November 7, 2007

Letter of Transmittal to Accompany the Proposal for Priority Registration

A complex system of priority registration that is based on assorted traditions, permissions, and precedents has evolved at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. There is a long history of efforts to establish a formal priority registration policy on our campus, and the goal of the Proposal for Priority Registration that is attached here is to provide a transparent, systematic mechanism for administering priority registration under appropriate scrutiny.

Informal conversations in fall 2006 led the Faculty Committee on Athletics to establish a task force to explore the possibility of proposing a priority registration system that would assist varsity athletes and other students who have notably difficult scheduling issues due to their university obligations. I was asked to Chair this task force. The initial members of the task force were Lissa Broome, Jack Evans, George Lensing (all from the Faculty Committee on Athletics), John Blanchard (Department of Athletics), and Robert Mercer (Academic Support Center for Student-Athletes).

To launch this endeavor, I consulted with various individuals regarding the groups of students who should be candidates to be covered by priority registration and the steps that would lead to a registration priority proposal being implemented. Conversations with Senior Associate Dean Bobbi Owen, Provost Bernadette Gray-Little, and Associate Dean of Academic Services Carolyn Cannon indicated that education majors, students with disabilities, and allied health majors were obvious candidates. Also, a plan emerged whereby if the Faculty Committee on Athletics endorsed the task force’s proposal, the proposal would then be forwarded to the Registrar, and she would seek advice from the Educational Policy Committee regarding the proposal’s merits pursuant to the charge of that committee to act “as a council of advice for the university registrar in administering faculty regulations concerning . . . registration.”

To expand the task force’s expertise, I consulted with Dean Tom James of the School of Education and on his advice, invited Jane Smith, Licensure Officer and Coordinator of Teacher Recruitment and Retention to join the task force. Subsequently, I also asked Anne Bryan, Director of Student Affairs of the School of Education to join. Beverly Foster, Chair of the Educational Policy Committee and Director of Undergraduate Studies in the School of Nursing; and Harold Woodard, Associate Dean of Student Academic Counseling, also agreed to join the task force.

After an initial meeting in December, the task force met four times and corresponded via e-mail. Our deliberations were focused on preparing the attached Proposal for Priority Registration. This
proposal addresses the general issue of priority registration and does not address enrollment priorities for select groups of students in particular courses (e.g., honor student enrollment in honor’s classes, or eligibility for courses with supplemental instruction). Another issue that this proposal does not address is the problem facing a student who is off campus due to a university sanctioned event on the specific day when that student is expected to register for classes. These issues are adequately covered by current policies. It is our understanding that UNC currently allows students with learning disabilities to register before their classmates in order to reduce barriers to their academic success. The present proposal would formalize this policy and extend it to a broader group of students who are deemed eligible.

We consulted with the University Registrar Alice Poehls and Applications Analyst Megan Keefe regarding the feasibility of the plan. The Registrar also helped us compile the registration priority policies at other ACC schools and at universities that we consider to be our “comparables” by updating a report prepared by the previous Registrar, David Lanier, in 2002 (Survey of Registration Priorities for Athletes 2007 – attached). She also gathered new data regarding priority registration policies at our peer institutions (Registration Priority for Athletes and Others at Selected Universities – attached). We also examined information gathered by Robert Mercer concerning registration policies for athletes at schools in the ACC and some of our comparables (SA Registration Procedures at Comparable Universities – attached). On the basis of these data, we are confident that our proposal is feasible and well within the boundaries that have been adopted by comparable institutions.

One important aspect of our deliberations was to determine how many student athletes would be eligible to be considered for priority registration. Under the guidelines of our proposal, the Athletics Department could nominate a student-athlete for priority registration during a semester in which the student’s practice obligation is at the NCAA maximum of 20 hours per week. John Blanchard prepared a table (attached) showing the number of weeks per semester in which varsity athletes are practicing at the NCAA maximum of 20 hours per week. One sport (cross country) has no official practices in the spring semester, so under the guidelines of our proposal, athletes who only participate in cross country (and are not members of the track & field team) would not be eligible for priority registration for that semester. Several sports practice at the 20 hour limit for only a few weeks a semester (e.g., baseball and softball in the fall semester). These students could be nominated for priority registration, but the Priority Registration Advisory Committee might advise against it on a sport-by-sport or student-by-student basis.

The Faculty Committee on Athletics reviewed the Proposal on May 1, 2007, endorsed it, and forwarded it to the Educational Policy Committee. Subsequently, Lissa Broome and Jack Evans raised the issue of priority registration with the Executive Committee of the Faculty Council. During the summer of 2007, I met with Student Body President Eve Carson to review the proposal, and I provided documentation to be posted on the Student Government website. I also met with Melissa Exum, Theresa Maitland, Jim Kessler, and Fred Clark to review the implications of this policy for students with special needs.

The Educational Policy Committee reviewed the Priority Registration Proposal on October 10 and October 17, and voted to return the Proposal to the task force with the request that clarifications be made regarding the scope of students who would be covered, the focus on groups of students rather than individual students, the expectations regarding annual reports, and the explicit inclusion of a four-year sunset provision that would require reauthorization of the Proposal after a thorough review by the Educational Policy Committee in collaboration with Faculty Council. A straw poll suggested that Educational Policy Committee members would vote in favor of the proposal if it incorporated the recommended changes.
I consulted with Lissa Broome and reconvened the task force with some change of membership. Specifically, Jane Smith was no longer available, but Anne Bryan continued to represent the School of Education. I also asked Theresa Maitland, Jim Kessler, and Fred Clark to join the task force. Modifications were made in the Proposal to incorporate the suggestions from the Educational Policy Committee. The Faculty Athletics Committee reviewed the revised policy on November 6, 2007 and approved it unanimously. The Educational Policy Committee reviewed the revised policy on November 7, 2007, made one minor modification, and approved it unanimously.

To summarize, we have made a diligent effort to formulate a priority registration system that solves obvious problems and has appropriate limitations and oversight to avoid misuse. The modifications suggested by the Educational Policy Committee are improvements. We look forward to a broad discussion of the proposal, and hopefully, its eventual implementation.

Sincerely,

J. Steven Reznick, Ph.D.
Professor and Director, Program in Child Development
Proposition for Priority Registration – November 7, 2007

Rationale

Some groups of undergraduate students encounter unusual challenges in our registration system that inhibit their academic progress and threaten their timely graduation. For example, students with physical or learning disabilities may require reasonable accommodations in order to reduce barriers to their academic success. Education majors in teaching programs spend the second semester of their senior year off campus as student teachers, and during their junior and senior year must complete specific courses required for certification in their areas of specialization. Nursing students must spend significant amounts of time in clinical rotations in order to meet licensure requirements. Varsity athletes must fit their class schedules with their practice/competition schedules so that they can make progress toward their degrees as required by the University and the NCAA. This proposal suggests a process for priority registration that provides a flexible but transparent approach to these issues.

Mechanism

A process for determining how students qualify for priority registration is described in subsequent paragraphs. Those students who qualify for priority registration will be allowed to register ahead of their cohort. UNC has adopted a new registration ordering plan in which the order in which students register is based on the number of semesters completed. Students who qualify for priority registration would receive the earliest assignment times for their semester cohort. In other words, a sophomore who receives priority registration would register before other sophomores but not before any juniors or seniors.

The Registrar will convene a Priority Registration Advisory Committee (the PRAC) that will meet each semester to review the student groups who have been recommended for priority registration. Members of the PRAC will be appointed by the Registrar and will include faculty, students, and administrators representing a range of interests and expertise. We recommend that the PRAC include some individuals who have had experience in educational policy, academic advising, and disability services.

Each semester, prior to the start of registration, an official who has responsibility for students who are potentially eligible for priority registration (e.g., a Dean, Director, or Department Chair) will send the Registrar a list of students who are recommended for priority registration and a rationale for the need for priority registration given the demands of the students’ activities. The Registrar will forward these rationale statements to the PRAC along with a tally of the number of students being proposed (i.e., the Registrar will not give PRAC an actual list of names). In the interest of transparency and accountability, the PRAC’s meetings will be open to the public, and all rationale statements and tallies as well as the PRAC’s decisions will be publicly available. Having received advice from the PRAC, the Registrar will adjust assignment times for those students who are selected for priority registration.

The PRAC will review summary data regarding the operation of priority registration (e.g., the specific courses that are selected during priority registration) and suggest modifications to the Priority Registration Policy as needed. The Registrar will consult with the PRAC and seek advice from the Educational Policy Committee.
regarding any amendments to the Priority Registration Policy. The Registrar will present an annual report to the Educational Policy Committee indicating the number of students who were granted or denied priority registration, and evaluating whether course selection during priority registration appears to be serving its intended purpose.

The Priority Registration Policy proposed here will be in effect for a trial period of four years. After four years, the Registrar will request that the Educational Policy Committee in collaboration with Faculty Council review how well the policy is working and make a formal recommendation regarding whether the policy should be continued as is, modified, or allowed to lapse.

Limitations

As a general rule, we recommend that no more than 25% of the seats in each section be available for priority registration. The Registrar and the PRAC will monitor the distribution of priority registration students across sections to determine whether any sections are being selected disproportionately. If significant over-enrollment occurs in selected courses, the Registrar will work with the department involved so that seat availability in selected courses is capped at 25% during the next priority registration.

Eligibility for Priority Registration

Priority registration will be extended to undergraduate students who encounter unusual challenges in our registration system that inhibit their academic progress and threaten their timely graduation. It is difficult to establish an a priori definition of “unusual”, but the Priority Registration Task Force has identified three groups that would be exemplars of these unusual registration challenges. Thus, these student groups are eligible to be considered for priority registration if the students in the group meet any of the following conditions:

- The student engages in an activity that formally represents the University and by virtue of that representation is required to attend practices and events during hours in which classes are offered (e.g., varsity athletes during a semester in which the student’s practice obligation is at the NCAA maximum of 20 hours per week);

- The student is enrolled in a degree program requiring that at least one semester be spent off campus (e.g., student teaching), that specific courses in Arts and Sciences be successfully completed in order to obtain licensure (e.g., Education majors), or that requires significant time be devoted to clinical practice (e.g., nursing, allied health, etc); or

- The student has a disability for which priority registration is an approved accommodation.

Other groups that may have comparable registration challenges may be proposed for priority registration by an official who has responsibility for their program (e.g., a Dean, Director, or Department Chair), and these groups will be reviewed by the PRAC. Individual students may not apply directly to the Registrar for priority registration.