

Memorandum of Understanding about Minimum-Grade Requirements

Introduction. If you would like to implement minimum-grade requirements, you and your program must commit to the procedures listed below. Please understand that these policies are not arbitrary—they arose out of the lessons that were learned from previous cases, and they are intended to ensure that you have the framework in place to handle the problems that minimum-grade requirements cause. Before you submit your proposal, please talk with the Curriculum Committee, Academic Affairs, and the Registrar's Office to ensure that you have anticipated all possible consequences (they aren't always obvious). Then you should consult with program faculty and staff to ensure that you have the resources and staffing to make this work.

Note: The Curriculum Committee has established the following policies on minimum-grade requirements:

1. *Generally, programs should only require minimum grades in core courses in the early stages of a program.* When minimum-grade requirements are imposed on courses early in a program, they essentially serve as gatekeepers that prevent students from advancing down a path for which they are not well prepared. When these requirements are placed on courses late in a program, such as a capstone, they cause significant problems because students can suddenly find themselves blocked from graduation even after spending a great deal of time and money on your program.
2. *Minimum-grade requirements must be implemented as course prerequisites.* Along similar lines, these requirements cause the most problems when students can “drift” through a program, only to find themselves barred from graduation because of a course they took a long time ago (perhaps before they ever declared the program). When they are implemented as course prerequisites, students are apprised of the problem more quickly and can make appropriate decisions.
3. *Only C- prerequisites can be implemented.* When different departments choose different standards, the result is chaos: students, faculty, and staff alike find it impossible to keep track of who requires what.

_____ *Preparation.* We have prepared and submitted a plan to the Curriculum Committee that spells out the following:

- the individuals who will be responsible for the procedures outlined herein; and
- the estimated number of past and future students who will be affected by this policy.

_____ *Implementation.* We acknowledge that minimum-grade requirements shall not be implemented on existing courses until two catalog years after the requirement is passed by the Senate. This delay will allow programs the time to advise students of the coming requirements. For new courses, the minimum-grade requirement can be implemented when the course is created unless doing so would cause other logistical problems.

_____ *Notification.* Between passage and implementation, we will take all reasonable steps to inform students of the coming grade requirements. These steps should include (but need not be limited to) the following:

- notifying students in the program through email, advising, or other appropriate methods;
- including a notification of the upcoming prerequisite in the catalog; and
- working with Academic Advising to inform undeclared students of the coming policy.

_____ *Advising.* After implementation, we will take all reasonable steps to ensure that students are aware of the consequences of these requirements. At the least, we will make advising mandatory for the following students:

- students who, at midterm, are earning an inadequate grade in a relevant course;
- students who have earned an inadequate final grade in a relevant course; and
- students who can no longer complete the program for which they have declared.

_____ *Enforcement at the course level.* We understand that, when students enroll for courses, the system assumes that they will obtain adequate grades in all courses in which they are currently enrolled. (For instance, students can register for MATH 120 before they know what grade they have received in MATH 111.) We acknowledge that we are responsible for promptly checking the "missing prerequisite" lists, and for notifying and removing students who have not met the stated minimum-grade requirements.

_____ *Manual overrides.* We acknowledge that Banner cannot check repeat-course grades when checking prerequisites. Consequently, if a student earns a D on the first attempt and a C on the second, Banner will only detect the D. We acknowledge that we are responsible for manually overriding such students into the appropriate courses.

_____ *Course repetition policy.* We acknowledge that the Course Repetition Policy states that students may only repeat a passed course once. If they pass it twice, they cannot take it again, nor can they transfer in credit for it.

_____ *Enforcement at the program level.* We understand that, in some cases, these prerequisites will prohibit certain students from completing a program. We acknowledge that we are responsible for promptly identifying and notifying students who can no longer complete the program for which they are enrolled.

_____ *Monitoring.* We agree to monitor enforcement at both the course and the program level by tracking the following, which we will annually report to the Dean:

- DFW rates in relevant courses;
- waivers and exceptions granted at the course level; and
- waivers and exceptions granted at the program level.

Memorandum Regarding Minimum-Grade Requirements

Introduction

Over the last few years, several programs have proposed or implemented minimum-grade requirements—that is, policies that require students to get a grade above a D- in a particular course. These come in two forms. Sometimes they are implemented as *course prerequisites*, meaning that students are required to get a particular grade in one course before they can enroll in a later course. For instance, to take MATH 120, students must have earned a C- or better in MATH 111. In other cases, they are implemented as *graduation requirements*, meaning that students must earn a certain grade in a course before they can complete a particular program, even if that course is not a prerequisite for another course. For instance, COMM states that “a grade of C- or better must be earned in any course” that is used to fulfill its major or minor requirements.

The Faculty Curriculum Committee and the Senate have usually approved these requirements—though not always, and not without debate. Recently, however, the Committee, the Registrar’s Office, and the Provost’s Office have found that these requirements invariably lead to a host of unintended consequences and unanticipated problems. In the case of the School of Business, the problems have been so severe that the School has decided to abolish their minimum-grade requirements. The Committee therefore believes that this is an opportune time to learn from the lessons of the past few years and develop a policy that addresses these issues.

Faculty members might wonder what these problems could possibly be. After all, the pedagogical rationale seems straightforward. By definition, a grade of C signifies that a student has an acceptable understanding of the material in the course. A grade of D, being lower, signifies that the student’s understanding is less than acceptable, albeit not bad enough to warrant an F. Consequently, if a student has an unacceptable understanding of the material in MATH 111, then it should be no surprise that they perform poorly in a class that assumes that they understand that material. Along the same lines, if a student earns a D in a core course in a major, then they have a poor understanding of a key area of that field of study, and should improve their understanding before graduating. A similar rationale underlies the requirement that students must have a 2.0 GPA to graduate, and grade prerequisites seem like they provide a more fine-grained implementation of that rationale.

Unfortunately, while the rationale is straightforward, the reality is much more complex. Requiring an *average* above a certain threshold is different from requiring a *grade* of above a certain threshold in a particular course. A student who does not meet the GPA threshold can raise his or her average by taking additional courses. The options are more limited for a student who earns an inadequate but passing grade in a particular course, because such a grade has substantially different consequences from a grade of F, particularly under the College’s course-repetition policy. As a result, the effects of these requirements are far more complex than those of a more general GPA requirement.

On the next page, we outline some of these consequences. Note that these are not hypotheticals: Each of them has actually occurred in a program here at the College of Charleston. In some cases, programs have tried to “solve” these problems by waiving grade requirements on a case-by-case basis, especially when they are faced with upset students (or upset parents, or the upset parents’ lawyers). The Committee believes that these waivers undermine the rationale behind grade requirements and are unfair to students who have made a good-faith effort to follow the published rules.

On the final page, we present the procedures we have established to mitigate these problems. We fully agree that students are ultimately responsible for understanding the requirements of their programs. We would, however, point out that certain means of enforcing this responsibility have proven less effective than others. Therefore, we believe that these procedures will help programs anticipate the consequences of minimum-grade requirements and implement strategies to handle the difficulties that inevitably arise.

Respectfully submitted,
Daniel Greenberg, FCC Chair

Unintended Consequences of Minimum-Grade Requirements: Case Studies, Catastrophes, and Points to Ponder

Problem 1: Enforcement and the risk of grade inflation. Faculty already receive pleas and imprecations from students on the border between a D and an F. Once they adopt a grade requirement—say, a C- prerequisite—they endure much the same from students on the D+/C- border. In some cases, the implementation of grade requirements has led to fewer D's and more C's. If grade inflation is responsible for this shift, it undermines the entire rationale for the grade requirement. How will you determine whether grade inflation is going on? How will you determine whether faculty are “holding the line” and resisting the grade-grubbers?

Problem 2: Enforcement at the program level. Suppose you implement a C- as a graduation requirement in your major—that is, students must earn a C- or better in each of several courses in order to graduate. Suppose further that a freshman earns a D in one of these courses. She goes on to take a number of other courses, otherwise completing the major. In the spring semester of senior year, she is notified that she cannot be cleared for graduation. She comes to your office and begs to be allowed to graduate because she has a job lined up, has been admitted to graduate school, etc. Will you grant her a waiver, thus undermining your policy? Or will you insist that she repeat the course, barring her from graduation because of a bad semester three years ago? (Note that if she does repeat it, she will not receive any credit hours for it, but she will be charged full price nonetheless.) If you implement a grade as a graduation requirement, you will be faced with these questions—and if you grant waivers, there is no point in having the requirements in the first place.

Problem 3: Disqualification from programs. Consider a COMM major who gets an inadequate grade (say, a D-) in COMM 214 the first time through, then another inadequate grade upon retaking the course. Our Course Repetition Policy states that students may repeat a passed course only once. Therefore, this student can no longer earn the requisite grade in this required course, and consequently can never earn a COMM major at the College of Charleston. If you implement a similar requirement, how will you find these students? Again, what will you do when they come to you in spring semester of their senior year and beg to be allowed to graduate? Will you let them out, thus undermining your policy, or will you inform them that they have to start over with a new major even after they have spent their entire academic career working towards a degree in your program?

Problem 4: Perverse incentives. Students have come up with a number of creative ways to avoid the above outcomes. Consider students who earned an inadequate grade in a course the first time through, then found themselves at risk of earning another inadequate grade upon retaking it. Some students in these circumstances have decided to *deliberately fail the course*. This is because they can take the course a third time if they fail it, whereas if they pass it a second time (even with a D), they cannot take it again. Do you find this acceptable? If not, what will you advise such a student to do?

Problem 5: Transfer credit. Alternatively, instead of repeating the course at C of C, students sometimes decide to take the equivalent course at Trident or a similar institution on the hypothesis that it will be easier. Furthermore, some students have taken a course twice at C of C, earned an inadequate grade twice, and then proceeded to Trident to make a third attempt. Some students already pursue this strategy when they have failed a course, but they are more likely to pursue it when they are barred from repeating the course at C of C. Are you comfortable with this outcome given that these students are trying to avoid the increased standards you have established?

Problem 6: Ignorance and confusion. Students, faculty, and advisers often find it difficult to understand all of the implications of these policies. Some of the confusion arises because a student gets credit for the course in some ways but not others. For instance, a student who gets a D in MATH 111 gets General Education credit for the course, and has satisfied the Math requirement for the Psychology BS degree. They can even continue to MATH 250—but not MATH 120. If they get a D in MATH 111 a second time, they can never take MATH 120, meaning that they can never complete any major that has MATH 120 as a requirement. How will you track all of this? Are you aware of the consequences of other programs' grade requirements for your own programs? Are you and your faculty ready to advise students about these consequences?