

Grade Forgiveness at the University of Delaware

What is grade forgiveness?

Grade forgiveness, also known as grade clemency or grade replacement, is a system for removing a bad grade from GPA calculations if a course is repeated successfully. UD currently includes all attempts at a course in the GPA, even if only one of them leads to credits for graduation. For example, if a three-credit course in which a D is received is retaken, and a B is obtained on the second attempt, all credits are included in the GPA calculation. This has the effect of a six-credit C on the GPA, even though only three credits count towards graduation. Under a grade forgiveness policy, this sequence of courses would still only give three credits towards graduation but would only include the three-credit B in the GPA.

Grade forgiveness policies are common among our comparator institutions (Table 1), but they may have a wide range of possible restrictions. The end-members are simple. Some institutions do not have any grade forgiveness policy, in line with current UD policy. Some institutions have an unrestricted grade forgiveness policy, in which any course may be repeated and replaced, by any student, regardless of original grade. Many institutions have policies somewhere between these two end-members (Table 2). Among the common restrictions applied to grade forgiveness policies are:

- Eligibility for repeating a course may be restricted to early classes, such as freshmen-only or some other limit on student experience.
- Repeatable courses may be limited to those in which the first attempt was at or below a certain level, such as C- (creating deficit points) or D+ (cannot be applied to a major).
- The number of times a particular course can be repeated for replacement may be limited.
- The total number of courses or credits that may be replaced may be limited.
- An application or petition may be required before attempting a repetition that can lead to replacement.

Why are we considering this?

Each year, the University of Delaware admits a pool of well-qualified candidates to enter our institution and begin working on the potentially life-changing goal of acquiring a UD undergraduate degree. Despite previous academic success, some students struggle during their transition to UD. Though their academic background indicates they are quite capable, for various reasons these students may not perform at full potential in their first year. The circumstances faced by some international students and first-generation students can be especially challenging. Many students assume that the University has a grade clemency policy, and they are surprised that when a course is repeated and a better grade is earned, the original grade is still included in their GPA calculation.

Current UD policies for removing grades from the GPA are highly restrictive. The Committee on Undergraduate Records and Certification (CURC) hears petitions from college assistant deans and University Studies staff on behalf of students who experienced documented extenuating circumstances beyond their control (most commonly medical reasons) that prevented them from being successful. CURC's decisions can lead to a student's grades being changed to "W" for the affected term, resulting in an improved GPA. CURC cannot withdraw students without medical or other documentation that explains how these circumstances negatively impacted performance.

Students cannot normally petition to remove poor grades and keep good grades from the same term unless they can argue that a medical condition affected their ability differently in various types of courses. (A hand injury causing an inability to complete an art course but not affecting performance in other courses has been given as a possible example.) Normally, either all grades for a semester are changed to “W” or no grades are changed.

UD has had an academic renewal policy in place since 1989 that allows a student to “start over.” Students who have not been enrolled at the University for at least five calendar years are eligible for academic renewal if they earn a “C” or better in each course for 12 credit hours after their return. The student’s GPA will be calculated from this point on and grades from previously completed coursework are excluded from the GPA. More recently, the English Language Institute instituted a policy for its students who eventually matriculate at the University of Delaware. Students who did not master material in the first attempt of an ELI-section of a UD course (earning a final grade below C–) may repeat the course, and only the second grade will factor into the GPA calculation. A similar policy applies to students who take UD courses while still in high school – CURC may be petitioned to remove these courses from the GPA on matriculation. These policies all attempt to avoid having students be on probation when they matriculate.

Freshman mid-term grades, which correlate with final grades and a student’s academic standing, can function as an alert when students are struggling academically. However, the deadline for posting midterm grades is not until the end of the 7th week of instruction. From that point, students only have seven days to make registration changes or withdraw from courses. A significant number of faculty do not post midterm grades by the deadline, giving students less time to talk with an academic advisor about their midterm grades, strategies to improve performance, and the implications of making registration changes. With the Blue Hen Success Collaborative (BHSC) and the coordinated effort of faculty, staff, and academic leadership, the University of Delaware has been working to better support undergraduate students from their initial enrollment through graduation. In conjunction with these support systems and existing policies, a new policy would increase the likelihood of success and retention, allowing first-year students to have a second chance to successfully master material and slightly improve their GPA.

What are we proposing?

Various proposals for a grade clemency policy have been suggested by students, faculty and administrators in the past. Insufficient consensus about what kind of clemency policy, or whether we should have one at all, has kept a policy from being implemented. On March 11, 2019, an Open Hearing initiated by the Undergraduate Studies Committee (UGS) was held, and all of the options discussed above and the tables shown below were presented. UGS believes that the consensus of discussion was that UD was ready for some form of grade replacement, but that the policy should be limited and conservative at this time, so that we can better see what effects it has on student retention and performance. Consequently, UGS has drafted for consideration a policy for limited grade forgiveness. The definitive version of the policy is in the catalog revision draft submitted as Attachment 1, but it can be summarized as:

- Only courses taken in the first year may be replaced,
- Only grades of C– or lower may be replaced, and
- Only two courses or eight credits (whichever is lower) may be replaced.

UGS respectfully submits this to the Senate with a positive recommendation for its passage.

Table 1. Policies at comparator institutions, arranged from most restrictive policies (no grade forgiveness) to least restrictive policies (any class, any grade, no limits on credits). These are drawn from web sites of the respective universities, requiring some interpretation of highly variable policies. Numbers in square brackets refer to notes at the end of the table.

No grade forgiveness

Boston University
 Case Western Reserve University
University of Delaware (current)
 University of Michigan
 University of North Carolina –Chapel Hill
 North Carolina State University– Raleigh
 Pennsylvania State University
 University of Stony Brook
 Texas A&M
 University of Virginia

Freshman only, D or lower

Georgia Tech (2 courses) [1]

Freshman only, C– or lower

University of Delaware (2019 proposal) (max 2 courses or 8 credits) [1]

Freshman/Sophomores, C– or lower

University of Arizona (max 3 courses or 10 credits) [2]

First year, any Grade

University of Maryland (max 18 credits) [1, 4]

Any Class, D+ or lower

Michigan State University (max 20 credits) [2]
 Rutgers University (max 16 credits) [1]

Any Class, C– or lower

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (max 4 courses, 10 credits) [1]
 University of Massachusetts – Amherst [2, 4]
 Virginia Tech [3]

Any Class, any Grade

University of Connecticut [4]
 Indiana University (max 3 courses, 10 credits)) [1, 3]
 Iowa State (max 15 credits) [2]
 University of Minnesota [2, 4]
 Ohio State (max 3 courses) [1, 3]
 University of Pittsburgh [4]
 Purdue University
 University of Utah [2]

Notes

- [1] One repeat attempt per course
- [2] Most recent grade only, not higher grade
- [3] Requires petition, may not be automatic
- [4] More than one repeat (may need petition)

Table 2. Comparator policy distribution – number of comparator institutions, including current UD, with each type of restriction. Numbers do not include the proposed policy, but its position in the table is indicated.

Restrictions on student class level

No grade forgiveness (UD current)	10	
Restrict to early classes or recent transfers	3	(UD 2019)
No restrictions on class	13	

Restrictions on grade of replaced course

No grade forgiveness (UD current)	10	
Below probation (varying levels)	7	(UD 2019)
Any previous grade	9	

Limit on number of courses that may be replaced

Zero (UD current)	10	
2 courses or 8 credits	1	(UD 2019)
3–4 courses or 10 credits	4	
15–20 credits	4	
No limit	7	