

WPI Faculty Handbook: Chapter Six - Policies Regarding Academics and Academic Programs

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Chapter Six - Policies Regarding Academics and Academic Programs

I. Statement of Values for Undergraduate Education

(Endorsed by the WPI Faculty, *May 6, 2004*)

1. WPI's programs shall emphasize fundamental concepts, knowledge, and skills, and ensure that students are able to apply them within the context of their major disciplines.
2. WPI's programs shall emphasize the development of students as effective thinkers and communicators, able to use evidence to present their ideas with logic, clarity, and persuasion.
3. Programmatic breadth in general, and balance between technical and humanistic components in particular, are the hallmarks of a WPI undergraduate education. In addition to educating students in their major discipline, WPI's programs shall provide students with a broad preparation for fulfilling lives as responsible professionals and informed citizens.
4. Grounded in project and course experiences, a WPI education shall provide a firm foundation for life-long learning in a variety of fields. WPI programs shall emphasize inquiry-based learning and open-ended problem solving. Students shall bear a considerable responsibility for learning outside of the classroom.
5. WPI's programs shall be sufficiently flexible so as to allow students significant choice in and responsibility for planning their courses of study. Faculty, via the central teaching tasks of project and academic advising, shall ensure that student learning experiences encourage critical reflection, decision making, and personal growth.
6. WPI's programs shall emphasize the scientific, technical, societal, and humanistic contexts in which knowledge is applied and constructed. Educational activities shall challenge students to make connections between disciplines, to consider multiple viewpoints, and to appreciate the consequences of their actions. The curriculum shall prominently feature integrative and interdisciplinary activities.
7. WPI's learning environment and educational activities shall balance personal responsibility and individual accountability with cooperation, collaboration, and mutual respect. Members of the community shall be encouraged to value academic integrity, and to become conscious of the value that such integrity

confers to themselves and to the community.

8. WPI shall be committed to assessment and improvement of student learning.

II. WPI Undergraduate Learning Outcomes

(Endorsed by the WPI Faculty, *May 6, 2004*)

Graduates of WPI will:

1. have a base of knowledge in mathematics, science, and humanistic studies;
2. have mastered fundamental concepts and methods in their principal areas of study;
3. understand and employ current technological tools;
4. be effective in oral, written and visual communication;
5. function effectively both individually and on teams;
6. be able to identify, analyze, and solve problems creatively through sustained critical investigation;
7. be able to make connections between disciplines and to integrate information from multiple sources;
8. demonstrate global and intercultural competency by developing the capacity to identify, explain, and critically analyze the forces (such as cultural, historical, political, economic) that shape the self and others as they engage with local and global communities;
9. be aware of personal, societal, and professional ethical standards;
10. have the skills, diligence, and commitment to excellence needed to engage in lifelong learning;

WPI shall be committed to regular review of its undergraduate offerings in light of these Undergraduate Learning Outcomes. CAP and UOAC recommend that the Outcomes be conveyed to the Board of Trustees, be conveyed to current and future faculty and undergraduate students, and be included with the Mission and Goals Statements in future editions of the Undergraduate Catalog and the Faculty Handbook.

III. Policies Regarding the Awarding of Grades

a. Faculty Guidelines for Project Grading

(Approved by Faculty, *October 9, 2014*)

Background

Pronounced grade inflation for MQP, IQP, and Sufficiency activity is evident over the last twenty years. This has, in turn, resulted in a steady increase of the percentage of students graduating with honors. Furthermore, data indicate that project grading

standards vary considerably from department to department. This not only creates an inequity with respect to honors, but may create barriers to student or faculty participation in multidisciplinary project activities.

Recommendations

Each term a student is registered for a project, the student receives a grade reflecting judgment of accomplishments for that term.

Upon completion of the project, students will receive an overall project grade. It is important to note that this grade reflects not only the final products of the project (e.g., results, reports, etc.), but also the process by which they were attained. No amount of last-minute effort should turn a mediocre project effort into an A.

The available grades and their interpretations are as follows:

- **A:** This grade denotes *excellent work* that attains all of the project goals and learning outcomes. The product and process of this work meet all of the expectations and exceed them in several areas.
- **B:** This grade denotes *consistently good work* that attains the project goals and learning outcomes. The product and process of this work meet but generally do not exceed all of the expectations.
- **C:** This grade denotes *acceptable work* that partially attains project goals and learning outcomes. The product and process of this work meet some but not all expectations.
- **SP:** This grade denotes *satisfactory progress* and certifies sufficient accomplishments to earn credit for that term. Faculty who assign this grade should provide clear feedback to the student regarding his or her progress during the term. The use of the SP grade is discouraged except in circumstances where the faculty member is unable to judge the quality of the work, yet can attest that the granting of credit is appropriate. This is a temporary grade and must be replaced by a permanent grade consistent with the criteria outlined above by, if not before, the end of the project.
- **NR:** This grade denotes work that did not attain the project goals or learning outcomes and is *insufficient for registered credit*. Both product and process were inconsistent with acceptable project work at WPI as outlined above.
- **NAC:** This grade is reserved for *performance that is unacceptable*. It might mean that a student's performance (or lack of it) has seriously impeded group progress, or it has embarrassed the group, a project sponsor, or WPI. Note that this grade remains on the transcript.

The results of a project should be such that an outside reviewer would reasonably deem the project as being worthy of the credit and grade given, based on evidence

such as the project report.

In light of the above grading criteria, it is strongly suggested that a formal project proposal or contract be developed early in the project activity, so that all participants in the activity have a clear understanding of the project goals and advisor and student expectations.

b. Policy on Undergraduate and Graduate Grade Appeals and Grade Changes

(Approved by the Faculty, *December 5, 2002*)

The purpose of the Grade Appeal Policy is to provide the student with a safeguard against receiving an unfair final grade, while respecting the academic responsibility of the instructor. Thus, this procedure recognizes that,

- Every student has a right to receive a grade assigned upon a fair and unprejudiced evaluation based on a method that is neither arbitrary nor capricious; and,
- Instructors have the right to assign a grade based on any method that is professionally acceptable, submitted in writing to all students, and applied equally.

Instructors have the responsibility to provide careful evaluation and timely assignment of appropriate grades. Course and project grading methods should be explained to students at the beginning of the term. WPI presumes that the judgment of the instructor of record is authoritative, and the final grades assigned are correct.

A grade appeal shall be confined to charges of unfair action toward an individual student and may not involve a challenge of an instructor's grading standard. A student has a right to expect thoughtful and clearly defined approaches to course, project, and research project grading, but it must be recognized that varied standards and individual approaches to grading are valid. The grade appeal considers whether a grade was determined in a fair and appropriate manner; it does not attempt to grade or re-grade individual assignments or projects. It is incumbent on the student to substantiate the claim that their final grade represents unfair treatment, compared to the standard applied to other students. Only the final grade in a course or project may be appealed. In the absence of compelling reasons, such as clerical error, prejudice, or capriciousness, the grade assigned by the instructor of record is to be considered final.

Only arbitrariness, prejudice, and/or error will be considered as legitimate grounds for a grade change appeal.

Arbitrariness: The grade awarded represents such a substantial departure from accepted academic norms as to demonstrate that the instructor did not actually exercise professional judgment.

Prejudice: The grade awarded was motivated by ill will and is not indicative of the student's academic performance.

Error: The instructor made a mistake in fact.

This grade appeal procedure applies only when a student initiates a grade appeal and not when the instructor decides to change a grade on their own initiative.

This procedure does not cover instances where students have been assigned grades based on academic dishonesty or academic misconduct, which are addressed in WPI's Academic Honesty Policy. Also excluded from this procedure are grade appeals alleging discrimination, harassment or retaliation in violation of WPI's Sexual Harassment Policy, which shall be referred to the appropriate office at WPI as required by law and by WPI policy.

The Grade Appeal Procedure strives to resolve a disagreement between student and instructor concerning the assignment of a grade in a collegial manner. The intent is to provide a mechanism for the informal discussion of differences of opinion, and for the formal adjudication by faculty only when necessary. In all instances, students who believe that an appropriate grade has not been assigned must first seek to resolve the matter informally with the instructor of record. If the matter cannot be resolved informally, the student must present their case in a timely fashion in the procedure outlined below. Under normal circumstances, the grade appeal process must be started near the beginning of the next regular academic term (for term grades) or near the beginning of the next regular academic semester (for semester grades) after the disputed grade is received.

Student Grade Appeal Procedure

1. A student who wishes to question a grade must discuss the matter first with the instructor of record as soon as possible, preferably no later than one week after the start of the next regular academic term (A-D, for term grades) or the start of the next regular semester (Fall or Spring, for semester grades) after receiving the grade. In most cases, the discussion between the student and the instructor should suffice and the matter will not need to be carried further. The student should be aware that the only valid basis for grade appeal beyond this step is to establish that an instructor assigned a grade that was arbitrary, prejudiced, or in error.
2. If the student's concerns remain unresolved after the discussion with the instructor, the student may submit a written request to meet with the appropriate Department Head, within one week of speaking with the instructor. For a grade in a course, independent study, Inquiry Seminar or Practicum, Major Qualifying Project (MQP), or thesis or dissertation credit, the appropriate person is the instructor's Department Head. For a grade in an Interactive Qualifying Project (IQP), the appropriate person is the Dean of the Global

School (or their designee). If the instructor of record is the Department Head or the Dean of the Global School, then the student should request to meet with the Dean of Undergraduate Studies (for undergraduate students) or the Dean of Graduate Studies (for graduate students), or an alternate if necessary, who will serve as the appropriate Department Head in this step. The appropriate Department Head/Dean will meet within one week with the student, and, if they believe that the complaint may have merit, with the instructor. After consultation with the Department Head/Dean, the instructor may choose to let the grade remain, to change a course grade, to petition the Committee on Academic Operations to change a grade for a Degree Requirement (MQP, IQP, or Humaniteis and Arts Inquiry Seminar or Practicum), or to petition the Committee on Graduate Studies and Research to change a grade. The Department Head will communicate the result of these discussions to the student.

3. If the matter remains unresolved after Step 2, the student should submit a written request within one week to the Provost's Office to request an ad hoc Faculty Committee for Appeal of a Grade. The Provost's representative (the Dean of Undergraduate Studies, or the Dean of Graduate Studies, or alternate if necessary) will meet with the student, and will ask the Faculty Review Committee to appoint the ad hoc Committee for Appeal of a Grade. The FRC, in consultation with the Associate Provost, will select the members of the ad hoc committee. The Chair of the FRC will convene the ad hoc committee and serve as its non-voting chair.

The ad hoc committee for all undergraduate appeals will be composed of three members of the Faculty Review Committee (FRC).

The ad hoc committee for appeal of a graduate course, thesis credit or dissertation credit grade will be composed of three faculty members. The first member will be the Department Head, Program Director, or Departmental Graduate Coordinator from the instructor's Department. If all three have a conflict of interest, then the Provost's representative will serve on the ad hoc committee. The remaining two members will be two FRC members with no conflicts of interest with either the student or the instructor. Apparent conflicts of interest would include the student's thesis or dissertation advisor, members of the student's graduate committee, and faculty members with close research collaboration or project advising relationships with the instructor.

Appointees to the ad hoc committee must not have any apparent conflicts of interest with the instructor of record (which might include but are not limited to frequent co-advising or research collaboration).

The Chair of the FRC requests a written statement from the student and a written response from the instructor. The ad hoc committee examines the available written information on the dispute, may meet with the student and with the

instructor, and may meet with others and gather additional information as it sees fit.

4. Through its inquiries and deliberations, the ad hoc committee is charged to determine whether the grade was assigned in a fair and appropriate manner, or whether clear and convincing evidence of arbitrariness, prejudice, and/or error might justify changing the grade. The ad hoc committee will make its decisions based on a majority vote.
5. If the ad hoc committee concludes that the grade was assigned in a fair and appropriate manner, then the ad hoc committee will report its conclusion in writing to the student and instructor. This decision of the ad hoc committee is final and not subject to appeal.
6. If the ad hoc faculty committee determines that compelling reasons exist for changing the grade, it would request that the instructor make the change, providing the instructor with a written explanation of its reasons. At this point, the instructor may change the grade. If the instructor declines to change the grade, they must provide a written explanation for refusing. If the ad hoc faculty committee concludes that the instructor's written explanation justifies the original grade, then the ad hoc committee will report this in writing to the student and instructor and the matter will be closed. If the ad hoc faculty committee concludes that it would be unjust to allow the original grade to stand, then the ad hoc committee will determine what grade is to be assigned. The new grade may be higher than, the same as, or lower than the original grade. Having made this determination, the three members of the committee will sign the grade change form and transmit it to the Registrar. The instructor and student will be advised of the new grade. Under no circumstances may persons other than the original faculty member or the review committee change a grade. The written records of these proceedings will be filed in the student's file in the Registrar's Office.

Faculty Grade Change Procedure

The Student Grade Appeal Procedure affirms the principle that grades should be considered final. The principle that grades for courses, projects, and thesis and dissertation credit should be considered final does not excuse an instructor from the responsibility to explain his or her grading standards to students and to assign grades in a fair and appropriate manner. The appeal procedure also provides an instructor with the opportunity to change a grade for a course or project on his or her own initiative. The appeal procedure recognizes that errors can be made and that an instructor who decides that it would be unfair to allow a final grade to stand due to error, prejudice or arbitrariness may request a change of grade for a course or project without the formation of an ad hoc committee.

For undergraduate courses or degree requirements (MQP or IQP), an instructor

may request a grade change in one of two ways. First, for courses, an instructor may submit a course grade change to the Registrar at any time prior to a student's graduation. Second, for degree requirements (MQP or IQP), an instructor must submit a petition to the Committee on Academic Operations (CAO) to change the grade.

For graduate courses, thesis credit, or dissertation credit, an instructor may request a grade change by submitting a course, thesis credit or dissertation credit grade change to the Registrar at any time prior to a student's graduation.