To: Steering Committee

From: David Blake, Chair and Professor, Department of English

Re: Policy on Academic Dismissal

Date: 16 December 2010

I am concerned about the emphasis in TCNJ’s Academic Dismissal Policy on a student’s cumulative GPA. In my years as an adviser and now as chair, I have several times come across students who continually face dismissal from the College because of disastrous semesters in the past. Although they do have the possibility for an appeal, these students find themselves in an inescapable loop in which their present work (no matter how improved) is always modified by past performance.

My concerns will be easier to understand with a fictive example. Student X enrolled in TCNJ as a transfer student with an associate’s degree. He got ill his first semester and spent some time in the hospital. Because of financial reasons, he did not withdraw from all his courses. In the end, he failed two courses and got a B and C in the others. His GPA was a 1.25, and he rightfully was placed on Academic Probation. With the health problems cleared up, the student returned the next semester and did quite well. He was only allowed to take three courses, but he finished with two Bs and a C. The GPA for the semester was a respectable 2.66, but his cumulative GPA was 1.8. The next semester the student earned two Cs and a B, but the cumulative GPA was 1.9, still below the 2.0 threshold. Despite the marked improvement, he was dismissed from the College.

What bothers me about the policy is that mathematically it is very difficult for this student to raise his GPA high enough with only a couple of semesters of course work (and diminished ones at that.) The policy puts him in the embarrassing and time-consuming position of being dismissed from the College and having to appeal that dismissal. I have tried to offer a moderate example here, but you can imagine more extreme situations in which students find themselves in a very deep hole and thus face dismissal semester after semester. (Students who transfer courses are under particular disadvantage.)

I recognize that Student X can retake the failed courses and that will substantially raise his GPA. With budget cuts, over-enrollments, and the regular rotation of classes, however, it is awfully hard for such students to get into the courses they need. (Student X was pretty much sent to the back of the line for registration.)

In no way am I suggesting that we shouldn’t have high standards. A student’s record should obviously be determined by their cumulative performance.

When it comes to Academic Dismissal, however, wouldn't it be better if our policy required students to raise their GPA to a certain level for each semester rather than for overall? For example, students on academic probation might be required to earn a GPA of 2.2 in the first semester and then 2.5 after that. Dismissal would only come from a failure to perform in that series of semesters rather than the entire GPA at TCNJ. (One can imagine the utility of a system that worked in the reverse. Student Y might have had all As her freshmen and sophomore year, but should she be in good academic standing after two junior semesters in which the GPA never got above a 1.2?)

I hope that you will instruct CAP to revisit this policy, so that the College could begin to congratulate people like Student X who turn things around rather than greet them with a letter of dismissal.