CAPP’S Response to the Council of Academic Advisor’s Comments on CAPP’s Grade Replacement Policy  
April 28, 2011

CAPP thanks Ruth Bingham, Chair of the Council of Academic Advisors for providing verbal feedback on CAPP’s Grade Replacement Policy at the Senate meeting on April 20, 2011 and for preparing a written document stating CAA's objections to the policy which we received on April 25. Because we had consulted CAA while drafting of the policy and worked hard to address its concerns in our revisions, CAPP was surprised and disappointed by CAA's strong opposition to this proposed policy.

CAPP has provided a point-by-point response to CAA's objections, below. First, however, we would like to remind CAA as well as our Senate and Faculty colleagues that the Grade Replacement issue was brought to the Senate via the Administration’s Enrollment Planning Working Group on “Improving Retention and Graduation Rates at Mānoa.” CAPP was asked in fall 2010 to "consider whether Manoa should develop a 'replace' grade rule for courses taken twice by students who did poorly the first time they took a course." The preliminary report on this matter was posted on December 8, 2011. In inquiring into the pros and cons of such a policy, our primary consideration was whether such a policy might encourage student success. We were not, admittedly, overly concerned with how such a policy might present an inconvenience to those charged with implementing it.

CAPP’s responses are in italics in blue under each item.

CAPP Proposal to Adopt a Grade Replacement Policy
Mānoa Faculty Senate Meeting
4 May 2011 ♦ Art Auditorium

CAA Response

Background: In February, the Mānoa Faculty Senate’s Committee on Academic Policy and Planning (CAPP) invited UHM’s Council of Academic Advisors (CAA) to discuss their earlier proposal on changing UHM’s repeat policy and introducing a grade replacement policy. CAA appreciates their taking the time to meet and was gratified to see the extensive revision in this new proposal, which focuses solely on introducing a grade replacement policy.

Feedback from academic advisors: When the current proposal was released on Monday, April 11th, CAA circulated it among academic advisors across campus. What follows is a summary of responses received.

1. Justification: CAPP has not made a compelling argument to justify this new policy, and it remains unclear what problem this policy is designed to address. In its report, CAPP states that the policy is meant to help students who are struggling and summarizes its survey of other institutions.

   ➔ Advisors have seen nothing to indicate that students stop out or become discouraged because they are unable to replace grades. Advisors question that assumption and would like to see supporting data before supporting this proposal. CAA does not
consider the fact that other institutions have grade replacement policies to be a compelling argument.

The data suggests that students who don’t do well academically do in fact drop out at a higher rate than other students. 53% of UHM students who were on probation after their first year dropped out (Mānoa Institutional Research Office, January 2, 2011). If such students were given a chance to retake a failed class for a better grade, they might not only be encouraged to stay in college, but they would have a chance to raise their GPAs--and thus get off of probation--more quickly.

While CAA does not consider other institutions' policies relevant, CAPP found that most institutions do have some sort of Grade Replacement Policy, which puts UHM students at a disadvantage when applying for graduate schools and jobs. Comparative data also indicates that public universities with Grade Replacement Policies have a better first-year retention rate and time to graduation rate than UHM.

CAA recommends that the Mānoa Faculty Senate consider initiatives more likely to help students who are struggling, such as an early response system, mid-term grade reports, increased access to tutoring and services, and so on.

CAPP’s proposal is in response to the particular charge regarding Grade Replacement, and does not exclude initiatives such as the ones listed above.

2. Lack of Support: CAPP mentioned that it consulted the Council of Chairs, the Council of Academic Advisors (CAA), and Arts & Sciences advisors when writing this proposal. CAA believes that CAPP’s report should include the fact that CAA and the A&S advisors strongly opposed the policy. CAA understands that the Council of Chairs also oppose this policy. To be clear, CAA also strongly opposes the current proposal.

As stated before, CAPP consulted with CAA and worked to address its concerns as we shaped the proposal. We were not aware that CAA "strongly opposed" any and all forms of grade replacement until the April 20 Senate meeting. In any case, CAPP’s main concern in considering this policy is its impact on students, not its impact on advisors. CAPP doesn’t understand CAA’s opposition to providing an opportunity for students to improve their level of knowledge and receive fair recognition for that accomplishment. For the record, the Council of Chairs has not expressed opposition to this policy.

3. Discrimination: This proposal unfairly disadvantages lower-income students, who can ill afford to pay for three extra courses; the proposal thus runs counter to UHM’s mission as a public institution. In effect, this policy allows higher-income students to buy a higher GPA, which advantages them in the job market and graduate programs. Even if students use financial aid to pay for these extra courses, most aid today consists of loans; encouraging students to take on additional debt in order to raise their GPAs does not seem ethical.

Under existing policy, students may retake courses that they failed or did not do well in and will continue to do so, whether or not this policy is implemented. This policy does not
mandate that students take "extra courses"; it simply allows them to let the higher grade count for only three courses re-taken over the course of their undergraduate studies. One of the objectives of this policy is to reduce the number of courses students must take to achieve an acceptable GPA. If anything this policy will inordinately benefit low-income students, who are often educationally disadvantaged relative to higher-income students when they begin their academic careers. Such students will be able to select classes they need to retake in order to improve their understanding of course material, and they may do so without penalty.

4. **Scope:** The policy does not address numbers or the likelihood of students repeating to replace grades; in discussion, CAPP members doubted that students with high grades would take advantage of the policy. From their long and extensive experience with students, advisors believe that most students who can afford to will repeat courses in order to replace grades. Competition for high GPAs should not be underestimated, and our highest-achieving students are some of our most motivated. Of our over 13,000 undergraduates, advisors expect that most will take advantage of this opportunity: in the competition for jobs, scholarships, internships, graduate schools, and professional degrees, both low- and high-GPA students will repeat to raise their GPAs. Only those who cannot afford to repeat will be left out, and behind.

Students already repeat courses. 2,217 courses, or 21.5% of courses with grades of C- and lower received in Fall 2009, were repeated in subsequent semesters. This policy will allow students to replace only three course grades in GPA computation during their entire undergraduate career (but all grades will remain recorded on transcripts). CAPP's expectation is that the policy will not have a large impact on a student's final GPA (raising it at most by 0.3 for a student with 120 credits), but will have a positive effect on students' early careers, when major requirements and program requirements demand a minimum GPA for admission. Again, it will also encourage students who may struggle at first to stay on and will improve both retention and graduation rates.

5. **Competitive Level of Courses:** As a result of this policy, more students will choose to repeat, which means that there will be more repeaters in classes (especially in challenging classes), which will raise the competitive level of those classes, and in turn impact how they are taught. CAA believes this policy will make courses harder for first-time-takers and for students who are struggling. CAA is concerned that encouraging repeats will become a vicious cycle, so that students will eventually have to repeat the more challenging courses just to get the grades they are currently earning as first-timers.

One assumption here is that UHM instructors are trying to fail a fixed fraction of their students and that assumption is not demonstrable. Other assumptions are those already discussed: that more students will repeat courses under the proposed policy and that students are not already repeating courses. These are not accurate assumptions. For example, 21.5% of C- and below grades were re-taken by the same students in the same course. Does this mean that it was harder for the other 78.50% in the class who took it for the first time? CAA has not provided any data to support its speculations. These speculations reveal a basic misunderstanding of academic pedagogy: that specific courses have specific objectives (learning outcomes), which may be achieved by any number of students.
6. **Access to High-Demand Courses:** Allowing students to repeat high-demand courses exacerbates access. In general, students who have already taken a course have more credits and thus register earlier than students who have not yet taken it. Repeaters should not be allowed to take seats from first-timers.

   It is up to administration to decide how to distribute teaching resources to provide seats in high demand courses. Departments may also establish their own guidelines or prerequisites for registration.

7. **Impact on Time-to-Graduation:** Encouraging students to repeat in order to improve their GPA works counter to UHM’s initiative to improve time-to-graduation, in effect turning UHM’s 120-credit degrees into 129-credit degrees.

   UHM needs to be clear about its priority: is it improving time to graduation or replacing grades? Before this policy is adopted, CAA would like to see a plan for expanding the number of available seats to accommodate over 13,000 undergraduates repeating three courses each.

   The statement is speculative and is not data driven. Students are already repeating courses multiple times to bring up their GPA or to meet other requirements. Because the Grade Replacement Policy will allow students to raise their GPAs with fewer classes than under the present policy, CAPP expects students will have to take fewer courses to graduate. CAPP has provided comparative data indicating that other public universities with Grade Replacement policies have a better time to graduation rate than UHM.

8. **Message to Students:** This proposal allows students to not take seriously their first time through a course. Advisors believe this kind of “forgiveness” policy enables poor academic behavior and exacerbates students’ transition from high school.

   The statement is speculative and is not data driven. Students will only be allowed three grade replacement opportunities (nine credits out of 120) and are not likely to assume that all courses can be retaken. CAPP views this policy as being supportive of students, particularly first-year students who often unprepared for the transition from high school to college and would benefit from the opportunity to retake foundational courses.

9. **Logic of Parameters:** This proposal allows students to replace strong grades (’C’ or higher, including, e.g., an A-minus) but not No Credit grades, which seems illogical for a policy trying to help students who are struggling.

   CR/NC is not a grade. The Grade Replacement Policy is to replace grades.

10. **Implementation:** In this proposal, CAPP chose not to address implementation issues. Unfortunately, implementation of this policy poses considerable challenges in terms of practicality, complexity, and workload. CAA believes that feasibility is an integral part of policy and there should be a reasonable chance of being able to implement a policy before it is passed.

   CAPP has offered to work on the implementation aspects of this policy. CAPP expects that the Grade Replacement Policy implementation aspects will be automated. If UH
Hilo and UH KCC are able to implement Grade Replacement Policies on Banner, then surely UHM will be able to accomplish this as well.

11. **Integrity of UHM Grades:** This proposal weakens the integrity of UHM’s grade point averages:

- Currently, UHM GPAs have high integrity and are accepted as reported on student transcripts. However, many professional schools (e.g., medical, etc.) and competitive graduate programs recalculate applicants’ GPAs into norms that do not allow for grade replacement. If this policy is adopted, UHM’s GPAs will no longer be accurate and students will think they have higher GPAs than they do.

*This policy aims to increase grade integrity by emphasizing a student's actual accomplishments. If a student receives an F on a course and retakes it and earns an A, doesn't the A more accurately reflect the student's mastery of the subject than a C? If UHM defines grade integrity by a student's average score on all attempts, then shouldn't we admit students on the basis of the average of all their SAT scores rather than their most recent attempt?*

- Grades are not only feedback for students but also communication with employers, graduate programs, and professional schools. Advisors believe there is an appreciable difference between students who earn ‘A’ grades the first time through and students who earn ‘A’ grades the second or third time through.

*CAPP is alarmed by the advisors' professed belief that "there is an appreciable difference between students who earn 'A' grades the first time through and students who earn 'A' grades the second or third time through." Students come to UHM with varying levels of preparation and ability, but shouldn't students who work to make up those differences and achieve the requisite level of accomplishment be fully acknowledged as equal to those who had educational advantages that better prepared them for college? Grades should reflect a students' mastery of a subject, not only pre-existing abilities. One of the stated goals of CAA is to “improve our students’ experience and educational success, thereby improving UHM’s retention and graduation rates.” How can advisors improve their students' educational success when they measure students by pre-existing advantages that don't take into account students’ actual educational success during their career at UHM?*

- Most UHM students are transfers. In the interests of fairness, once UHM starts “forgiving” grades for its own students, will it also “forgive” UH community college grades when deciding whether to grant admission?

*Grade Replacement Policy is not the same as Admissions policy.*

In conclusion, many of the comments and reasons given as to why not to support this policy and why it would have dire consequences are based on speculation and not actual evidence.

On the other hand, CAPP wonders, while we are speculating, why not then also speculate that something good would occur out of this policy such as students graduating on time, reducing drop-out rates, Mānoa gaining a reputation of being student-centered and geared toward student
success? Any policy is generally designed to have positive outcomes for the greater good and should not be judged only on worst case scenarios.