

Rutgers University Senate
Instruction, Curricula, and Advising Committee

Charge: S-1902: Issues Surrounding Prerequisite Course Availability: Consider the issues relating to availability to students of courses that must be completed in sequence. Is there a way to ensure that students who fail a prerequisite course are able to register for that course the next time that it is offered? Respond to Senate Executive Committee by February 2020.

The Issue

Students who are struggling in a course may or may not complete that course successfully. They may not know if they have failed the course until the final grades are submitted. If this is a course that is a prerequisite to another course, it may be closed out before the student knows that they need to retake the course. If they cannot take the prerequisite, they obviously cannot register for subsequent courses either. This may significantly increase time toward degree. If a student is locked out of subsequent courses and their course load falls below full-time status, it may also affect their financial aid.

While this charge focuses on issues for students who have failed a prerequisite course, obviously the issue arises for other students as well. For example, students may not be able to register for a course they need due to financial or other holds, delaying their registration. This delay causes courses to fill. Due to safety, space, and equipment issues, labs usually have a hard stop point so even students without other issues may not be able to register for a lab that they need. While when there is sufficient demand departments will usually try and add lab sections, often there are still students who cannot be accommodated.

Special Permission Numbers (SPNs)

The most obvious recourse for students who need to register for a class that has been closed is to obtain a Special Permission Number (SPN). At Rutgers, a Special Permission Number (SPN) is a 6-digit number that is used most often to allow a student to register for course that is full or that is not open to that student's major or class year.¹

However, the process, and the opportunity, for obtaining an SPN varies from school to school and department to department. In some departments, a student may need to contact the individual course instructor, in others, a program coordinator, and in others an administrative assistant. In some cases course instructors are consulted; in others instructors have no say. A few departments (New Brunswick Math and Computer Science, Physics and Astronomy) have online request systems. Some schools (for example, the Bloustein School and the Business School—New

¹ Issues relating to Rutgers SPNs have been recognized for some time. See: <https://www.dailytargum.com/article/2014/04/rutgers-evaluates-special-permission-numbers-policy>

Brunswick) do not, as a matter of policy, issue SPNs for closed sections; while SAS-NB Psychology will only issue SPNs to seniors. On the other hand, any non-major or undeclared student wishing to take a Criminal Justice course in New Brunswick must request an SPN; any student in the Camden Theater Program taking a performance class must get an SPN. Students registering for an undergraduate internship program usually must get an SPN.

While some schools/departments have information on their SPN policies and procedures on their web pages², the overwhelming majority do not. Most students don't know the SPN exists. First year students, who have never had to go through the registration process on their own before, are unlikely to know what their options might be if they fail a course, or what to do if a course they need is closed. Transfer students enrolling out of sequence (Spring admits, for example) are not likely to have access to courses in the proper sequence and will not be able to graduate within the usual two to three years. Other transfers, who may come in with the required number of credits, may not necessarily have all their courses accepted as pre-requisites, and so also have a sequence problem.

While a consistent approach to SPNs would obviously be helpful, any such recommendation is probably unrealistic. However, asking all departments/schools to provide current information on their SPN policies and procedures on their web pages would be an important step towards alleviating student confusion.

Although a consistent approach to SPNs may not be viable, having a University-wide automated process whereby a request for an SPN would automatically go to someone authorized to fulfill such a request should be achievable. Certainly from a student perspective having such a "one stop" process would be ideal. While we understand that setting up any such system would be labor-intensive, it seems that it would be worth the effort and in the long run less laborious than other options.

Work-Arounds

Some Schools/Departments have recognized this issue and tried to work around the current structure. For example, the School of Engineering has a very stringent pre-requisite sequence. If a student fails Calculus 2 in the Spring of their freshman year, they cannot take any sophomore level courses in the Fall. Typically, students will then take Calculus 2 in the Summer. If they take it at Rutgers, they are able to add their Fall courses. If not, they are unable to register for their Fall courses until they completed Calculus 2 and provided a transcript from the outside institution. In the Summer of 2019, SOE did pre-requisite overrides in the Spring and allowed students to register for the Fall if they provided proof of registration at the outside institution. While this made things much easier for the students, it was extremely labor-intensive for staff

² For example, the School of Engineering maintains a particularly useful site that provides information not only on getting SPNs for School of Engineering courses, but for courses outside the School as well: <https://soe.rutgers.edu/oas/specialpermission>

who had to spend much of the Summer reminding students to provide them with transcripts. Staff then had to deregister courses for students who did not provide transcripts or who did not pass the course with at least a C.

How do they know?

In many ways, it would seem that this issue is less a matter of how to work-around the process, or override the technology, and more about “how do we get information to students, and how do we inform students about their options.”

Some of the miscommunication issues could be resolved if there was sufficient time between the release of the next schedule of classes and the opening of registration to allow for more students to meet with an advisor. Currently, in the Fall there is only a two-week window between the schedule release and registration opening. If this could be extended to three weeks, many more students could meet with advisors and get advice on their “what do I do now?” issues.

It would also be useful to generate a “What should you do if you fail a class?” notice for all students prior to registration opening each semester. The notice could be distributed via email and through campus-specific channels such as Raptor Connect in Camden and RU-N4Success in Newark.

Department administrators could also use the “Notes” section of WebReg to indicate/link to that department’s SPN policy for that course.

While Rutgers discourages students from automatically having their Scarletmail email forwarded to their preferred email account³, we know that many students do not read their Scarletmail. There is a solution whereby notices sent to their Scarletmail account would also go to their preferred non-Rutgers account: <https://it.rutgers.edu/scarletapps/faqs/scarletmail-faq/> Making students better aware of this option would be beneficial not just for purposes of this particular issue, but would help ensure that students see all their official notices. One option would be to make dual email part of all orientations—not just informing students of the option, but actually walking them through the process. The School of Nursing currently does this and finds that it works well.

³ Due to privacy concerns, RBHS students are required to use Rutgers Connect and are not permitted to forward email to other accounts.

Recommendations

The Rutgers University Senate recommends that:

1. All departments and schools provide current information on their Special Permission Numbers (SPN) policies and procedures on their web pages.
2. Department Administrators use the “Notes” section of WebReg to indicate/link to that department’s SPN policy for that course.
3. Registrars ensure that there is a minimum of three weeks between the release of the Fall/Spring schedule and the opening of registration.
4. Prior to the opening of registration, Registrars generate a “What should you do if you fail a class?” notice for all students. The notice should be distributed through multiple channels, including email and campus-specific resources such as Raptor Connect and RU–N4Success.
5. Enrollment Management and Admissions Administrators should develop clear language when admitting transfer students which notifies them that although they are admitted to Rutgers, they might be one or two semesters out of degree completion sequencing based upon course offerings in a their first Rutgers semester, and, based upon the individual student's transferred coursework.
6. Student orientation programs walk students through setting up a dual email account whereby notices sent to a student’s Scarletmail account would also go to their preferred non-Rutgers account
7. The University charge a system-wide committee, including representatives of IT, campus Scheduling officers, and faculty from each campus, to investigate the development of an automated process for students to request and receive Special Permission Numbers.

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