

Request: Variable Credits

All North Campus Digital Design Courses

In 2022, without warning the ability to issue variable credits was taken from Digital Design and other vocational programs on the North Campus. This would not have been allowed to happen had there been a clear understanding of the unique challenges faced within corrections education on the part of administration and must be corrected. These challenges are described in detail in the Justification section.

Using fixed credits in an open enrollment scenarios is:

- **Inaccurate:** Misreports student progress
- **Disenfranchising:** Legitimate student progress is lost
- **Messy:** Produces far more Y and Z grades
- **An equity issue:** Students are expected to complete the same course work with fewer class hours
- **Unethical:** Asking an instructor to keep two sets of records and misreport progress lacks academic integrity

Restoring the ability to use variable credit on the North Campus is vital to the success of incarcerated students. It correctly recognizes student progress through course material on their transcripts and it ensures that none of their progress is lost due to circumstances beyond their control. It removes roadblocks and disruptions and more elegantly negotiates these challenges when they do inevitably occur. It will allow instructors to once again issue grades with full-confidence and without the undue burden of maintaining shadow books.

Digital Design in conjunction with the associated department chairs (Business and Computer Science) request that all of the courses with course change forms referencing this justification be adjusted to allow variable credit between one and five credit (in increments of one credit) on the North Campus.

Comprehensive Background & Justification

Digital Design is offered as an open/continuous enrollment, non-cohort program. At any given point in time each student will be at a unique place within the program. Registrations are processed at the beginning of the quarter, and at any point throughout the quarter.

This rolling registration is driven by the limitations and unpredictability of the corrections education environment and is a vital part of successful outcomes for incarcerated students.

A student's release date is approximate and fluid. A student's presence in the classroom is can be unpredictable.

A Chaotic and Unpredictable Educational Setting

It is common for a student to be unable to attend class for a variety of reasons beyond their control and for an unknown period of time.

These could be...

- Protective custody
- Expedited release legislation (graduated re-entry and class action lawsuits)
- Mandated state employment needs
- Quarantine
- Pandemic throttling (for example, mandated reduced classroom size)
- Unexpected transfers to remote locations
- Prison population fluctuations (new arrivals).

Because of this environment of constant unpredictability, it is important for us to get students registered and engaged in learning as expediently as possible. It is our priority to get students into the classroom and given a laptop as soon as they exhibit an interest because we never know how long that student will be able to attend.

Open-enrollment is vital to the success of this program and to student success. Furthermore, success for this group of students in particular can have even more dramatic and life-changing implications than in more traditional learning environments.

Open-enrollment relies on variable credit, and without serious 'off-the-books' mabouverings and workarounds by instructors, fixed credit under these circumstances is fundamentally unworkable.

The negative consequences of applying fixed-credit registrations to an open-enrollment scenario are numerous.

Common Scenarios

The following are not hypothetical scenarios, they are real world and commonplace.

Mike is ready to join the program after week 8 of the quarter. With fixed credit registration, should the instructor:

- Tell Mike to wait till next quarter?
- Not register Mike but allow him participate in class without a registration with the instructor maintaining a secondary 'off-books' shadow roster alongside the official one?
- Register Mike for five credits knowing full well that he's unlikely to complete. Give Mike a Z or Y grade at the end of quarter, since he will not meet the 2/3 requirement for an Incomplete?

Jafar works fast and at a high level. He completes all of the classes he is registered for this quarter with two weeks remaining. The instructor is faced with a similar predicament. Does the instructor:

- Tell Jafar to stay away for then next two weeks?
- Register him for the next class knowing he will receive a Z or a Y
- Allow him to be in class and keep a shadow record of his progress, then next quarter register him for all five credits with the understanding that he's already completed 2/5 of the material.

James is progressing well, but has to miss out on three weeks of scheduled class time because he has conflicting state-mandated Drug Offender Sentencing Alternative (DOSA) classes that take precedent. When he returns James manages to make it 2/3 of the way through his last five-credit class. The instructor decides to issue James an incomplete, writes up the agreement, and issues a temporary C.

- Next quarter James, nearing release, is moved to Monroe Correctional Center, closer to his family. Monroe does not offer this particular program. So despite not completing, but doing A-grade work, his transcript registers a C.

Danny is doing well, making good progress, but part way through the quarter, during a cell-search, contraband is found in his cellmate's bunk. All three cellmates are transferred temporarily to the Administrative segregation. It is four weeks before he is allowed to return to class.

Zach is close to completing one of the classes after signing up too late to be registered for the full five credits. His instructor had records of his progress and planned to register him for the class officially in the following quarter. Zach is approved for graduated reentry and moved to a work-release facility in Bellingham. Zach's progress goes unrecognized as if he never started it.

In all of these scenarios a student's progress is inaccurately reported resulting in messy and misleading transcripts. **Grading this way lacks academic integrity.** All of these situations are effortlessly and accurately supported when variable credit is in place.

Repercussions

- Instructors need to keep two sets of Student Rosters: Official Registrations (inaccurate) and Class Grade Rosters (accurate).
- Students will have a messier and less accurate transcript filled with many more instances of Z and Y grades. It will underrepresent and misreport a student's progress. Students may face negative financial-aid implications from the preponderance of Y and Z grades.
- North campus FTE calculations are negatively affected by underreporting which may have further repercussions on state funding
- **Equity!** Incarcerated students regularly face serious challenges to their access to education for reasons beyond their control. Imposing a draconian 'one-size-fits-all' policy on them and denying them the flexibility to accomplish the equivalent learning outcomes in a way that takes into account their particular logistical challenges and leveling the playing field is clearly a diversity, equity and inclusion issue.