

## Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

### Guidance Note on Required to Withdraw due to Poor Academic Performance

The purpose of this note is to provide general guidance on the steps to take within a department or non-departmentalized Faculty when dealing with a graduate student who is not meeting minimum academic requirements. In many cases, the termination of a graduate student's program of studies on the grounds of poor academic performance is not an automatic step, but rather the end result of a series of steps taken by the department (or Faculty) to ensure that the student was made aware, in a timely manner, of the consequences that flow from poor academic performance, and was given a reasonable period of time in which to attempt improvement, such as a period of time on academic probation.

#### The Step-by-Step Approach

##### **Step 1: Monitoring Student Grades and Cumulative GPAs**

Departments and non-departmentalized Faculties are strongly advised to perform periodic checks of the grades and GPAs of their graduate students so as to ensure early identification of students performing below the minimum requirements, including departmental minimums that are higher than those set by FGSR. Ideally, grades should be checked on a term-by-term basis to ensure timeliness within the process for addressing poor academic performance. Particular attention should be paid to reviewing the grades of new graduate students after their first term. For students in a thesis program, a similar practice of monitoring on a yearly basis should take place with respect to progress towards completion.

##### **Step 2: Departmental Review of a Student's Academic Progress**

As a matter of best practice, departments should arrange to meet with students once they have been identified as having grades and/or a cumulative GPA that falls below the minimum requirements, or are exhibiting lack of progress on a thesis. Such a meeting can provide a useful and timely opportunity to reinforce the student's awareness of the rules concerning academic performance. The representative of the department should also discuss with the student the likelihood of academic improvement, the possibility of being required to withdraw from the program if no improvement occurs, and the possibility of ineligibility to graduate. Such discussions place the student on notice. If the department will be seeking to place the student on academic probation, this action must be discussed with the student, including the consequences of failing to meet the conditions to be attached to the recommended probation. The meeting can also be used to remind students of their own responsibility to seek the advice and assistance of their instructors, and it can provide an opportunity to ask whether the student has faced or is facing any extenuating circumstances contributing to the poor academic performance, which in some cases may lead to the identification of a need for a leave of absence. The student should also be told of the availability of any internal departmental appeals procedure, if one exists, with respect to a decision to recommend probation, including informal procedures such as the opportunity to ask the Chair of the department to review the matter. Graduate coordinators are welcome to contact an Associate Dean at FGSR for advice or to discuss possible courses of action.

**Step 3: Document the Department's Actions**

Document the meeting with the student. Record-keeping is very important, especially if a matter later leads to an appeal. Documentation can be used to show that a student was made aware of the situation and the consequences, received an adequate warning, and was given a reasonable time period in which to attempt improvement. A meeting between the department and the student can be documented by a note to file, or by sending a follow-up email to the student summarizing the key points of discussion at the meeting and clearly stating what consequences will flow from no improvement. A closing line can be included in the follow-up email asking the student to read the contents of the email carefully, to ask questions if anything is unclear, and to confirm receipt of the email. A copy of the reply and the original email can then be printed and kept in the student's file.

**Step 4: Recommendation for Academic Probation**

Where there are no extenuating circumstances, and when the cumulative GPA falls between 2.3 and 2.7, departments are strongly advised to recommend to FGSR that the student be placed on academic probation with the condition that the student achieve the grades needed to raise the GPA to meet the department's minimum requirement for eligibility for graduation (Graduate Program Manual, s. 7.4; University Calendar, s. 203.8.2). In the interests of fairness and transparency, the student should be made aware that the department is recommending academic probation, ideally followed up in writing.

It is FGSR (as the student's Faculty) that makes the decision to place the student on probation and if approved, a notation will appear on the student's permanent academic record and transcript indicating that the student is "On Academic Probation." If the student successfully meets the conditions of the probation, a notation of "Cleared Academic Probation" is added to the record and transcript.

Probation can also be used as an additional step in cases of increasing severity, such as when a student has a low grade in a term and then meets with a graduate coordinator to discuss the need to improve, but then in a subsequent term, receives additional poor grades, and is then advised by the department that it will be seeking to place the student on academic probation. FGSR recommends against the use of what some call "informal" probation as our experience has shown that this results in a lack of clarity, both for the student and for the University should the terms of the "informal" probation not be met.

There is also the option of no probation and going directly to a recommendation that the student be required to withdraw. This route is often used when the cumulative GPA is so low that there is no possibility that the student will be eligible to graduate, or when a qualifying graduate student has failed to meet the conditions of admission to the program.

**Step 5: Departmental Recommendation that the Student be Required to Withdraw**

If there is no chance that the student could raise his or her GPA to be eligible to graduate, or if after an additional term, the student on academic probation does not meet the condition imposed to improve their academic performance to meet the department's minimum requirements, the department may wish to recommend to FGSR that the student be required to withdraw and that the program of studies be terminated. All departmental requests for termination of a program must be made in writing by the Chair or Graduate Coordinator of the department to an Associate Dean of FGSR, with a copy provided to the student, ideally at a face-to-face meeting with the student. According to section 7.13 of the

Graduate Program Manual, “departments are encouraged to have internal appeal procedures” and thus a meeting, followed by an email, is a useful means of ensuring that the department has advised a student of the availability of these internal appeal procedures, including informal procedures such as the opportunity to ask the Chair of the department to review the matter. Section 7.13 also states that the departmental letter recommending termination “must document carefully the reasons for the recommendation” and make reference “to any previous discussions or correspondence with the student related to the matter.” The steps discussed in this Guidance Note are inspired by this direction.

### **Step 6: FGSR Action**

Upon the receipt of a department’s recommendation to require a student to withdraw, FGSR contacts the student and offers the opportunity to request a meeting with an Associate Dean at FGSR. In many cases, the student takes up this offer, and the Associate Dean then meets with the student. The Associate Dean will also contact the department to follow-up on any matter raised by the student.

A student facing a recommendation in favour of being required to withdraw is also advised by the FGSR Associate Dean of the two means of terminating a program, namely voluntary withdrawal by the student and being required to withdraw at the behest of the university, and how these two routes are reflected differently on a student’s permanent academic record. In some cases, it may also be possible to transfer the student to a different department or a different program of studies. If FGSR decides to terminate a student’s program, an appeal can be brought by the student to the FGSR Academic Appeals Committee. In this situation, the FGSR Associate Dean will be the respondent to the appeal, with the assistance of the Graduate Coordinator from the department involved serving as advisor.

### **Resources**

Graduate Program Manual, s. 7.4: “Grades”

<http://www.gradstudies.ualberta.ca/gradmanual/7.4.html>

Graduate Program Manual, s. 7.11: “Student Program Monitoring”

<http://www.gradstudies.ualberta.ca/gradmanual/7.11.html>

Graduate Program Manual, s. 7.13: “Termination of a Student’s Program”

<http://www.gradstudies.ualberta.ca/gradmanual/7.13.html>

Graduate Program Manual, s. 6.21: “Withdrawal from the University”

<http://www.gradstudies.ualberta.ca/gradmanual/6.21.html>

Academic Grievances and Appeals

<http://www.gradstudies.ualberta.ca/degreesuperv/appeals.htm>

FGSR Academic Appeals Regulation

<http://www.gradstudies.ualberta.ca/degreesuperv/appealregs.pdf>

University Calendar, s. 203.8: “Academic Standing” (for graduate students)

<http://www.registrar.ualberta.ca/calendar/GradStudies-and-Research/Regulations/203.8.html>