

February 2008 Report to the Academic Senate, on review of the implementation of the Accommodations Policy (formerly PPM 9-7 Sec 16. Renumbered Sept. 2008 as University Policy 6-100-III-Sec. 16)

Review of University Policy 9-7, Sec. 16: Accommodations

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Background

When passed by the Academic Senate in 2005, the Accommodations policy called for the Senate to review the policy in two years. Here, somewhat late, is a report to aid the Senate in its review.

The policy has two main sections. The first, Scheduling Accommodations, includes a policy the University has had since long before 2005, which ensures that students who miss class for religious obligations or officially sanctioned University activities will be permitted to make up missed assignments or examinations. The second section, Content Accommodations, was developed in 2004-2005. The university agreed to develop a policy of this sort as part of a settlement agreement in a lawsuit. The specific terms of the policy were developed by a committee made up of three students, three faculty members, one staff member, and one community member. This committee held more than 20 meetings with students, faculty, and community members. The Academic Senate debated and amended the proposed policy over three meetings before passing it. A background and summary statement distributed at the time is attached.

In brief, the policy provides for a process by which students who think that any requirements in a course conflict with their “sincerely-held core beliefs” may request a content accommodation. This request is to be made in writing (with a copy to the chair) before the last day to drop courses without penalty. The gist of the policy is in the following sentences: “Instructors are not required to grant content accommodations, as long as the subject course requirement has a reasonable relationship to a legitimate pedagogical goal, but they may do so, only if a reasonable alternative means of satisfying the curricular requirement is available and only if that alternative is fully appropriate for meeting the academic objectives of the course...” However, “[i]f an instructor in a course makes content accommodations for any reason other than those covered under [legislative mandates such as the Americans with Disabilities Act], the instructor must similarly consider requests made during the same semester for the same course for accommodations based on conflicts with sincerely-held core beliefs.” The full policy appears at PPM 9-7, Section 16: <http://www.admin.utah.edu/ppmanual/9/9-7.html>.
[updated to <http://www.regulations.utah.edu/academics/6-100.html>]

Policy Review: Method

* I would like to thank my student assistant, Jessica Pennock, for her help with this review.

On December 21, 2007, I sent a request to deans, department chairs, and program directors, asking them to send copies of any written requests received and to answer four questions:

1. Are you aware of requests for content accommodations that have been handled informally rather than following the procedures laid out in the policy? If any, have these been frequent, occasional, or rare? Why do you think these requests have occurred informally rather than following the written policy? Please either describe in writing the outcome of these requests (i.e., granted or denied, student stays in class or drops) or ask Jessica to contact you for an interview about them?
2. Do you believe the policy is adequate as written re content accommodations? If not, what changes would you propose?
3. Regardless of formal or informal student requests for accommodations, how many faculty members in your department, if any, use statements on their syllabi to announce a class policy re content accommodations? (If you do not have a central collection of syllabi, please ask faculty members about their practices.) Please send examples of any statements used.
4. Are you aware of any difficulties between students and faculty around scheduling (as distinct from content) accommodations, as laid out in Section III.A. of the policy?

A second request was sent on January 16, 2008. In total, 32 departments, colleges, or programs responded, approximately half of the units contacted.

Policy Review: Survey Results

It appears that five semesters after the policy went into effect, no students have made formal written requests. A few requests do arise and are still handled informally. Departments that report from one to three informal requests for content accommodations, which generally have been granted, include Management, Theatre, Psychology, and Sociology. The Department of Art/Art History has had four requests, and the faculty in Painting/Drawing have made a collective decision that no accommodations for “life classes” will be made. That department is starting to make more effort to use the formal request process.

The only department that reported “many” informal requests is Film Studies. Some faculty in that department have made informal accommodations. A recent instance of a student attempting to renegotiate the terms of an accommodation has led the department chair to urge his colleagues to include a statement in their syllabi and make no such accommodations. No other department reports a uniform policy against making accommodations, but scattered faculty members have adopted explicit policies declining to make accommodations, such as the instructor of the Linguistics course “Bad Words and Taboo Terms.”

The use of statements on syllabi about the accommodations policy is more widespread, but by no means universal. Eight departments or programs spread across Business, Education, Fine Arts, Humanities, Social & Behavioral Sciences (SBS), and

LEAP reported that most or all of their faculty either include statements on their syllabi or discuss the policy in class. Two additional departments (in SBS and Science) reported that one or two faculty members use syllabus statements. One department reported that some faculty had initially adopted syllabus statements after the policy passed, but apparently had discontinued them.

The content of syllabus statements varies. Some adopt the generic statement suggested by the Office of General Counsel at the time the policy passed: "Some of the writings, lectures, films, or presentations in this course may include material that conflicts with the core beliefs of some students. Please review the syllabus carefully to see if the course is one that you are committed to taking. If you have a concern, please discuss it with me at your earliest convenience." Some are more detailed and reflect the content of the specific course, such as statements for a film production course, various Gender Studies courses, and an Anthropology course on "Humor and Laughter."

No respondents from any department either reported problems with the Scheduling Accommodations section or proposed changes to the Content Accommodations section. Not surprisingly, respondents from more technical fields tended to feel unaffected by the policy and the underlying issues that prompted it.

Discussion

Student requests for content accommodations have been exceedingly few. From the perspective of department-level administrators, the current policy is working fine. The policy has not excessively bureaucratized interactions between students and faculty, but provides a more formal process for those instances when informal resolution is not satisfactory to both. In the many discussions occurring during 2004-05, the overwhelming majority of students expressed support for the atmosphere of free inquiry prevailing at the University of Utah. Overall, the policy seems to be serving well the values acknowledged in its preamble:

The values held most strongly by the University of Utah community are those of academic freedom and integrity as they are expressed collectively by the colleges and departments as well as individually through research and teaching and as they exist within the wider context of advanced study as commonly understood by all universities. The community also values diversity and respect, without which there can be no collegiality among faculty and students. In addition, the University community values individual rights and freedoms, including the right of each community member to adhere to individual systems of conscience, religion, and ethics. Finally, the University recognizes that with all rights come responsibilities. The University works to uphold its collective values by fostering free speech, broadening fields of inquiry, and encouraging generation of new knowledge that challenges, shapes, and enriches our collective and individual understandings.