

Running head: COMPARING ACADEMIC POLICIES

A Comparison of Nine Universities' Academic Policies from 1988 to 2005

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Abstract

This study compares academic policies related to academic good standing, probation, suspension, and expulsion at nine universities over 17 years providing a benchmark to which others can compare. The print and on-line versions of the undergraduate catalogs from 1988-2005 for each of the nine public universities in the southeastern United States were examined regarding those policies. Each school requires a 2.0 cumulative grade point average for graduation, but students earlier in their careers may remain in good standing with lower CGPAs. Students not in good standing may be put on probation while remaining in school and given a chance to improve their grades. Failing that, they may be suspended with various paths to return. After one or two suspensions, students are expelled, although six institutions have policies allowing them to return after time away. Grade forgiveness policies are also examined. We find that over time those institutions with lower standards for good standing have raised them. This study lays a foundation for a study answering larger questions about how these policies affect enrollment, persistence, and graduation, particularly among women and minority students majoring in engineering at these institutions. (Contains 6 tables and 3 appendices.)

Key Words: academic good standing, probation, suspension, expulsion, clean slate policies.

## A Comparison of Nine Universities' Academic Policies

From 1988 to 2005

### Introduction

All higher education institutions have policies and guidelines that determine which students are in good academic standing. College admission and enrollment are the earliest milestones on the path to achieving a college degree. After enrollment, students are responsible for the choices and actions that allow them to succeed academically and ultimately to graduate. Along the way, through inattention or inability, some students fail to meet the academic standards set by their institution.

This paper explores academic requirements over a 17-year period at nine large public universities in the southeastern United States. Specifically, we look at the published policies at Clemson University, Florida A&M University, Florida State University, Georgia Institute of Technology, North Carolina A&T State University, North Carolina State University, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, University of Florida, and Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. These institutions enroll collectively over 160,000 students per year. In the aggregate, engineering students are overrepresented at these institutions (Ohland, et al. 2008). Today these same institutions comprise the partners in MIDFIELD, the Multi-Institution Database for Investigating Engineering Longitudinal Development.

Our two research questions for this study were: 1) What are the grade point average (GPA) requirements to remain in good standing and thus avoid probation, suspension, or expulsion? and 2) Once a student has been put on probation, suspended, or expelled, under what conditions may that student return to school and to academic good standing? This study of academic policies lays a foundation for other studies using the MIDFIELD database that describe

the population of at-risk students, and then follow the paths that students take after they are put on probation or suspended – whether they return to good standing, continue along an unsuccessful pathway, or leave school entirely.

### Literature Review

#### *Why study academic policies?*

The use of term “Academic Literacy” has increased in recent years. Within the context of undergraduate education it refers to the very basic skills and information that students need to navigate the system successfully. Yet these kinds of literacies remain obscure to many students, in particular to those who are outsiders to the traditions of White western culture, such as underrepresented minorities and the socioeconomically marginalized (White, 2007). White’s study participants “were not even aware that they lacked the requisite literacy they needed for survival...Rather,...the university expected them to possess this kind of literacy – to know the rules of participation – prior to their entry into this system” (White, 2007; p. 279). More to the point, *all* newly admitted students are assumed to internalize an institution’s policies shortly after entry and, from thence forward, uncritically accept those policies.

Perhaps it is because academic rules and regulations are so ubiquitous that they have relatively little recent attention in the literature as potential contributing factors in students’ ability to succeed. While there have been multitudes of studies concerning climate and teaching techniques during the past two decades, relatively few have investigated what impact, if any, can ultimately be the result of institutional policies. For example, a search dating from 1980 forward using the terms *academic*, *policies*, *probation*, and *suspension* (singly or in combinations) yielded an article noting the ways that such practices vary from campus to campus (Boulard, 1994). Many of the 17 institutions cited by Boulard used a cumulative GPA of less than 2.0 as

the threshold for probation, an approach similar to that of several universities in the present study. Boulard asserts that there are not one or two simple reasons why departments continue to experience such high rates of attrition, and he concludes with a plea for greater social support networks for students, especially minorities. A supplemental list of probation, suspension, and readmission policies and procedures from selected institutions is provided, though not discussed.

Others have likewise observed the curious scarcity of studies concerning academic policies. For example, Miller and Trujillo (1978) reported “a distinct lack of literature pertaining to institutional policies and procedures in suspending and reinstating students who experience academic difficulties,” (p. 1). For their study, 33 private and public colleges and universities in the Pacific Northwest were surveyed in January 1977 for information about academic standards, suspension for academic reasons, and reinstatement following suspension. Of the 24 (unidentified) institutions responding, 23 reported having some type of policy in place regarding academic standards, and the authors found various similarities and differences among them. Overall, they concluded that there were two principal variables at work in all cases, these being: (a) the person or persons who make reinstatement decisions, and (b) the perception that students have of the process and how it works.

A slightly different approach was taken by Richards-Smith (1986), who sought to determine whether ACT or SAT scores were reliable predictors of student success, and if there was a critical cut point or score related to incidents of probation or suspension. A questionnaire was mailed to all students on probation in Spring 1985 at Grambling State University, a historically black institution. Respondents were later interviewed, and grades and GPA were included in the analysis. Data failed to show conclusively a score threshold on the ACT or SAT that was related positively or negatively to placement on probation or suspension. Interestingly,

it was also found that (a) knowledge of probation did serve as a potential deterrent for a small number of students; but that (b) although the students on suspension or probation understood these policies, they did not follow them. In sum, the study revealed that the students were aware of what they needed to do to succeed in college, acknowledging that they should study more, attend classes faithfully, adhere closely to academic policies, and work closely with advisors.

Finally, in his 1961 dissertation, Dula surveyed a nationwide sample of junior colleges concerning academic policies and their effects. As in the case of Miller and Trujillo (1978), Dula reported that such policies varied widely among the 158 responding institutions. Among his more significant findings: (a) the act of placing a student on probation was tantamount to dismissal for over one-third of them, and fewer than 10 percent of the 483 students sampled later graduated; that (b) men “appear to be more susceptible to academic difficulty than women at the junior college level” (Dula, 1961; p. 63); and that (c) the restrictive nature of an institution’s policies and practices of probation and suspension were “not found to be related to academic success” (p. 61).

#### *Academic Policies and Retention*

We explored whether the retention literature of at-risk students included any discussions of the impact of academic policies on those students. This search yielded many articles concerning the academic success of minority students. For example, Clewell and Ficklen (1986) performed case studies at four postsecondary institutions for the stated purpose of discovering the effectiveness of institutional practices in this regard. Study data were then used to develop a series of steps necessary to create a successful retention program. This action plan included a policy decision, a needs assessment, implementation and monitoring guidelines, but nowhere was the long-term effect of academic policies on the students discussed. A more recent study by

Yorke and Thomas (2003) conducted semi-structured interviews with senior managers at six UK institutions where the retention of minority undergraduates met or exceeded expectations. Their analysis found that successful retention of students from lower socioeconomic groups mandated a strong commitment at the policy-making level and subsequent practical action. They identified five factors likely to have a positive impact on retention and students' subsequent success, but none of these addressed the possible effects of academic policies. Other studies considered the impact of the National Science Foundation's Program for Women and Girls (Darke, Clewell, & Sevo, 2002), the effects of the state of Georgia's HOPE Scholarship on students' course-taking behaviors (Cornwell, Lee, & Mustard, 2005), the uses of performance indicators (Gaither, Nedwek, & Neal, 1994), and the usefulness of certain "institutional variables" for predicting graduation rates (Goenner & Snaith, 2004), without raising the issue of long-term effects of academic policies on student performance and retention.

#### *Academic Good Standing and Academic Difficulty*

Because the present study compares academic policies related to GPA requirements, probation, suspension, and expulsion at nine institutions, these and other synonymous terms also became part of the search criteria. One author (Berger, 2002), who likewise observed the scarcity within the literature of investigations into the effects of organizational behavior on student persistence, used a multidimensional model as a theoretical basis for recommendations intended to help campus leaders improve the effectiveness of existing retention efforts, but stopped short of considering the potential impact of institutional policies on student performance. Another study (May & Chubin, 2003) conducted an exhaustive review of articles, government reports, Websites, and archives published since 1980, in an effort to isolate factors that contribute to the

success of minority students in engineering programs. It listed six success correlates, none of which involved or even suggested that academic policies could also be a factor.

Worth noting in conclusion is an insightful article by Golde (2005), describing themes that emerged from a qualitative study of the impact of departmental culture and discipline on the attrition of doctoral students. Using Tinto's (1993) model of incongruence and student isolation as its theoretical basis, this author believes "that it is impossible to separate completely the effects of discipline and department" (Golde, 2005; p. 695), as the character of the department is in many ways defined by its disciplinary policies. Consequently, any action plan aimed at improving students' retention should take into consideration all aspects of the academic environment, including the effects of the academic policies that in many ways determine the character of departments and even the disciplines themselves. Apparently, no such comprehensive plan of action yet exists, as Tinto (2006-07) has discovered:

What is needed and what is not yet available is a model of institutional action that provides guidelines for the development of effective policies and programs that institutions can reasonably employ to enhance the persistence of all their students... The development of such a model would require, among other things, not only more research on effective practice but also more research on the impact of organizational policies on those practices and in turn on student retention. (Tinto, 2006-07; pp. 6-7)

### Methods

To investigate the research questions, we studied the printed and web-based catalogs from each institution from 1988-2005. We chose to present the academic years 1994-95 and 2004-05 for contrast as many schools changed their policies in the mid to late 1990's to the ones that appear in 2004-05. More recent catalogs have been spot checked, though not as thoroughly



studied, with significant policy deviations noted. With the exception of UNC-Charlotte, which had a relatively short-lived and complicated progression policy from 1993-1998, the policies in 1994-95 reflect those of earlier years. Some institutions publish their policies online in other venues (e.g., under “Academic Policies and Regulations”) and those policies were accounted for as well. Where there was a discrepancy between the printed catalog and online information, the online information was assumed to be more accurate as it can be updated after its original publication. The institutions provided printed catalogs. Others were found using the archives of College Source Online ([www.collegesource.org](http://www.collegesource.org)), an online repository of nearly 44,000 college catalogs, and the “Internet wayback machine” ([www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org)) which allows access to older versions of some university websites. Although a few catalogs are missing, the set is relatively complete and comprehensive. In many cases, policies could be interpolated based on information published before and after the time of the missing catalog. Where the catalog information was unclear, we asked campus personnel for clarification. Appendix A summarizes the campus sources reviewed.

The data for each school were sorted and displayed on a spreadsheet in a time-ordered matrix that listed each policy by academic year (Miles & Huberman (1994), pp. 119-120).

### *Definitions*

Although each institution has its own terminology for various levels of academic distress, the following terms will be used in this paper to apply to all nine universities.

Academic Good Standing – a semester (SGPA) or cumulative grade point average (CGPA) that is high enough to avoid all academic penalties.

Academic Probation – an SGPA or CGPA that is lower than is required to be in academic good standing. Students may remain continuously enrolled, perhaps with conditions. Those

returning to school after serving an academic suspension may also be on probation until they meet the requirements to be in good standing.

Academic Suspension – requirement to separate from the university for a period of time, usually a semester or an academic year. Students may be suspended more than once.

Academic Expulsion – permanent separation from the university. May not return except under extraordinary circumstances and only by appeal to a university committee or through other special programs.

Grade Point Deficit (GPD) – a mathematical relationship between credit hours and quality points earned where hours attempted times credits earned is less than two times the hours attempted. See Appendix B for the relationship between CGPA and GPD.

### *Limitations*

Unwritten or discretionary policies are not included in the analysis although we may refer to them anecdotally. Appeals processes may allow students to continue who would otherwise be unqualified according to the written policies. Due to the publication schedule of printed catalogs, a policy may have taken effect before appearing in a catalog. For our purposes, the exact timing of a particular change in academic policy is not as important as the change itself. Upon close inspection of the printed catalogs, it became apparent that they were not always accurate or internally consistent, particularly when policies changed. In these cases, we used our best judgment as well as information from later catalogs and other sources, such as campus personnel, to ascertain the policy at the time.

If there is a difference between policies as they apply to students entering an institution as native first-years and as transfers, only those policies that apply to native first-year students are described here. An example would be the number of hours of D or F that a student may exclude

from GPA calculations after retaking courses where they did poorly. Similarly, some policy changes may apply to new students while existing students continue to operate under the old policies for a period of time.

## Findings

### *Academic Good Standing*

Students at all nine institutions need to achieve a 2.0 cumulative GPA to graduate except for a four-year period at Georgia Tech from 1999-2003 where a 1.95 average was required, likely due to the Institute's transition from a quarter to a semester system at that time. For students earlier in their academic careers many of the institutions allow students to be in good standing with a lower CGPA. As a student attempts more credit hours, the required CGPA for good standing increases. Table 1 shows the CGPA required for good standing at each institution in 1995 and 2005 for students after 16 hours (typically after one semester) and after 60 hours (typically the beginning of the junior year).

[Insert Table 1 about here]

The CGPA requirement at 16 hours is the same over time at six of the nine schools and at 60 hours at five of them. Where they are different, the CGPA requirement has been increased. For NC State and NCA&T, the increasing standards at 16 and 60 hours continue a trend. Before 1990, NC State had no minimum CGPA for students who had attempted fewer than 27 hours and the required CGPA at 60 hours was 1.55. The lowest CGPA to remain in good standing was 1.25 for students who had attempted between 28 and 59 hours. Beginning in 1990, the lowest CGPA to remain in good standing was 1.5 for students who had attempted 1 to 35 hours. By 2004-05, the lowest CGPA was raised to 1.8 for anyone with fewer than 60 credit hours attempted.

A similar pattern was noted at NCA&T. Before 1993, students in their first or second semester had no published minimum GPA requirement. At the beginning of the third semester a student must have passed at least 24 hours and the minimum GPA for good standing was 1.2; students did not need to achieve a cumulative GPA of 2.0 until after their 8<sup>th</sup> semester and the completion of at least 96 hours. It was possible at the time then, to remain enrolled and in good standing for four entire academic years without having a GPA good enough to graduate. Beginning in the 1995-96 academic year, the minimum GPA for good standing was 1.4 and a 2.0 was required after the 6<sup>th</sup> semester and completion of at least 72 hours. The trend of increasing standards at NCA&T has continued through the 2008-2010 *Bulletin* where the minimum GPA for good standing is 1.6, a 1.75 GPA is required of students who have attempted 16 hours, and a 2.0 is required after attempting 36 hours.

Clemson shows a slightly different trend. At 60 hours, the standards have increased from a 1.6 GPA before 1990 to the 1.87 required since. However early in their careers, students needed a 1.4 average before 1990 to be in good standing after attempting 16 hours rather than the 1.28 since then. Since 1990, students who have attempted 15 or fewer hours have no minimum GPA requirement; before then, only students who had attempted 10 or fewer hours had no minimum. Clemson appears to have recently joined the trend toward higher required GPAs as the policy in the 2008-09 issue of *Undergraduate Announcements* indicates that all students require a 2.0 GPA to be in good academic standing. At all of the other schools, the policies we studied before 1994-95 were the same as in that year.

Appendix C shows the GPA level required for good academic standing at all of the institutions at all credit levels for both 1994-95 and 2004-05.

*Grade Forgiveness*

While computing a student's GPA to determine academic standing would seem like simple arithmetic, at many of these schools, it is possible to exclude some poor grades from GPA calculations. Such exclusions allow students to maintain good academic standing and all of its commensurate privileges, such as scholarship retention, where they would not otherwise. This is accomplished through course repeat policies that allow students to replace poor grades with better ones in GPA calculations and course exclusion policies that allow students to petition to exclude poor grades from GPA calculations with or without repeating them.

Table 2 shows the circumstances under which poor grades may be removed from cumulative GPA calculations in 1994-1995, thus improving a student's academic standing. In all cases, all grades remained on the student's transcript. Notable in Table 2 is that in 1994-95 at both FAMU and NCA&T, students could repeat courses in which a D or F was earned and have the repeated grade replace the original grade in GPA calculations without limits. FSU, NC State, UNC-C and Virginia Tech allowed students to exclude from two to four courses from GPA calculations. At all other schools both the initial grade and the repeat grade were counted in GPA calculations, although students were generally not permitted to repeat for credit courses in which they had received a C or better.

Over time, forgiveness rules have become more restrictive or even eliminated everywhere that had them with the exception of Clemson where Academic Redemption was initiated in 2003. The Academic Redemption Policy allows students to repeat up to nine hours where a D or F was earned as long as the number of hours repeated plus the number of hours withdrawn is 17 or fewer. At FAMU, course forgiveness was limited to three courses in 2004. Florida State rescinded their forgiveness policy in 2004. NCA&T changed from counting the highest grade in

the GPA to counting both grades in the GPA in 1995-96. NC State limited their policy to first-year students and reduced the number of eligible courses from three to two in the fall of 1995. UNC-Charlotte eliminated their course exclusion policy in April 1998 at the same time as they rescinded a complicated academic progress policy (for more information on this policy see <http://www.provost.uncc.edu/Catalogs/1995-1997/ugrad/progress.html>). UNC-C subsequently initiated a grade replacement policy for two courses beginning in the Fall of 2007. In 2000-01 Virginia Tech eliminated the “freshman rule” where students could exclude 6 hours from their freshman GPA to a rule where any student, regardless of year, could drop up to six credit hours during their career as late as the last day of class without penalty.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

To illustrate the effect of these policies, if a hypothetical student had grades of A, C, C, D, and F and repeated the courses in which the D and F were received, earning a C on each second attempt, a course repeat policy where both grades are counted results in an increase in the student’s GPA from 1.8 to 1.87. A policy that replaces the old grade with the new one results in increasing the student’s GPA from 1.8 to 2.4, removing any academic distress.

### *Probation*

In general, when students’ CGPA’s fall below that required for good academic standing, they are placed on probation for a period of time during which they are allowed to remain enrolled and required to get their grades up to standard or face suspension. Table 3 shows the probation conditions at each school and how students could remove probation in 2004-2005.

[Insert Table 3 about here]

The probation policies have remained relatively consistent over time. Florida State’s policies have been in place since 1981. FAMU’s policies were also in place for the entire time

period, although those policies do not make it entirely clear what students need to do to remove probation. We surmise that a 2.0 semester GPA is required for all students on probation and that juniors and seniors may also need to raise their CGPA above 2.0. Other changes have often been simply to make technical corrections or clarifications, such as to reflect the change from a quarter to a semester system at Georgia Tech. Likewise, the only change at UNC-Charlotte was to exclude failing to meet academic progression requirements that were rescinded. NCA&T did not define probation as such before 1999-2000 except to say that students who were on probation at the end of the spring semester could go to summer school to remove their academic deficiencies. We surmise that students who did not meet the standards were eligible for suspension, but were not actually suspended the first time their grades were too low, rather they were put on probation.

Clemson and Florida have both had consistent policies over the timeframe studied although they are both notable because students may remain in school and on probation for quite some time as long as they do not do so poorly as to be suspended. Clemson's probation policy allows students whose CGPA is less than 2.0 but above the academic progression minimum (see Appendix C) simply to get a warning in their grade report with no notice on their permanent record. This will continue until students have achieved a 2.0 CGPA which is not required until a student has attempted 96 hours. Theoretically, students there could remain on probation for most of 3 academic years without suffering any further penalty. Beginning in 2008-09, students on probation were evaluated at the end of the spring semester and if they had not raised their CGPA above 2.0 they were subject to suspension.

Until 1990, students at Florida were on probation if they had a GPD of 10-19 and on warning if their GPD ranged from 1-9. Since then, a GPD of 1-14 has caused students at Florida

to be on probation. There does not appear to be any limit, other than what might be set by the individual colleges, on how long a student may remain enrolled but on probation. In fact, a student enrolled on probation is considered to be in academic good standing by the university.

NC State and Virginia Tech had the most substantive changes to their policies over the time period. At NC State from 1990 to 1997, students whose CGPA was below that required for good standing (a sliding scale ranging from 1.5 to 2.0) were allowed to enroll on probation for one semester during which time they were expected to get their grades up to an acceptable level or face suspension. Beginning in 1997, lower division students with a CGPA of less than 2.0 but greater than that required to be in good standing (see Appendix C) were put on academic warning status instead as were students who would have been suspended but for the exceptions outlined in the *Suspension* section below. Academic warning includes rules for meeting with the student's advisor to review and revise the student's plan of study. Also, students who were suspended and readmitted on appeal were readmitted on probation. Students needing fewer than 15 hours to graduate who would normally be suspended were allowed to enroll on probation.

In 1994-1995, students at Virginia Tech whose CGPA was below that required for good standing (see Appendix C) at the end of a spring semester were placed on probation and required to enroll in the following summer or fall term and raise their CGPA to the level required for good standing before being allowed to enroll the immediate next fall or spring semester. Virginia Tech changed its policy to reflect its raised academic standards during this period and students whose CGPA's were below 2.0 were put on probation and, like at NC State, needed to create a contract with their advisor for improving.



*Suspension*

Related to the schools' probation policies are their suspension policies. Students whose grades are substandard risk a period of separation from the university, usually a semester or academic year. They may have been given a period of warning or probation before their suspension during which they had the opportunity to raise their grades to an acceptable level. Four schools explicitly state that they will not suspend students in their first or second semesters, although at every school, students were much more likely to be put on probation after their first semester than be suspended, even if they were technically eligible for suspension. The one exception was NCA&T which until 1997 stated that students who did not meet the CGPA requirements were subject to immediate suspension. However, even though they did not clearly define academic probation until the 1999-2000 academic year, they did indicate that students could remove probation by attending summer school and we inferred that even though students were subject to suspension, they were instead put into a probationary status the first time their grades were too low. Table 4 shows the suspension policies in 1994-95 and Table 5 highlights the changes made by 2004-05.

[Insert Table 4 about here]

[Insert Table 5 about here]

As Tables 4 and 5 show, suspension policies have changed more substantively over the years than have probation policies. Only FAMU, Florida State, and Georgia Tech had very consistent policies over the study period. The only changes in Georgia Tech's suspension policy since 1990 were related to the change from a quarter system to a semester system.

Although getting suspended at Georgia Tech doesn't appear to be any more likely than at any of the other schools, returning from suspension is much more difficult. Each School

(Department) in the Institute sets its own standards for readmission that are not published in the general catalog. The policies for the School of Electrical and Computer Engineering published in their handbook from 1994-1998 may be illustrative. Students must attend another institution for two quarters (12 credits) and receive a 3.0 average there. Fifty percent of the courses must be in math and science. The student must then interview with the Associate Director for Undergraduate Affairs and sit out an additional quarter. Upon being readmitted, the student must sign a contract for the next three quarters at Georgia Tech stipulating a program of study and a minimum GPA to get to a 2.0 by graduation. Students must also stipulate that if they fail to meet the terms of their contract they will voluntarily withdraw from the Institute and not seek further readmission (Georgia Tech School of Electrical and Computer Engineering, n.d.).

The astute Clemson student from 1993 through 2002 would notice that he or she could attend school each fall and do very poorly without ever being suspended since one needed to attend both a fall *and* spring semester before being suspended. The lure of free football tickets could be considered sufficient incentive for this behavior. In 2003, this loophole was closed and students who had been enrolled for any two semesters could be suspended.

The three North Carolina schools and Clemson all explicitly allow students to return to good academic standing by attending summer school classes and performing well enough to avoid suspension. NC State and UNC-Charlotte students may continue to attend summer school while on suspension until their grades are high enough to return to good standing. Virginia Tech allowed students to attend summer school while on probation from 1987 through 1996 in order to improve their grades and avoid suspension. Beginning in 1997, however, students who were suspended in the spring were prohibited from enrolling in summer school. NC State and Florida

State also include distance education courses as a mechanism for achieving academic good standing.

From 1987-1991, the grade point deficit required for suspension at the University of Florida was 20 rather than the 15 in the years since then. Also, until 2001, students who were suspended at the University of Florida a second time were only allowed readmission under the *Fresh Start Program* described below. Since then, students may be readmitted multiple times at the discretion of their college. For instance, the College of Engineering allows two readmissions, but students could theoretically apply to another college within the university after being denied by the College of Engineering (Jonathan Earle, personal communication, January 28, 2009).

#### *Expulsion and Clean Slate Policies*

Once students return from suspension, those who perform poorly may be suspended once or twice more, but are eventually expelled. Georgia Tech students dropped after returning from suspension are not readmitted. Florida State does not readmit after a second suspension. Virginia Tech, FAMU and NCA&T, have appeals processes, usually reserved for extraordinary circumstances, by which students may return even after having been expelled.

In spite of the nominal permanence of expulsion, six of the nine institutions have formal provisions for allowing students to return after a number of years off ranging from two to five. In addition, Florida State will readmit students who were expelled and subsequently received an Associate of Arts degree. UNC-Charlotte will likewise readmit students who have received an Associate's degree in addition to students who left the institution for any reason for two or more years. Among the six institutions with a "clean slate" policy, Clemson is unique in that students there start over completely – none of their grades or credits earned before their hiatus count in their new GPA nor toward graduation. Students at Florida, NCA&T, and UNC-C before 1997

receive credit for courses where they received a C or better before their hiatus and students at UNC-C since 1997 and NC State have grades of C- or better count in their new GPA. Of course, if a student still does not have acceptable grades after invoking one of the special programs, they likely are prohibited from returning to a degree program. Virginia Tech's *obsolete credit policy* is not expressly designed for students who left the institution in academic difficulty, but they may use it. Students who have not been enrolled at Virginia Tech for five years (ten years between 1992 and 1995) can petition to have their records examined by the appropriate dean for credit, similar to transfer credit. All grades would remain on the academic record but would not count in a student's GPA.

The institutions with these policies vary on their expectations of students during their hiatus. NC State allows students to take summer school and distance education courses during a three-year break. Under the *Fresh Start Program*, Florida expects students to pursue non-academic endeavors during a five-year break. Clemson, NCA&T, UNC-C and Virginia Tech do not specify what students may or may not do while they are away. For a student to be readmitted to NCA&T under the *Five-Year Readmission Policy*, the student must be able to complete their degree program before attempting 152 credit hours. UNC-C has two paths to return, one called the *A.A. Rule*, where a student who leaves and subsequently receives an Associate of Arts degree may return with a clean slate, with prior credits earned at UNC-C applying to the A.A. degree. The other, called the *Two-Year Rule*, allows a student who has left the institution for at least two years to return. Since 1993, any student, not only those who are suspended, may invoke either rule, but not both. Before 1993, students were not expressly prohibited from using each rule once. Table 6 shows the clean slate policies at the nine institutions.

[Insert Table 6 about here]

## Discussion and Conclusions

As we embarked on this study, we were surprised at the lack of published research on the changes in academic policies related to good standing, probation, suspension, and expulsion over the years. As we have found, there has been considerable variation over time within and between the institutions studied. We know that institutions such as these do not make changes to their policies without careful consideration and, one would assume, benchmarking with peer institutions. Such benchmarking may have been done, but as best we can tell, was unpublished. One of our key findings is that over time, institutions that historically made it relatively easy for their students to remain in good academic standing have tightened their standards by increasing the GPA expected of all students to or closer to the 2.0 GPA normally required for graduation. With the exception of Clemson, schools that had grade forgiveness policies during the study period made them less forgiving by reducing or eliminating the number of courses students could omit from GPA calculations.

Probation carries vastly different meanings at the institutions studied even as they remained relatively constant within institutions. Clemson and Florida have few penalties for probation while the other schools require students to improve their grades within a semester or two or face suspension. NC State and Virginia Tech now require students to be more formally involved with the advising process when they are in academic difficulty rather than simply providing a set of rules for students to follow to return to good standing. FAMU has similarly provided counseling to lower division students who were not doing well academically.

There was more change over time in the suspension policies at the institutions. In 1994-95, only NC State allowed students to return from suspension an unlimited number of times while in 2004-05, UNC-C and Florida both allowed students to return as often as they could have

their appeals accepted. By 2004-05, NC State allowed two returns from suspension, each with defined levels of academic progress that must be attained to achieve good standing. Virginia Tech also more clearly defined what students needed to accomplish when returning from suspension. At the other end of the scale is Georgia Tech whose suspension policy is not only consistent, but some would say draconian. Once a student is suspended, it is highly unlikely that he or she will be allowed to return without overcoming enormous barriers.

Future research will allow us to test our conclusions using the empirical data provided in the MIDFIELD database (Ohland, et al. 2008). Preliminary data show that nearly 65,000 students were put on probation and 45,000 students were suspended over the study period. We will model whether the tightening of academic standards that we have observed has improved outcomes by discontinuing the stringing along of students who have no hope of graduating or whether the stricter standards separate students too abruptly who might be able to graduate. With NCA&T's lower required GPA to remain in good standing and the opportunity to remain on probation indefinitely at Florida, it appears that it would be easiest to remain in school without graduating at those two institutions. We will also apply the suspension rules from Georgia Tech to all of the schools to determine empirically how many students are ultimately successful when given a second or third chance that they might otherwise have been denied. Dula's (1961) finding among junior college students – that the placement of a student on probation was equivalent to dismissal for over one-third of those sampled – strongly merits investigation using data from four-year institutions. MIDFIELD will allow us to compare policies at the different institutions to determine which ones lead to better success outcomes overall and for underrepresented groups.

Institutional policy makers can use the current study to compare their own institutions' policies to a sample of large public institutions, including two HBCUs. They will also be able to use our future research to help shed light on the need to balance academic standards with student success metrics such as retention to graduation.

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Table 1

*GPA required for Academic Good Standing*

School	16 hours		60 hours	
	1995	2005	1995	2005
Clemson (CLEM)	1.28	1.28	1.87	1.87
FAMU	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0
Florida State (FSU)	1.5	1.5	2.0	2.0
Georgia Tech (GT)	1.7	1.7	1.9	<b>1.95</b>
NCA&T	1.1	<b>1.5</b>	1.55	<b>1.9</b>
NC State (NCSU)	1.5	<b>1.8</b>	1.8	<b>2.0</b>
U. Florida (UF)	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0
UNC-Charlotte (UNCC)	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0
Virginia Tech (VT)	1.5	<b>2.0</b>	1.75	<b>2.0</b>

Notes. 16 hours is used as a proxy for the midpoint of the freshman year. Items in **bold** indicate an increase from 1995 to 2005.

Table 2

*Grade Forgiveness and Exclusion in 1994-1995*

	Grade on 1 <sup>st</sup> attempt	Limits?	Must retake?	Comments
CLEM	N/A			
FAMU	D or F	None	Yes	D forgivable if C required
FSU	D or F	2 courses	Yes	
GT	N/A			
NCA&T	D or F	None	Yes or substitute	
NCSU	D or F	3 courses, 100 / 200 level only	Yes or substitute	2 <sup>nd</sup> attempt must be w/in 12 months of 1st
UNCC	Any	4 courses	No	
UF	N/A			
VT	D+ or worse	6 hrs from 1 <sup>st</sup> yr GPA	No	Until 28 hrs are earned

Table 3

*Probation conditions in 2004-2005*

School	Conditions for probation	Length of probation	Removal of probation
CLEM	CGPA < 2.0 but above good standing level	No more than 95 hrs attempted	Get CGPA to 2.0
FAMU	None for Freshmen; Soph SGPA and CGPA < 2.0; Jr/Sr CGPA < 2.0 but SGPA > 2.0; If Jr/Sr CGPA and SGPA < 2.0, then probation or suspension; 1 <sup>st</sup> time a student fails to meet standards.	1 semester	SGPA >= 2.0. Upper class students may also need CGPA >= 2.0 during the probationary semester.
FSU	GPD between 1 and 18 depending on the # of credit hours attempted; CGPA >= 2.0 but semester GPD of 7-19.	1 semester	Register for 12-15 hours the next semester and get CGPA to 2.0 or GPD from 3-15 (“warning range”) depending on number of hours attempted; Receive an AA degree.
GT	SGPA or CGPA below academic good standing. Students with a term GPA < 1.0 may be put on probation or suspended	1 semester of warning, then 1 of probation. If on probation and SGPA is unsatisfactory but CGPA is ok may remain on probation or be suspended.	Likely a student must get both the SGPA and CGPA above that required for good standing based on the number of hours attempted. May take no more than 14 semester hours.
NCA&T	CGPA is less than the required for good	1 semester	Register for maximum of 12 hours

## Comparing Academic Policies 30

	standing.		and eliminate deficiency.
NCSU	Students who have been suspended and readmitted on appeal; students requiring fewer than 15 hours to graduate with a GPD of 10 or less who would otherwise be suspended.	2 semesters if suspended. Graduating students on probation until CGPA up to standard	Suspended students must raise GPA by end of spring semester; Graduating students must have $\geq 2.5$ semester GPA or raise CGPA above 2.0.
UF	When CGPA $< 2.0$ and GPD $< 15$ . Colleges may put students on probation for failing to make academic progress.	As long as the GPD remains less than 15. Colleges may impose stricter limits.	GPD = 0 (CGPA $\geq 2.0$ )
UNCC	GPD $< 14$	2 semesters	CGPA $\geq 2.0$
VT	When CGPA is $< 2.0$ .	Contract terms	Enroll for $\leq 16$ hours, sign contract.

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Note: SGPA = Semester GPA; CGPA = Cumulative GPA

Table 4  
*Academic Suspension in 1994-95*

School	Conditions for suspension	Length of Suspension	No. of readmits	Exceptions	Removal of suspension
CLEM	Student on probation is suspended if CGPA substandard	1 semester	2	Only after completing both fall and spring semester. SGPA $\geq 2.2$ on 12 hours.	After 1 term hiatus, meet continuation requirements or if summer restores CGPA. After 2 <sup>nd</sup> suspension, appeal after one year hiatus.
FAMU	Below standard after probation.	At least 1 semester	2		SGPA $\geq 2.0$ , CGPA $\geq 2.0$ may also be required.
FSU	GPD still in probationary range after 1 semester on probation; Fr/So with dismissal GPD after a term on warning.	Probably 1 semester	1	All students are guaranteed retention for their 2nd semester but may be on probation.	Completing State University System correspondence courses with minimum average, AA degree, or permission of dean.
GT	Low QGPA and CGPA after probation; QGPA low, QGPA acceptable or QGPA $\leq D$ may be suspended.	One quarter or longer as determined by each school.	1		Conference with major department and reapply. Students not normally readmitted. Each school sets its own guidelines.
NCA&T	If CGPA substandard, may be suspended	1 semester	2		Reapply (appeal if 2 <sup>nd</sup> suspension) after 1 term hiatus. Returning SGPA must



## Comparing Academic Policies 32

	immediately.				be $\geq 2.0$ . May attend summer school and raise CGPA high enough to avoid fall hiatus after spring suspension.
NCSU	Low CGPA after probation.	Raise CGPA in summer, distance ed.	No defined limit.	Summer grades cannot trigger suspension.	Automatically readmitted if Summer, independent studies, cable, or videocassette courses fix CGPA. By appeal.
UNCC	Low CGPA after 2 probationary terms or GPD $\geq 14$ .	1	2	1) GPA restored; 2) SGPA = 2.5; or 3) in line with progression policy	Reapply and 1) 1 term hiatus, 2) improve CGPA in summer, 3) earn AA, or 4) apply "2 year rule." After 2 <sup>nd</sup> susp., only (2).
UF	Students whose GPD is $\geq 15$	Min. 1 term	1		Reapply for "final scholarship probation." Keep GPD $< 15$ .
VT	CGPA is too low after probation.	1 year including probationary term; 2 years if 2 <sup>nd</sup> suspension	2		Achieve satisfactory CGPA in the academic year following suspension.

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Note: SGPA = Semester GPA; CGPA = Cumulative GPA; QGPA = Quarter GPA

Table 5  
*Changes to Academic Suspension Policies in 2004-05*

School	Conditions for suspension	Length of Suspension	No. of readmits	Exceptions	Removal of suspension
CLEM	Student on probation suspended if CGPA below standard after spring term.	1 semester	2	Must complete 2 terms. No suspension if Spring (or May/sum) SGPA $\geq 2.2$ on 12 hours.	Guaranteed after 1-term hiatus or if summer fixes CGPA. After 2 <sup>nd</sup> suspension, may appeal for reinstatement after 1 year.
FAMU	No change				
FSU	No change				
GT	No change except that suspension is now for a semester rather than a quarter				
NCA&T	Student does not raise their CGPA enough after a semester on probation.	1 semester	1	Dean may waive if 2.0 SGPA until CGPA repaired.	After 1 term hiatus, implied readmission or, if 2 <sup>nd</sup> suspension, must appeal. May attend summer school and raise CGPA high enough to avoid fall hiatus after spring suspension.
NCSU	CGPA is below standard after spring semester.	If summer, distance ed, independent studies do not repair CGPA, 1-term hiatus	2	No suspension: 1) until after 2 <sup>nd</sup> regular semester; 2) until after 12 hours attempted; 3) due to summer grades; 4) if	Automatically readmitted if Summer, independent studies, distance ed. fix CGPA. Otherwise, 1-semester hiatus followed by counseling or intervention or reapply and demonstrate motivation and

## Comparing Academic Policies 34

		(2-term if 2 <sup>nd</sup> suspension		CGPA $\geq$ 2.0 at the beginning of a semester.	achievement. After 2 <sup>nd</sup> suspension, petition, provide work plan and plan of study.
UNCC	Low CGPA after 2 semesters [on probation] <sup>a</sup> or GPD $\geq$ 14.	Reapply and meet one of conditions at right.	No defined limit	No suspension if: good standing after semester or 2) SGPA $\geq$ 2.5.	Reapply and 1) appeal to dept., 2) improve CGPA in summer, 3) earn AA, or 4) apply “2 year rule.”
UF	GPD $\geq$ 15	1 semester? (unclear)	No limit defined		College decides. GPD < 15 after readmission.
VT	2 consecutive seme- sters of SGPA < 2.0	1 <sup>st</sup> susp. - 1 semester; 2 <sup>nd</sup> suspension – 1 academic year	2		Returning SGPA $\geq$ 2.0 and CGPA $\geq$ 2.0 by end of 2 <sup>nd</sup> semester back or earn SGPA $\geq$ 2.5 until CGPA > 2.0

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<sup>a</sup>The term “on probation” was omitted from all catalogs from 2003 to 2009 but the policy was confirmed with campus personnel.

Note: SGPA = Semester GPA; CGPA = Cumulative GPA

Table 6  
*Clean Slate Policies*

Policy	CLEM	FAMU	FSU	GT	NCAT	NCSU	UNCC	UF	VT
Year initiated	<1987				1995	<1987	<1987	1992	1992
Number of years off	2	-	-	-	5	3	2	5	5 <sup>a</sup>
Automatically readmit after receiving A.A.			Y				Y		
GPA starts over	Y		Y		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Credit for C or better courses before hiatus; do not count in GPA.					Y		Before 1997	Y	Y
Credit for C or better courses before hiatus; count in GPA.						Y	Since 1997		
All grades appear on permanent record, even if not calculated in GPA	Y		Y		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

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<sup>a</sup>Hiatus was 10 years between 1992 and 1995

Appendix A

Summary of Campus Sources Reviewed

Clemson University

*Undergraduate Announcements*, Clemson, SC 29634. 1987-2009.

Florida A&M University

*General Catalog*. University Publications, Suite 103 Lee Hall, Florida A&M University, Tallahassee, FL 32307. 1986-2006; Missing 1988-1991, 1995-1996.

Florida State University

*General Bulletin*. Office of the University Registrar, Tallahassee, FL 32306. 1987-2005

Georgia Institute of Technology

*General Catalog*, Atlanta Georgia. 1990-2005; Missing 1987-1990.

1995-1996 and 1996-1997 ECE [Electrical and Computer Engineering] Student Handbooks

North Carolina A&T State University

*Bulletin of North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University*. 1601 East Market Street, Greensboro, NC 27411. 1987-2010.

North Carolina State University

*Undergraduate Catalog*. North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC 27695. 1987-2005.

Suspension Policies:

[http://www.ncsu.edu/policies/academic\\_affairs/enrollment/admissions/REG02.10.2.php](http://www.ncsu.edu/policies/academic_affairs/enrollment/admissions/REG02.10.2.php) and

[http://www.ncsu.edu/policies/academic\\_affairs/enrollment/admissions/archive-admissions/REG02.10.2-archiveasof2-5-99.php](http://www.ncsu.edu/policies/academic_affairs/enrollment/admissions/archive-admissions/REG02.10.2-archiveasof2-5-99.php)

University of Florida

*Undergraduate Catalog, The University Record*, University Registrar, PO Box 114000,

University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611. 1987-2005.

University of North Carolina at Charlotte

*Catalog*. Office of Academic Affairs, The University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte,

NC 28223. 1987-2009.

Academic Progression Policy:

<http://www.provost.uncc.edu/Catalogs/1995-1997/ugrad/progress.html>

Virginia Tech

*Undergraduate Course Catalog and Academic Policies*, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State

University, Blacksburg, VA 24061. 1987-2005.

Appendix B

Cumulative GPA Required to Attain Various Grade Point Deficits

Hours attempted	Grade point deficit of									
	1	3	5	7	9	11	13	15	17	19
15	1.93	1.80	1.67	1.53	1.40	1.27	1.13	1.00	0.87	0.73
30	1.97	1.90	1.83	1.77	1.70	1.63	1.57	1.50	1.43	1.37
45	1.98	1.93	1.89	1.84	1.80	1.76	1.71	1.67	1.62	1.58
60	1.98	1.95	1.92	1.88	1.85	1.82	1.78	1.75	1.72	1.68
75	1.99	1.96	1.93	1.91	1.88	1.85	1.83	1.80	1.77	1.75
90	1.99	1.97	1.94	1.92	1.90	1.88	1.86	1.83	1.81	1.79
105	1.99	1.97	1.95	1.93	1.91	1.90	1.88	1.86	1.84	1.82
120	1.99	1.98	1.96	1.94	1.93	1.91	1.89	1.88	1.86	1.84
135	1.99	1.98	1.96	1.95	1.93	1.92	1.90	1.89	1.87	1.86

Appendix C  
Academic Good Standing at Each Campus

Clemson

1994-1995 and 2004-2005

Credit hours attempted		Minimum GPA for good standing
<16		None
16-95		Calculated by $2.25 * (CL / (CL + 12))$ where CL = credit level.
95+		2.0

Note. In 1995, evaluation at the end of the fall and spring semesters; in 2005, evaluation at the end of the spring semester

FAMU

1994-1995 and 2004-2005

2.0 average required at all times

FSU

1994-1995 and 2004-2005

Deficit points for:			
# hrs attempted	Warning	Probation	Dismissal
1-7	6	7-9	10+
8-16	9	10-12	13+
17-23	12	13-15	16+
24-31	15	16-18	19+



32-40	12	13-15	16+
41-46	9	10-12	13+
47-51	6	7-9	10+
52-56	3	4-7	8+
57+	0	1-6	7+

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Georgia Tech

Year	1994-95	2004-05
Freshman	1.7	1.7
Sophomore	1.8	1.9
Junior	1.95	2.0
Senior	2.0	2.0

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NCA&T

Semesters completed	1994-1995	2004-2005
1	1.1	1.4
2	1.2	1.5
3	1.3	1.6
4	1.4	1.8
5	1.55	1.9
6	1.7	2.0
7	1.8	2.0
8	1.9	2.0

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NC State

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Credit hours

attempted	1994-95	2004-05
1-35	1.5	1.8
36-47	1.6	1.8
48-59	1.7	1.8
60-71	1.8	2.0
72-83	1.9	2.0
84+	2.0	2.0

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University of Florida

1994-1995 and 2004-2005

2.0 average required at all times

UNCC

1994-1995 and 2004-2005

2.0 average required at all times

Virginia Tech

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Credit hours

attempted	1994-95	2004-05
1-36	1.5	2.0
37-70	1.75	2.0
71+	2.0	2.0

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