

## **Committee on Scholastic Standards and Petitions**

### **Review of Proposal Change for Class Attendance Policy**

The initial proposal for there to be changes to the attendance policy that governs undergraduate courses at USC arose out of discussions in the Jewish Faculty and Staff Council (JFSC). The JFSC is a group of Jewish employees at USC, who were concerned about the problems that a number Jewish students had reported. The Jewish religious calendar has holidays on which observant Jews traditionally do not work. In the fall, four of these holidays will sometimes fall on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and students who do not attend classes on these dates will exceed the number of absences allowed before faculty are permitted to begin assessing penalties.

Some faculty members have expressed surprise that any student would be penalized for these kinds of religious absences. However, there have been specific complaints about this happening, from a modest but meaningful number of undergraduates. In response to this problem, the JFSC proposed that USC's academic regulations should be changed, so that faculty would be required to distinguish between unexcused absences (which could be penalized after a grace period was exceeded) and excused absences (which would include documented religious observances and could not be penalized).

The language of the JFSC proposal was refined and clarified through a series of consultations (with the dean of undergraduate studies, and representatives for some other student groups often placed at a disadvantage by the current policy). It was then presented (by the JFSC convener, Adam Schor) to the Committee on Academic Standards and Petitions, to which the issue had been referred by the Faculty Senate.

Opinions of the committee members were quite divided, and these divisions were mirrored in the further input that was received from the broader faculty after the proposed new policy was presented to the Senate in the spring. Some people were strongly in favor of allowing unlimited absences for religious and other excused absences. However, on the other hand, some faculty were opposed to any increase in the leniency of the attendance policy, wanting to grant faculty the greatest leeway in setting their own attendance rules; the burden of distinguishing different types of absences and policing students' claims was a significant concern. Naturally, there was a spectrum of intermediate positions as well, representing a diversity of opinion reflecting the diversity of USC faculty members's teaching experience, which can involve some very different types of classes.

The Committee on Scholastic Standard and Petitions produced an compromise proposal, which was an attempt to be responsive the the concerns that had been raised about the specific situations faced by Jewish and other students. Under the proposed policy revision, it should be clear that faculty are not required to enforce attendance or penalize absences, but that if they do so, they must be consistent and equitable to all students. (Students, in turn, are instructed

that they must be fully honest when requesting exemptions from a penalty for absence.) There is also advisory language, to better guide faculty as to what sorts of religious holidays and other excuses that they may wish to consider and whom they should contact if they want more information about various holidays.

Most importantly, the proposal raises the absolute threshold, below which faculty may not penalize absences, from 10% of class meetings to 15%. This number was selected based on based on information about the number of absences that Jewish or other religious students might observe, which could amount to up 14% of a Monday-Wednesday or Tuesday-Thursday class.

The proposed changes were presented to the Faculty Senate in the spring, and senators were asked to solicit feedback from other faculty in their units. The feedback from the full faculty covered just about the full range of possible responses, suggesting that the proposal did represent a reasonable middle ground.

If this proposal does not pass the Faculty Senate, then the rule will remain that faculty may, begin to assess penalties as soon as students miss more than 10% of the meetings of a course. If the proposal does pass, that does not preclude the Faculty Senate making further changes to the attendance policy rules in the future, as soon as this coming academic year.