Dear University Registrar Upadhyay and Vice Chancellor Lemons,

This concerns the attached May 22, 2021 Policy & Procedure Memorandum on CUNY Uniform Grade Glossary, Policies, and Guidelines, which we saw for the first time in mid-December. We have several questions and concerns. In this initial communication we will try to be brief. We believe that several of the changes indicated will be damaging in a number of ways, the reasons for them are not clear, and they actually concern matters that fall under the purview of college faculty by Article VIII of the CUNY bylaws (“policy relating to the admission and retention of students including health and scholarship standards therefor, student attendance including leaves of absence, curriculum, awarding of college credit, granting of degrees”). There are two main areas of concern.

The first involves three changes related to student completion of incompletes and grade appeals. They occur on pp.8-9 of the attached – I highlighted them in yellow and numbered them in red. In each case, we think the change will be harmful to students and we ask you to explain the reason for the new policy, specifically, what advantage it has over our own policies that we have successfully implemented for years:

1. Elimination of possible extensions for completing INCs. At Hunter, we allow faculty-requested extensions for the student to complete work once the original deadline for the INC has passed and the grade has turned to an FIN. The new May 22, 2021 policy eliminates this since its provision for faculty appeal requires students to have completed work by that original deadline. This would hurt a lot of students who have legitimate reasons for needing more time and who do successfully complete the coursework after the FIN deadline. What is the benefit of eliminating this as an option for faculty and students?

2. Shortening of our deadlines for grade appeals to 30 days after grade is given. At Hunter, we time deadlines from the start of the subsequent semester: an student has to appeal a grade within the first three weeks of the subsequent semester (for in Fall for Spring grades and Spring for Fall grades). The timelines in the May 22, 2021 policy are not consistent with the faculty availability in summer or January and so are unworkable. Do you disagree? What is the advantage of the new shorter deadlines?

3. Taking the decision by dept and Senate grade appeal committees to be only recommendations to the faculty member. At Hunter, we take the dept level to override the faculty member decision but it may be appealed to the Senate (by either the student or faculty member), and then the Senate grade appeal committee decision is final. The policy in the May 22, 2021 memo that makes the rulings by appeal bodies only recommendations would completely change the nature of the appeal process and seemingly make it a pointless exercise for students and committee members. Also, note that the finality of the committee decision occurs in the Hunter College Governance Charter in the description of the Grade Appeals committee:

Article VIII, Section 10: “The Senate shall establish a Committee on Grade Appeals, consisting of 4 faculty members, and 3 students and 3 student alternates. The Committee on Grade Appeals will consider grade appeals in which the student or faculty member involved takes exception to the decision of the Departmental Grade Appeals Committee. The Committee on Grade Appeals shall establish guidelines for procedures to be followed in its review of grade appeals and will report its decisions in each case to the parties concerned, the Department Chair, and to the Registrar. The decision of the Grade Appeals Committee is final.”
What is the reason for making the decision of any grade appeals committee only be a recommendation? Also, could you please specify the grounds on which the May 22, 2021 memo overrides our BOT-approved Governance Charter?

The second area of concern – perhaps the more fundamentally problematic one - is the removal of the effect a WU has on a student’s GPA. The situation in which a student receives a WU is one in which a student enrolls in a course, engages in it initially but then stops turning in assignments. One issue is how doing that may affect a student’s financial aid, but that is not the key question here, since of course not all students in such cases may be receiving financial aid. Rather, the main issue is the academic standing of a student and how that is affected by such a situation. The academic question is how to judge the student’s performance in meeting academic standards when they just stop participating in a course. We take it that under the May 22, 2021 memo that performance is still being judged as a failure to meet standards for passing and that a consequence of this is that the student does not receive credit for the course. But, generally, the extent that a student meets academic standards is also indicated via the course grade that is incorporated into GPA. The GPA-affecting WU was a way for the faculty to indicate that a student “disappearing” during a course is a failure of the student to meet scholarship standards. To remove the effect of the WU on a student’s GPA is to exempt the student’s performance in that case from academic assessment, that is, to remove the student from any judgement the instructor may have on the extent the student met scholarship standards.

What is the advantage you see in doing this? To us, it seems that there will be many negative unintended consequences. For example, it seems inevitable that more students will be “disappearing” from class as semesters progress. Inaction will have the same effect as deliberate withdrawal; borderline students will have less incentive to make the effort necessary try pass a course and may choose to not show up for the final, thus protecting themselves from F grades. The WU may come to be seen by students as an alternative in courses where the P/NC option is not allowed by their major.

But beyond those considerations, there are two other issues. First, this directive memo concerning the WU appears to violate faculty governance of academic standards. It is unclear how given the CUNY Bylaws (Article VIII), this decision to exempt a student from academic assessment in such a case can be legitimately made by any body other than the college faculty itself or the BOT. Was this policy approved by the BOT?

Second, it undermines the reliance on the GPA as a standard by which to judge a student being in good academic standing. If the new grading definition of the WU does not allow for that kind of failure of a course (one due to inactivity) to be reflected in a student’s GPA, then some other way for that to be registered needs to be found. Otherwise how to prevent a self-funded student from remaining enrolled with a majority of WUs? If WUs do not affect the GPA of a student, then there seems nothing put in place to prevent this. The admission and retention of students could be achieved merely by their ability to pay, not by the adequacy in level of academic achievement. If there are good reasons for exempting the WU from affecting the GPA, then some additional measure of good standing needs to be found and it is in the purview of faculty to determine this.

For all these reasons, we respectfully request that you immediately suspend the implementation of the May 22, 2021 memo and that consultation be done with the governance bodies of all the CUNY colleges. This would allow us to continue to use this year our current Senate-approved policies that we believe most beneficial to student academic success.

Sincerely,

Laura Keating, Chair, Hunter College Senate
Sandra Clarkson, Chair, Senate Student Standing Committee, and Co-Chair, Senate Graduate Course of Study and Academic Requirements Committee
Peggy Chen, Co-Chair, Senate Graduate Course of Study and Academic Requirements Committee
Kevin Sachs, Chair, Senate Undergraduate Academic Requirements Committee
Jason Young, Member, Senate Undergraduate Academic Requirements Committee
Jason Wirtz, Chair, Senate Grade Appeals Committee
Larry Shore, Member, Senate Grade Appeals Committee
Stefan Schlussman, Co-Chair, Senate Undergraduate Course of Study Committee
Jeanne Weiler, Co-Chair, Senate Undergraduate Course of Study Committee