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MEMORANDUM

To: Undergraduate Council

From: Elizabeth Boretz, Director of the Student Advising and Learning Center

Re: Request for 5-year Extension of Mid-Semester Grade Reporting in Lower Division Courses

January 9, 2008

I. Introduction

In the Spring of 2005, the Undergraduate Council approved the proposal submitted by Jane Lawrence for a 3-year trial of mid-semester grade reporting for all lower-division courses. Part of the pilot included the creation of mandatory workshops for all students with a grade of D+ or lower.

As promised in the original proposal, I respectfully submit to you an update on the effectiveness and benefit of mid-semester grade reporting to students' overall wellness, and to retention and the learning environment in general. In light of the constructive outcomes with regard to both teaching effectiveness and student persistence that we can attribute to the mid-semester grade and Success Workshop processes, I respectfully request a 5-year extension of this program.

II. Overview of Mid-Semester Grading and Success Workshops

When mid-semester grades in lower-division courses are issued by the Registrar, students are alerted by e-mail and in many of their classes. At this time they are also informed of the requirement to attend a Success Workshop if they have a D+ or lower in any course. Students may not register for their courses in the upcoming semester unless they attend a workshop, which helps to enforce participation. Workshops are open to all students and the participants are encouraged to bring a friend. Each semester, 20-30 non-required attendees show up, usually because they were encouraged to do so by an advisor, or to support a friend whom they accompany to the session. Approximately 50 students attend each session. Fall Student Success Workshops have 4 components:

1. **Welcome and Student Self-Assessment (attached)**
   Students are greeted as they enter, and each receives a sheet to fill out privately. During the opening remarks that I make, I reinforce the message that there is still time to raise their grades, and that the purpose of the gathering is to make sure that the participants all have a plan to finish the semester with the best performance possible. We also point out that if the students have any issues that they feel are private, or if they are uncomfortable in the workshop, then they may leave and meet one-on-one at a later time with me, their advisor, or another staff person that they choose, and then their registration hold will be released. In the past 4 semesters, only 3 students have elected to walk out of the workshop; one of them chose to visit a professional counselor in lieu of the workshop, and the others met with advisors.

After I speak for 2-3 minutes, 3 or 4 experienced UC Merced peer mentors who overcame academic difficulties in their first year address the group, and each one briefly tells his or her story and tips for success. This is a new element this past fall, and it received positive reviews from the participants.

2. Small-group discussion

Facilitators attend each session. These include all academic advisors from the Schools, Vice Chancellor Jane Lawrence, Students First Center Staff, Disability Services Staff, Counseling Center professionals, Student Advising and Learning Center (SALC), Student Life, Financial Aid, and Residence Life Staff. All facilitators are professionals in advising or student affairs; peer mentors partner with the facilitators and help lead the group discussions. Each staff person briefly introduces himself or herself to the group during the opening. Students move the chairs into small circles of 5-8 per group, and they are encouraged to sit with a facilitator that they particularly want to speak with, if they have a preference.

In the small groups, facilitators set ground rules for respect among peers. They also remind students that they are welcome to keep any private information to themselves, and to share only what they care reveal. My guidelines for the group leaders remind them to prevent the session from turning into a complaint forum, and to steer the students toward solutions to the obstacles that they identify on their self-assessment. By and large, the discussions are lively, or at least productive. I encourage the facilitators to share their own memories of college and to comment on the items on the self-assessment that they once struggled with, in order to set the conversation in motion. I have found that group leaders enjoy this portion of the workshops, as I do, too. Often, these discussions generate meaningful realizations on the part of the students, and it is rewarding to participate in a process where feelings of defeat and frustration turn into optimism, individually and collectively.

3. Composition of Success Plans

After a thorough discussion of the self-assessment, the facilitators hand to each student a "Success Plan" which shows examples of changes they can make for themselves (attend all classes and sit in the front , utilize faculty office hours, attend tutoring, exercise daily, make a daily to-do list with a schedule, etc). The students then review their self-assessments, think about the discussion, and list 5 changes that they will make to improve their academic performance, starting that day. Finally, each reads his or her Success Plan aloud to the group, and the student and facilitator sign the sheet. Students take these items with them so that they can remember their plan, and this document also serves as their proof of participation, should they be asked for that at any time.

4. Evaluation (attached)

Before they leave their group, students fill out an evaluation of the workshop experience. I have attached a compilation of the comments collected in the fall of 2005 and spring 2006, and a summary of their feedback in the fall of 2006. Student responses continue to be overwhelmingly appreciative and positive as of fall 2007.

Spring workshops had a slightly different evaluation form because they included an exercise that differed from that used in the fall workshop, and they were somewhat lecture-based, on the topic of motivation. The students then engaged in small-group discussions where they defined their own motivations for succeeding. Success Plans at the spring sessions revolved around the theme of motivation, too.

Upon departure from the workshop, each student leaves the evaluation face-down with an assistant at the door, and they also hand in their self-assessment to be kept on record in the SALC. I use the self-assessments for a variety of research and tracking purposes, most immediately for identifying which students are to have their registration hold released for the next semester.

The following page shows the level of need for workshops for each year's freshman cohort.

Workshops in Review:

Date	Student Participants	% of freshman cohort	Number of Sessions
Fall 2005	423	58%	8 (with 5 smaller follow-up "makeup sessions")
Spring 2006	354	43%	6 (with 4 smaller follow-up Sessions)
Fall 2006	193	42%	4 (with 2 smaller follow-up Sessions)
Spring 2007	203	45%	4 (with no make-up sessions; a make-up written exercise was implemented for the stragglers)
Fall 2007	399	53%	7 (with no make-up sessions; written make-ups allowed)

Although the fall of 2005 began with more than half of the freshmen in danger of failing, at the end of the semester, 74% of the workshop participants were on probation or in good standing, rather than "subject to academic dismissal." We had a slightly higher success rate with the at-risk students in the spring of 2006.

In the fall of 2006 I examined the list of students who actually were academically dismissed (did not successfully appeal their dismissal), and approximately 60% of them had neglected the Success Workshop requirement. This means that those who participate in the workshop, even if they do finish the semester "subject to academic dismissal," are highly likely to persist in their pursuit of a degree. Of the 142 students who attended a success workshop in the fall of 2006, 23 were dismissed. This is to say that the struggling students who attend Success Workshops actually have a higher retention rate year to year (84%) than that of the fall 2005 or fall 2006 freshman cohort in general, thus far (82%; 79%). Without mid-semester grade reporting, both of these retention rates could be significantly lower.

III. Benefits of Mid-Semester Grade Reporting

1. Enhancing Faculty Responsiveness to Students' Learning Needs

In the fall of 2006 and 2007 I had the opportunity to share students' feedback about themselves and the workshops with the new TA's, and with the SSHA faculty, at their orientation sessions. This gave them the ability to anticipate students' reticence to seek help on their own, and it alerted them to the widespread problem on campus related to the low confidence and preparedness levels of at-risk, underrepresented, first-generation college students. Faculty and TA's who participated in this event have been especially communicative with my area, referring struggling learners and reminding students to utilize tutoring and learning assistance workshops.

An additional, perhaps unanticipated benefit also arose in relation to teaching methods. In two courses in the fall of 2005, in which the freshman enrollment exceeded 200, mid-semester grades revealed that more than 50% of the students were in danger of failing. In both instances changes were made at the instructional level to enhance the students' opportunities to succeed. Examples include: an increase in the frequency of quizzes to motivate the students to focus on their progress, and to provide feedback to the instructor(s) on their actual learning; addition of a mid-term exam near the end of the course to give the "recommitted" students a chance to prove themselves and drop their lowest test score; adoption of a different textbook for the same course the next time that it was offered.

Overall, mid-semester grade reporting and the findings that this practice provides to us have helped to cultivate a faculty culture of sensitivity toward the uniqueness of UC Merced's students' learning needs.

2. Enhancing Student Affairs' Responsiveness to Students' Learning Needs

The Student Advising and Learning Center, along with Residence Life and in collaboration with Counseling, offered more than 24 workshops on the topics of motivation, stress management, test anxiety, utilizing faculty office hours, note-taking, reading to remember, studying for science courses, writing a paper, and related themes from the spring of 2005 to the fall of 2006. In 2006-07 and 2007-08 the SALC alone offers 3-4 workshops every month on learning skills. All of these have

been custom-designed based on students' feedback about themselves at the Success Workshops. If you examine the workshop schedule of any other Learning Center in the UC System, you will see a norm of 5-9 workshops per year.

In addition, there are 25-32 peer tutors, selected by faculty members, working for the SALC each semester. They offer drop-in group and one-on-one assistance for students in a growing number of lower- and upper-division courses each semester, including foreign languages, accounting and economics, and various levels of chemistry, calculus, physics and biology. I am always open to hiring more tutors upon faculty request, whenever the properly qualified students are available for the job. The aim of the SALC and all of Student Affairs' programs is to uphold the academic standards on campus while supporting the students who do not always have the confidence or skills to meet the expectations of their instructors. Mid-semester grades have helped us to make our support services as appropriate to the students' needs as possible.

Mid-semester grade reporting has helped to underscore incredible adaptability and caring toward our at-risk students that is demonstrated by our teaching faculty. This provides a source of motivation for Student Affairs Staff to maximize outreach and support to students in a spirit of partnership with the academic mission.

3. Promoting Retention of Students

As noted in section II above, UC Merced has a high percentage of students on quantitative probation, academic probation, and on "subject to academic dismissal" status. However, these students are demonstrating a strong commitment to remaining enrolled in college. We see this through their responsiveness to the workshop programs and the learning contracts that they engage with following their initial appealed dismissal. The Success Workshops are to be credited with the students' willingness to take part in learning support programs thereafter; this is because Success Workshops set a tone for a relationship between staff and students in difficulty that is founded on upholding the students' dignity, and respecting students' ambitions, regardless of their past struggles. Semester by semester, advisors are seeing their students work their way into good standing. For students who earn below a 1.5 in their first semester, this process can take at least two more semesters to accomplish, and it requires the student to move forward with endurance and optimism. The gesture of support presented through the Success Workshop helps the students to see that this institution respects and upholds every student's dignity, regardless of their academic performance. This is a key impact, measurable or not, of mid-semester grade reporting.

4. Providing Positive Reinforcement and a "Wake Up" Call

The "wake up" call generated by mid-semester grade reporting in the fall of 2005 led to a jump of 300% in the attendance rate at tutorial sessions, and elevated usage continued until Thanksgiving; a similar increase has occurred each semester following the workshops. Also in the week following the first round of Student Success Workshops, the number of appointments to visit a professional counselor tripled in comparison to the weeks prior, and the same occurred in Career Services. Furthermore, mid-semester grades provide encouragement and motivation to those students who see high grades on their records at mid-semester. Successful academic performers in their first semester are experiencing many transitions and stresses as do all of their peers, and the positive reinforcement early in their college career motivates them to continue striving for excellence.

Although I am unable to track class attendance rates, one of the most common items on the Success Plans each semester is "attend all classes; no more absences." Other items that I cannot track, yet they are frequently seen on Success Plans, include reducing and controlling time spent on Facebook.com, completing assigned readings, making a daily schedule, and finding a quiet place to study away from friends.

5. Helping Students Understand Financial Aid Eligibility

72% of UC Merced's students rely upon some form of financial aid, ranging from grants to loans. Through the mid-semester grade reporting process, students in the spring sessions of the Success Workshops viewed a brief presentation demonstrating the impact of repeated semesters on probation upon their eligibility for aid. Without a sanctioned requirement to attend these workshops, many students would not be aware that aid can be discontinued for students who remain on probation for more than 2 consecutive semesters.

6. Utilization of Student Support Services

Mid-semester grades make it possible for students to begin to anticipate the consequences of their poor performance, and often this prompts them to become more communicative with different professionals on campus, including Career

Services, Counseling and Financial Aid. In a number of instances, the Student Success Workshop resulted in students visiting Financial Aid to seek alternatives to working excessive hours, so that they could dedicate more time to their studies.

III. Conclusion and Recommendations

With one more semester remaining in this 3-year program, I respectfully offer my recommendation:

1. Continuation of Mid-Semester Grade Reporting
In light of the trend in students' poor preparedness levels for succeeding at UC Merced, I propose that the Undergraduate Council approve continuation of the practice of mid-semester grade-reporting, supported by the SALC through Success Workshops, and annual review of these programs' effectiveness, for at least 5 more years.

I look forward to discussing mid-semester grades with the Council at one of your upcoming meetings.