Realigning Academic Policies to Support Student Success:
University-level Policies v. College/School-based Policies

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What does a degree from the University of Colorado Boulder represent? What are the unique qualities that set a CU Boulder graduate apart from graduates of other institutions? Are there common experiences – academic or otherwise -- that unite students who study at CU Boulder?

There is no question that students who persist to graduation represent CU Boulder through their contributions to their chosen professions or continued studies. However, navigating their way to the commencement stage can be fraught with bureaucratic hoops, confusing messages, and reliance on others to help them make progress toward degree completion.

It is not uncommon for large institutions, such as CU Boulder, to be administratively decentralized across their various colleges and schools. The degree and nature of disparate policies and procedures related to curriculum administration across campus units can be steep. These are reflected not only in organizational structures and traditions, but also in academic policy or procedural matters that apply to students.

In recent decades, the University of Colorado Boulder has had very few baseline campus-level policies as they relate to student academic affairs. Such policies that currently exist include Final Examination, Observance of Religious Holidays and Absences from Classes and/or Exams; and Student Classroom and Course-Related Behavior. As a result, over the years, colleges and schools have developed their own academic policies and procedures without a clear guiding university principal on what a CU Boulder education or degree means. These include everything from course repeats, degree application of online classes, class drop/add deadlines, petition processes, academic standing rules, and graduation/degree honors. Conversely, a lack of policy at any level also has proven problematic when the university has had to make or defend decisions in response to unique situations (i.e., closing campus during final exams).

One can argue that college-based policies and practices are appropriate when based on the unique nature of programs offered, applicable accreditation standards for specific disciplines, or customs that have helped shape or define a unit. However, they should only be considered when more stringent standards are required. Because our institutional culture and structure have allowed colleges/schools to develop their own academic standards and rules does not necessarily mean that this approach best serves the university or students' academic interests, nor does it help them achieve their academic goals more effectively or efficiently.

The objective for streamlining academic policies and procedures that impact students is that they promote consistency, fairness, clarity and reasonable expectations. In addition, they set a baseline for standards that foster academic integrity, ease administrative burdens and provide

clearer protocols for managing exception requests. These goals fit well with **recent campus initiatives that focus on unifying the student experience, improving the first-year college-experience, and maximizing resources through efficiencies and shared services**.

Too many distinct college/school and/or department-based academic policies, while well intentioned, may lead to confusion between and among students and result in unnecessary administrative overhead through duplication of effort. Subtle inconsistencies across similar policies are difficult to communicate to the student body at large, are burdensome to administratively maintain, require significant and potentially costly student information system programming resources, and can prove challenging to defend. Examples of problems that result from lack of common standards and practices on the Boulder campus are overly complex degree audits based on college/school rules and delays in implementing a system-wide planning tool designed to help students stay on track with degree progress.

Policy information is typically located on college or school web sites, but is not always included in university publications that serve as important historical academic records. Having academic policy information easily accessible and centrally located in a few designated areas such as the Provost's website and in the university catalog would greatly improve consistency and transparency to faculty and staff, but most importantly to our students. Colleges/schools could then link to this information from their respective sites, as needed.

Unless a unique policy is necessary due to program capacity, curricular requirements or accreditation standards, both students and the campus may be better served by more consistency in policies and protocols, particularly within career levels (i.e., Undergraduate, Graduate and Law). In doing so, colleges and schools could benefit in the following ways:

- Allow the institution to create a centralized communication plan for the dissemination and publishing of student academic policies (i.e., student email reminders, common academic calendar, university catalog);
- Defer policy oversight and exception processing to central and neutral academic standards committees (comprised of college/school representatives, student services and enrollment management professionals);
- Reallocate resources to dedicate to academic advising and individual student support.

Having unified, simplified instructions for students on how policies apply, how to appeal, what constitutes an exception, and potential impacts on academic records and standing would benefit students and advisors alike. Currently, communication problems and inconsistent policy applications are exacerbated for students who are dual degree, who change programs, or who are enrolled in concurrent plans of study.

Most policies should be appealable when individual circumstances warrant a review or exception. However, when policies are not consistently upheld or when precedence is not

established, the campus may inadvertently unfairly advantage or disadvantage some students over others.

In order to effectively review existing academic policies and practices and implement new protocols for policy proposals, adoption and administration, the Provost might consider creating a standing campus-level academic policies and standards committee. It would consider specific issues and recommendations brought forward by campus stakeholders committed to effective curriculum management, innovative teaching/learning and student success. These may include central administration, college- or school-based curricular governance bodies, and enrollment management units.

The objective body would carefully review select policies and policy proposals among the academic units and assess whether they reflect the needs and positions of the university. It would suggest where alignment of department or college/school policies with university policy makes the most sense, particularly as they pertain to student academic and financial records. Consideration should be given to best practices at leading research institutions, as well as strategic and operational needs. There would also need to be a clearly articulated path for approval and adoption of new or revised policies and practices. Additional limited resources may be required to establish and sustain a more unified infrastructure.

The codification of campus policies is important to maintain academic integrity and for archival and historical purposes. It can help explain why academic records reflect certain course inclusions, exclusions and calculations, reasons for students' academic standing at given points in time, minimum standards for satisfactory degree progress and/or completion, and more. At minimum, this proposal should include policies that have clear academic record impacts (drops/adds, withdrawals, retroactive withdrawals, changes in grading basis, grade changes, course repeats), affect academic standing with the university (good standing, probation/recovery, suspension/expulsion), minimum academic qualifications (credits and GPA) for degrees awarded by the university, and certain academic honors and awards. In addition, it would recommend by whom, how and why revisions to academic records or exceptions to academic policies may be made.

Effectiveness, consistency and efficiency in curriculum administration and academic standards are central to a student's overall success, to their time to degree and to the instructional mission of the university. They would impart the values of our institution, unify the experiences of students who matriculate, and provide a sound historical record that helps define a CU Boulder education.