

February 11, 2010

## **Report of the UCAP Ad Hoc Task Force on the MSU Course Repeat Policy**

To: Members of the University Committee on Academic Policy

From: Gillian Bice, Ron Perry and Henry Reinart

On January 14, 2010 the UCAP voted to establish an Ad Hoc Task Force (TF) on the MSU Course Repeat Policy. The TF was charged with:

1. Reviewing the proposed revised course repeat policy presented by the UCAP Subcommittee (2008-2009),
2. Making recommendations to the UCAP regarding
  - a. Whether a revised policy should be considered by the committee at this time,
  - b. How the revised policy should be worded.
3. Presenting recommendations to the UCAP at its February 11, 2010 meeting.

The TF met on January 21 and February 4, 2010. Peter Cobbett (CHM representative to the UCAP) was invited and elected to attend the February 4 meeting in a consultative capacity. Following discussions, the TF hereby recommends the UCAP consider revising the existing MSU Course Repeat policy, and furthermore that the wording of the new policy under consideration be as follows:

~~An undergraduate student who received a grade of 2.0 or above, CR, or P in a course may not repeat the course on a credit basis. An undergraduate student may repeat no more than 20 credits on a credit basis. in courses in which grades below 2.0 were received. An undergraduate student may repeat a course a maximum of two times (three total enrollments in a course).~~

A graduate student who received a grade of 2.0 or above, CR, or P in a course may not repeat the course on a credit basis with the following exception: with the approval of the associate dean, a graduate student may repeat a course in which a grade of 2.0 or 2.5 was received. The number of credits that a graduate student may repeat is determined by the student's academic advisor or guidance committee, in accordance with unit policies.

Whenever a course is repeated on a credit basis, the last grade and credits earned completely replace the previous grade in the satisfaction of requirements and computation of grade-point averages. All entries remain a part of the student's permanent academic record.

Any course repeated for credit must be taken on the same grading system under which the course was taken the first time, except where standard requirements to the contrary must be satisfied in order to meet graduation requirements.

Credit by Examination may not be used to repeat a course in which a grade below 2.0 was received.

A student who has taken a course as a visitor may subsequently enroll in the course for credit with the approval of his or her advisor.

It should be noted that the proposed new policy liberalizes the existing policy to the extent that it eliminates the course grade restriction on repeating a course for credit for *undergraduate students*. However, the new policy does not change existing policy as regards graduate students. In addition, the new policy retains the restriction that students may repeat a maximum of 20 credits, and adds the restriction that students may repeat a single course a maximum of two times (3 total enrollments). All other elements (conditions/restrictions) of the existing policy remain unchanged (i.e., the only changes to the existing policy are in paragraph one; the rest of the new policy is the same as the existing policy).

The discussion of the TF focused on the following issues:

Primary Factors

- ✓ Impact on competitiveness and eligibility of MSU students for consideration as applicants to programs / other institutions
- ✓ Benchmarking “best” or “common” practices

Secondary Factors

- ✓ Current economic conditions
- ✓ Logistical challenges (e.g., resources, course enrollment limitations, etc.)
- ✓ Potential future programmatic and graduation requirements

As many of these issues were already addressed in the report of the UCAP Subcommittee from spring semester 2009, the current report will primarily focus on several specific concerns elucidated in the minutes of the UCAP January 14, 2010 meeting.

1) Probably the greatest overall concern expressed by current UCAP members pertains to the rationale for changing the existing policy. Is there evidence the existing policy is flawed? What problem(s) would be addressed by a new policy?

- ✓ There seems to be general agreement that the current policy demonstrates a degree of unfairness. Students who perform extremely poorly in a course are actually advantaged in that they have the opportunity to try again and potentially improve their GPA, whereas, students who achieve a higher score cannot. Additionally, although there is no “data” which can be brought to bear, anecdotal evidence suggests that some students intentionally “tank” their grade in an attempt to ensure their eligibility to repeat the course. Deliberately reducing a course grade can negatively impact a student even if they repeat the course and improve their grade. Although a subsequent higher grade replaces their original grade in calculation of GPA, the original grade remains on the transcript. This has the potential to decrease a student’s competitiveness in the job market or when applying to other degree programs, graduate programs, graduate-professional programs, etc. On the other hand, it is the TF opinion that *all* grades and *all* attempts in a course should appear on the transcript. Incidentally, it seems a shame that an academic policy would prompt a student to strategically aspire to a lower grade. Changing the policy has the potential to enhance the competitiveness of MSU graduates.
- ✓ The UCAP has regularly expressed reservations regarding requests for minimum grades and GPAs as barriers to admission, progression and graduation. With the existing course repeat policy, the committee has been hesitant to approve such requests and remorseful over previous decisions to do so. Yet, minimum grades and

GPA's can streamline an admissions process and enhance the quality of a program and its graduates, which ultimately has the potential to positively impact the reputation of the program, the college, and the University. Consequently, in some cases, it is desirable to approve such a request, if not for the potential negative impact on an individual student, who for whatever reason performed poorly (but not poorly enough) in their initial attempt at a course or courses. A related issue raised at the January 14 meeting was whether liberalizing the course repeat policy would "result in the committee's inability to challenge requests for a grade or grade point average requirement for admission, progression or graduation" (UCAP Minutes, January 14, 2010, page 3). It is the TF opinion that this would not be the case. The UCAP can challenge such requests for any number of reasons. However, if the (current) course repeat policy, which limits a student's ability to repeat a course based on the grade achieved in that course, is the *sole* rationale for challenging a request, then in light of a new policy, perhaps the request would not need to be challenged. In some ways, it is comforting to think of the UCAP functioning as an effective "gatekeeper" that, through its deliberations and actions, can prevent barriers that are too high/unreasonable and/or inconsistent with the broader University mission and vision. However, the future composition of the committee is uncertain. Will the future UCAP (or UCUS) have a similar disposition?

- ✓ The question was raised as to whether students themselves see the course repeat policy as a legitimate issue to be addressed. The TF felt that there was no need to survey students (as was suggested) because the bill being brought forward by ASMSU does indeed support consideration of a revised policy.

2) In consideration of the policies and practices of other institutions (particularly other Big Ten universities), as has already been discussed, locating and directly comparing these policies to MSU's is challenging. Those identified vary considerably. Although few (presented in the document titled, "Selected Institutional Repeat Policies") are more restrictive than MSU's, some are more liberal (e.g., University of Michigan, Ohio State University, University of Wisconsin). The policy recommended by this TF for consideration by the UCAP does not seem to be aberrant or extreme in any way.

3) Although the TF recognizes the reality of current economic conditions, as well as potential logistical challenges and resource limitations, it is the opinion of the TF that these should not be the primary factors influencing *the committee's consideration* of an academic policy, especially if there are other compelling reasons to do so. In addition, regarding resource concerns, the TF suggests it could be pointed out to administration that enrollment fees and tuition dollars (associated with repeat students) may generate revenue to help offset expenses related to higher enrollment (e.g., need for additional sessions).

As an aside, the institutional history pertaining to the original rationale for selecting 1.5 as the cut-off grade for repeating a course seems to have been lost. The existence of a policy should not by itself be evidence that the policy is good and should go unchanged.

In summary, the UCAP Task Force, convened on January 14, 2010, recommends that the UCAP consider a revised Course Repeat Policy proposed herein at its February 11 meeting. It is the opinion of the TF that there is adequate rationale for considering a change in policy at this time.