**Policy Revisions Q & A**

**How have RU’s probation and suspension policies changed over the years, and what are the current policies?**

Prior to 1996, probation and suspension were determined by a sliding scale in which the more hours a student had attempted, the higher his/her GPA had to be. There were three probation thresholds: 1.50 for 1-20 hours attempted, 1.75 for 21-40 hours attempted, and 2.00 for 41 or more hours attempted. Suspension resulted if the student fell below the probation threshold for three consecutive semesters or if the student’s total number of quality points was 18 or more less than twice his/her total hours attempted at Radford University. Provided a student’s cumulative GPA did not fall below the GPA specified for probation for three consecutive semesters, a student could therefore avoid being suspended by marginally improving his/her cumulative GPA each term. However, a student did not have to achieve a cumulative 2.00 until graduation.

In an attempt to tighten academic requirements, policies were revised in 1996. Currently, new freshmen and new transfer students must achieve a 1.25 during the first semester of full-time enrollment to avoid suspension. Continuing students must have earned a 2.00 at the conclusion of all summer sessions after they have attempted 30 credit hours to avoid suspension. All students not subject to suspension whose cumulative GPAs are below 2.00 are placed on probation.

**Are exceptions made to these policies?**

Simultaneously with the revision of the suspension policy, in 1996 RU began to offer Students On the Road To Success (SORTS), which is, in effect, an exception-to-suspension policy for new students who would otherwise be suspended. Each semester, new students judged as being the most likely to recover academically have been invited to participate in this contracted, structured program which involves contact with peer mentors, attendance in study halls, participation in workshops, etc. Each spring, between 50-60 students in their second semester of enrollment—almost all of whom had first semester GPAs between 1.00 and 1.25—have participated in SORTS.

For a few years following the initiation of the new suspension policy, continuing students who were to be suspended could appeal for exceptions to their academic deans. However, the deans had little confidence that decisions about exceptions were being made fairly and consistently, so for the past ten years or so, no exceptions to suspension have been granted to continuing students.

**Has SORTS been successful?**

While it is true that it SORTS has “salvaged” some students, its overall record of success has not been good. Of the 55 students who were part of the program last spring, for example, only 24 (43.6%) returned in fall 2012. Moreover, of the 445 students who were part of SORTS between 2001 and 2008, only 22% eventually graduated. (Eight remain enrolled.) Due to the limited success of the program, we have recommended to Dr. Minner that SORTS be discontinued following this semester and that resources be reallocated to students on probation.

**What are the implications of the elimination of SORTS?**

Minimally, the discontinuation of SORTS requires that we decide whether any new students will be offered exceptions to suspension. Failing to allow exceptions without a concomitant adjustment in suspension policies would almost certainly have negative retention implications, since students who would otherwise be given exceptions through SORTS (primarily students with a first semester GPA between 1.00 and 1.24) would be suspended. Therefore, this is a good opportunity to examine our policies, address their shortcomings, and tighten our academic requirements.

**How do we propose that our probation and suspension policies for new students be revised?**

We propose that the suspension threshold for first-time, full-time new students be lowered from a 1.25 to a 1.00 GPA. First-time, full-time new students whose first semester GPAs fall between 1.00 and 1.99 will be allowed to return to the University on probation.

**Doesn’t this imply lowering academic standards?**

On the surface, yes. However, there are some very good reasons to set the new student suspension threshold at 1.00:

1. As noted above, the *de facto* situation is that the majority of students whose GPAs are between 1.00 to 1.24 are currently invited to participate in SORTS, which changes their status from suspension to probation. Therefore, the reality is that there will be no appreciable difference in the numbers or proportions of new students who are on probation or suspended.
2. A 1.00 standard links the threshold to an easily explained marker—a D average—which is not the case for the current 1.25 standard. Moreover, 1.00 is the minimum GPA a new student can earn while passing all courses (albeit, to be sure, with Ds).
3. The recommended 1.00 new student suspension policy must be examined in light of our recommendation that no exceptions to suspension be granted and our recommendations to tighten the continuing student policy. (See below.) In effect, the full message (which should never be voiced, lest students strive for the minimum!) would be: “We acknowledge that making the transition to Radford University can be challenging for new students. As long as they earn a D average during their first semester, we will allow them to return for a second semester. However, anything less than 1.00 during the first semester is unacceptable and will result in suspension, and we will make no exceptions. Moreover, while a D average will enable students to return for a second semester, they must subsequently demonstrate constant academic progress, achieving a 2.00 by the time they have attempted 48 hours at RU and maintaining at least a cumulative 2.00 GPA until they graduate, or they will be suspended. There will be no exceptions.”
4. If we did not adjust the suspension threshold, based on the three most recent new student cohorts, 2-3 percent more new students than is currently the case would likely be suspended each year. As already noted, this would have a negative effect upon the University’s new student fall-to-fall retention rates. Radford University’s retention rates are already lower than those of some of our competitors’ in Virginia—not because our students’ academic profiles are not comparable (our graduation rates, in many cases, are higher!), but because our competitors seem more likely to wait until later in the students’ academic careers to suspend non-performers. We would never suggest manipulating academic policies to artificially increase new student retention rates, but it would not appear to be in the best interest of our students or the institution to take actions that would decrease them.

**Will any new students be offered exceptions to suspension?**

Since the suspension threshold will be lowered, we recommend offering **NO** exceptions to suspension for new students.

We fully understand that, regardless of the credentials that justify admitting them, many students come to college woefully unprepared academically and lack the motivation to succeed. However, we believe that a first semester GPA of 1.00—*a D average*—is both reasonable and attainable. Students who cannot achieve at this level should demonstrate their capacity to succeed in college by enrolling at a community college. If they do not feel ready to resume their studies immediately following suspension, they should consider employment. They can apply for readmission to RU in a subsequent semester.

Moreover, while we are sensitive to the fact that things beyond students’ control—homesickness, serious illness, family issues, dysfunctional relationships, etc.—occasionally get in the way of students’ academic success during their first semester, we doubt that these matters can be satisfactorily and completely resolved such that struggling students are “ready to go” the very next semester.

We recommend that new students who enter in the fall be ineligible to attend Wintermester to improve their GPAs and avoid suspension. We believe that struggling students are unlikely to have the maturity to succeed in online courses following only one semester of enrollment. So that students are treated consistently no matter when they enroll, we recommend that new students who enter in the spring be ineligible to enroll in the summer.

**What problems have emerged with the current suspension policies for continuing students?**

The current suspension policy has two significant shortcomings:

1. The “30-hour loophole” for continuing students. When the policy was initiated, a faulty assumption was made: namely, that since students must pass an average of 15 hours each semester to graduate in four years, continuing students would pass the 30-hour threshold following two semesters of enrollment. Including summer, we assumed that most poor performers would be suspended following no more than one calendar year of enrollment.

However, students and their advisors soon figured out that if they attempted fewer than 30 hours during the first calendar year of enrollment, they could remain enrolled on probation for a second year. In a worst case scenario, a student can under the current policy earn the minimum 1.25 GPA during the first semester and then have three consecutive semesters with 0.00 GPAs, provided he/she remains below the 30-hour suspension threshold during the first year. While this student will eventually be suspended, he/she has almost no chance of readmission or ever completing a degree.

1. The “one-point-in-time” suspension policy for continuing students. Currently, continuing students are suspended only at the end of all summer sessions. This can produce a yo-yo effect, in which a continuing student can drop below a 2.00 cumulative GPA each fall provided that his/her end-of-summer GPA is above 2.00. In effect, this means that students can be less serious about their academics in the fall than they must be in the spring. It also means that they can move in and out of good academic standing each semester, which is clearly not good for the student or the University’s academic reputation.

**How do we propose that our probation and suspension policies for continuing students be revised?**

We propose that the University utilize a “sliding scale” suspension threshold which is based upon the number of hours that the student has attempted. Specifically, academic suspension for continuing students will occur when the student’s cumulative GPA does not meet the following suspension thresholds:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Hours Attempted | Cumulative GPA Required to Avoid Suspension |
| 13-23 | 1.00 |
| 24-35 | 1.50 |
| 36-47 | 1.80 |
| 48 or more | 2.00 |

The scale—which essentially expects improvement in the cumulative GPA of .5 by the end of semester two, .3 by the end of semester three, and .2 by the end of semester four—is responsive to the fact that the more hours a student has attempted, the more difficult it is to move the cumulative GPA.

Continuing students whose cumulative GPAs are below 2.00 and who are not subject to suspension would be permitted to enroll on probation.

**Will any continuing students be offered exceptions to suspension?**

We recommend offering **NO** exceptions to suspension for new students. This is consistent with current policy.

**How does the proposed policy address the problems of the existing policy, and consequently enhance the University’s academic expectations?**

First, it closes the 30-hour loophole. It assumes that students will have attempted 24 hours by the end of the second semester. This is a far safer assumption than the 30-hour criterion we used when we developed the current policy, since students must attempt 12 hours each semester to be eligible for financial aid, to live in residence halls, to be covered under parents’ insurance policies, etc.

Second, it eliminates the yo-yo effect. It expects students to make reasonable and steady progress during their first four semesters and to remain in good academic standing each semester thereafter. If a student barely avoided suspension with a 1.00 first semester GPA with the minimum 12 hours attempted and then attempted the minimum number of hours required for full-time status in each of the next three semesters, he/she would need a semester GPA of 2.00 in semester two, 2.42 in semester three, and 2.58 in semester four to avoid suspension following each semester. (A student who attempted 15 hours each semester would need semester GPAs of 2.00, 2.40, and 2.60 in semesters two, three, and four.)

Third, it allows for suspension after each term, not just at the end of all summer sessions.

Finally, it requires that students maintain 2.00 cumulative GPAs each semester after they have attempted 48 hours; i.e., there is no probationary status for juniors and seniors. It does not seem unreasonable that such students be expected to remain in good standing, especially since an increasing number of programs now require GPAs significantly higher than 2.00 for students to declare majors, change into majors, and graduate. As is currently the case, continuing students who fall below the suspension threshold following the conclusion of the fall or spring semesters will be eligible to attend Wintermester or summer sessions to earn the grades they need to return to good standing.

**What support will be offered to students on academic probation?**

Currently, RU offers no support whatsoever to any students on probation other than those who would appear to be least likely to succeed, namely, those in SORTS. The elimination of SORTS will enable RU to shift resources to those most likely to achieve good standing. While nothing has been formalized, it is likely that the cornerstone of the support we offer to students on probation will be an academic success course. This course is likely to be structured similar to UNIV 100 (i.e., with a faculty and a peer instructor) and with topics and learning outcomes adapted from similar courses offered at numerous institutions around the country. We anticipate having the course ready for review by the Senate in early fall 2013, and that it will be offered to students on probation for the first time in spring 2014.

**How might the revision of our suspension policies affect the readmission of students after they serve their semester of suspension?**

Currently, students who are readmitted in the fall have a clear advantage over those who are readmitted in the spring: although we expect them to eliminate half of their quality point deficit during the first semester of enrollment after readmission, they have an extra semester to return to good standing before facing a second suspension—and therefore, dismissal—at the end of the following summer. The policy revision we are recommending would eliminate that advantage. Fall readmits would have only the fall semester (plus Wintermester) to return to good standing.

The implication is that we must only readmit students whose reentry GPAs are close enough to 2.00 that they have a reasonable chance to quickly return to good standing. (In the course of our research, we have discovered that readmitted students with significant ground to make up have been unlikely to return to good standing, so tightening our readmission standards is probably warranted even if we do not change suspension policies.)

Moreover, one of the reasons that our readmitted students have been less than successful is that they have received no support upon their return to campus. We hope to offer sections of the academic recovery course discussed above exclusively for readmitted students, especially those who were suspended after spending only one semester at RU.

We are proposing that we clearly inform potential readmits of the standards that we will use in evaluating their applications for readmission. For example, the current catalog indicates that two of the criteria we use in evaluating applications for readmission are “quality point deficit” and “number of repeats available”; we propose informing students upfront that they are more likely to be readmitted if their quality point deficit is nine or less, and if they have multiple repeats available. Furthermore, while we now ask applicants for readmission to tell us why their performance at RU was poor, if they cite extenuating circumstances, we do not request documentation. We are proposing that the Readmission Committee be less trusting in these situations.

We are also proposing a change in the composition of the Readmission Committee. Currently, the Academic Advising Committee functions as the Readmission Committee. Professional advisors in the advising centers review applications for students in their colleges and make recommendations to the Committee. Distributing this responsibility so widely has the potential to lead to inconsistent recommendations across the University. While the Committee has occasionally overturned a college recommendation, most readmission recommendations become decisions. We are recommending, therefore, that a smaller group apart from the Academic Advising Committee be constituted to review the recommendations of the advising staffs and make final readmission decisions.

Finally, we are strongly considering requesting that students wishing to apply for readmission remit a nonrefundable fee. Processing and reviewing hundreds of applications is time consuming, and a significant portion of students we readmit never reenroll. Requiring a modest readmission application fee should limit applications to those who are serious about returning.

**When will the new policies go into effect?**

If Dr. Minner approves the new policies before the end of this semester (presuming the approval of the Academic Policies and Procedures Committee and following his consideration of comments from the Senate and the SGA), the new policies will enter the 2013-2014 undergraduate catalog and be in effect for students who enter RU beginning in fall 2013. The new policies will be discussed with entering students and their parents at Quest.

Currently enrolled students will continue to fall under policies in effect when they enrolled. While the Registrar has indicated that enforcing two sets of policies for a few years will be complicated, he has assured us that it can be done with minimal difficulty.