes to the existing procedures, criteria and guidelines for withdrawal under extenuating circumstances outlined in the proposal as set forth in S. 02-56 , effective Fall Semester 2003. ”

Rationale:

At the prompting of the Committee of Chairs, SCUS examined how to improve the way in which we handle requests by students for course withdrawal under extenuating circumstances (WE). Roger Blackman chaired a SCUS subcommittee that produced the attached proposal for revising policy and procedure for handling both timely (within-semester) and retroactive WE requests.

The current procedure for timely WE requests calls for the student to pick up a form from the Registrar's Office, have the form assessed and signed by each course instructor and each department chair, and then return the completed form to the Registrar's Office. Among the perceived difficulties with this process are the following:

- a) From the student's view: Many students seeking a WE are not in a fit condition to be seeking signatures from as many as 5 different instructors and 5 different department chairs.
- b) From the instructor's view: Many instructors and chairs feel they lack the information needed to make a well-considered decision. Some routinely support WE requests. Others do so only if there is relevant documentation. Few attempt to check documentation. Very few have a clear set of guidelines to help them make a consistent decision.

- c) From the health professional's view: We have often been called to task by SFU's Health Services personnel for encouraging students to seek medical notes, sometimes retrospectively, simply for the purpose of satisfying the procedures for granting academic relief (such as WE). They see this largely as a waste of time.

The problems for retroactive WE requests are similar in nature but often worse in degree.

We believe the revised proposal improves upon existing policy and procedure in several significant ways.

1. Students making WE requests will benefit from a "one-stop" service, and from having their requests assessed through the consistent application of explicit criteria.
2. The primary responsibility for deciding most WE requests will be made by one or two trained staff persons rather than by hundreds of untrained academics. This is appropriate where the precipitating factors are primarily health-related or employment-related and are essentially non-academic.
3. In the minority of cases where academic issues are deemed to be relevant, the WE request will be decided at the Dean's level after appropriate academic consultation.
4. Faculties may arrange with the front-line staff to have all cases within a category of WE request (e.g., selective) passed on to the Dean's office for decision.

This proposal has the support of the Committee of Chairs and of SCUS. In addition, the principles on which the proposal is based were seen as appropriate by the great majority of faculty and students who offered feedback on various drafts

Withdrawal Under Extenuating Circumstances: Procedures, Criteria and Guidelines

During Weeks 4-12 of the semester, a student may apply for permission to drop a course under Extenuating Circumstances. These are defined in the Calendar as "unusual circumstances beyond the student's control which make it impossible for the course to be completed". If the application is successful, a WE notation will appear after the course on the student's transcript (note that during Weeks 4-5, a student wanting to withdraw from a course for any reason may choose to receive a WD, which is automatically granted). This document specifies the procedures to be followed in submitting WE applications and the criteria that will be used in evaluating them, and it offers guidelines to assist students in the presentation of their case.

I. PROCEDURES

- a. Students considering making a WE application should seek advice from staff in Student Services in the Maggie Benston Building.
- b. As soon as a decision is made to pursue a WE request, the WE Application Form should be completed, relevant documentation appended, and the package submitted to Student Services (not to the department offering the course).
- c. The application will be reviewed by Student Services staff to determine whether it should be decided directly or referred to the student's Faculty of registration. Such referral may be required by a Faculty because of the general type of withdrawal requested (e.g., selective), or may be warranted by the characteristics of the individual case. If the request is decided directly by staff, the student will be notified of the decision, normally within a few days, with copies going to the course instructor and to the department chair or faculty dean. The WE annotation will be placed on the student's transcript a week or so later.
- d. If the WE request is referred to the relevant Faculty Dean's office, information may then be collected by the Dean's office from the course instructor and/or department chair before it is decided whether or not to approve the application. That decision will be communicated to Student Services, who will notify the student, normally within 2 weeks.
- e. Requests arising after the 12th week of the semester, or requests relating to a course taken in a previous semester, are referred to as "retroactive". Retroactive WE applications follow the procedures laid out above for "in-semester" requests, but may take longer to adjudicate.

II. CRITERIA

It is not possible to lay down clear rules specifying precisely how WE applications will be assessed because the reasons for such requests are so varied. However, the following

criteria are stated in a manner intended to help students determine whether they are eligible to apply for withdrawal under extenuating circumstances.

a. Medical Grounds

Students have grounds for a WE request if they suffer a medical condition during the semester which so impairs their ability to study that course requirements cannot be satisfied. Hospitalization for a week or more is almost certain to be regarded as sufficient evidence, while the sort of minor transient ailment that many students experience is most likely to be insufficient.

b. Employment Grounds

Students have grounds for a WE request if they experience an unexpected change in conditions of employment that is so disrupting that course requirements cannot be completed. Transfer to a remote location is almost certain to be regarded as sufficient evidence, while a requirement to work occasional overtime is most likely to be insufficient.

c. Compassionate Grounds

Students have grounds for a WE request if they have a traumatic experience that renders them unfit to complete course requirements. An extended period of intense grief following the death of an immediate family member is almost certain to be regarded as sufficient evidence, while short-term anxiety associated with a friend's illness is most likely to be insufficient.

d. Other Grounds

It is unusual for students to apply for a WE on grounds that are not medical, employment-related or compassionate.

III. GUIDELINES

Compassion and Equity

The dominant principles governing the WE process are compassion and equity. The university is prepared to help students who experience unexpected and uncontrollable events that seriously threaten their academic studies. But in doing so it must be careful not to disadvantage students who continue their studies when faced with similar circumstances. In practice, this means that WE requests are approved only when there is compelling evidence that the student really has no alternative to withdrawal. Students who do not take reasonable steps to resolve existing problems before the end of Week 5 will have difficulty meeting this standard.

Selective vs. Complete Withdrawal

Since the reasons for a WE request are likely to have a pervasive influence on a student's academic performance, they will typically affect all the courses in which a student is enrolled. For this reason, most WE requests are for complete withdrawal from all courses in a semester. Occasionally, however, circumstances may be such that not all courses are

affected, in which case the request is for selective withdrawal. A student applying for selective withdrawal must specify the reasons why one course is affected but another is not.

Poor Course Performance

Although most students requesting a WE have experienced academic difficulties in the course in question, the fear of a poor grade is not, in and of itself, acceptable as a basis for granting withdrawal. The assessment of a WE request is based on the nature and severity of the reasons for the poor performance. It is important for students requesting selective withdrawal to keep this point in mind, particularly where performance is weak in the course from which withdrawal is sought and noticeably stronger in courses in which the student wishes to stay registered.

Medical Documentation

Students with a medical condition severe enough to warrant a WE request will normally have consulted a medical practitioner and can document that consultation. Such documentation must be attached to the WE application. Students who did not see a doctor at the time of the accident or illness are advised not to seek medical documentation at a later time. Little useful information can be gained from retrospective medical notes written by health care professionals who were not consulted at the time the student was experiencing poor health.

Employment Documentation

Students appealing on employment grounds should submit a letter from their employer that supplies such information as the nature of the change, its date of onset and duration, and where relevant, the impact it has on the student's ability to maintain academic commitments.

Covering Letter

WE applicants should state their reasons clearly but succinctly in a covering letter. They may do so in the knowledge that the letter will be read only by the staff and faculty members who are responsible for assessing the application. The letter should link as clearly as possible the claimed causes (e.g., health problems) and effects (e.g., missed assignments). This may include setting out a chronology specifying the dates of relevant events. The more complete the documentation and the clearer the covering letter, the more likely the application is to be decided promptly.

Consultation

Students considering withdrawing from a course are required to seek counsel from Student Services. They may also wish to consult their course instructor and departmental advisor.

IV. REVIEW

It is expected to implement these procedures in the semester following their approval by Senate. After they have been in force for one year, Student Services will provide to SCUS a descriptive and statistical summary of the revised WE procedures.

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF CRIMINOLOGY

MEMORANDUM

To: The Chair and Members of Senate (via Bobbie Grant)

From: Dr. Robert Gordon, Professor and Director
School of Criminology

Re: New WE Policy and Procedure

Date: June 21, 2002

This is to confirm that at the last meeting of the Chairs' and Directors' Committee (May 23rd, 2002) the members voted overwhelmingly to support the proposed changes to the WE procedure.

The Chairs and Directors have long called for the kinds of changes being proposed and urge Senate to adopt the new policy and procedure.

