Cutting Course Withdrawal Rates and Improving Successful Course Completion At One Community College

Abstract

In 2005, as part of a robust effort to increase student retention, a group of Central Piedmont Community College English faculty partnered with Planning and Research to design an intervention called the Withdrawal Pilot. The intervention was intended to show that it was possible to lower course withdrawal rates in participating sections, and results were originally reported in 2006 (Manning & Bostian). Course withdrawal rates in the treatment sections were significantly lower, but that success led to subsequent policy changes which halved course withdrawal rates in the years since implementation. This article seeks to provide a follow up to those efforts, with attention given to a project to improve student retention and success via a change to the College's Withdrawal Policy and the changes to student success and retention within courses that followed the college-wide policy change.

Background

Beginning in the late 1990's, some faculty and staff identified high course withdrawal rates as a possible barrier to student success. This led to a cultural shift at the college. Previously, the prevailing view was that as students were adults, they should be allowed to make their own decisions. Access to college was the important thing: any particular student's idiosyncratic path through a college education was valid, and any additional processes, designed and imposed in order to manage or hasten that path, were considered barriers. From this point of view, course withdrawals served as

an important outlet for students struggling in a given class, or who had major life issues to deal with. Before 1990, Students not earning an A, B, or C were either given an I for incomplete or a W for withdrawal; there were no D or F grades. This created a withdrawal culture, where struggling students were counseled by instructors and their fellow students to withdraw from courses as often as needed. The student population was assumed to be special in terms of coming less well prepared, and having more non-academic challenges to their success than students at other community colleges. Therefore, course withdrawals were seen as a way of increasing eventual student success for our students.

With the general push toward accountability, however, the picture—and the culture—began to change. College data, benchmarking data from IPEDS, and data from 151 colleges in the National Community College Benchmarking Project showed clearly that our student population was not very different from that of other large, urban, multi-campus community colleges. What were different were our student success rates. Central Piedmont Community College (CPCC) fell into the bottom 5% of benchmarked colleges with our course withdrawal rate (as high as 29.9%), first term transfer rate (2.5%) and three-year graduation rate (as low as 6%). Additionally troubling were our 58% Fall-to-Spring retention rates, and the fact that we fell into the bottom 28% for student perception of academic challenge, according to the CCSSE survey.

Looking back, focusing on course withdrawals made perfect sense. While perhaps not sufficient by itself to create an increase in graduation rates, increasing course completions was obviously a necessary step toward that goal. The work of Clifford Adelman (2006, 2005, 1999) has continued to point to "excessive no-penalty

withdrawals and no-credit repeats" as one important factor limiting student credential completion rates, and two large Florida studies by Winn and Armstrong (2006, 2005) showed that for students who were college ready, and for those who placed into remedial classes, rates for completion of credentials were much higher for students who had no course withdrawals. Once faculty and staff at CPCC made that same connection, we decided to intervene.

The Intervention

The first step in determining what strategy would be most effective in lowering the course withdrawal rate was to locate the various possible causes. Surveys of students have shown that community college stop-outs and course withdrawals often reflect personal decisions based on life issues, rather than academic struggles within the classroom. A 2012 textual analysis study by Michalski has found that student reasons for course withdrawals mirror the traditional reasons students give for withdrawing from community colleges. In order from most to least common, he found that students withdrew from courses citing Time-Schedule, Personal-Other, Job-Work, Family, Course-Negative, Faculty-Negative, Financial, Online Course, Health, Info Technology, and Federal Service. In 2001, Zhai and Monzon found that students withdrew from community colleges citing in order of greatest to least frequency, Conflict with work schedule, Personal reasons, Parking issues, Family obligations, Financial difficulties, and Dissatisfaction with instruction. Course withdrawals have also been attributed to everything from ethnicity (Baldwin, 2002; Johnson and Molnar, 1996), to course shopping (Hagedorn, Maxwell, Cypers, Hye, & Lester, 2007).

Increasing student integration can counteract these barriers (Tinto, 1993). However, student integration at a commuter college is challenging. Students spend little time on campus outside of class, and are likely to work one or more jobs, even full time jobs, and have families and other responsibilities that may interfere.

Self-efficacy was also identified as a means of retaining students in courses (Schunk & Pajares, 2001; Bandura, 2001, 1997). Getting students to feel a greater sense of their own academic prowess requires the employment of new instructional methodologies designed to individuate instruction and create early classroom successes. These methods included collaborative learning to foster a sense of community (Cooper, 1995). With successful a history of developing learning communities for developmental education, this seemed feasible for CPCC. Also identified as important were positive teaching strategies to foster in students' an expectation of success (Lau, 2003), techniques to maximize faculty and student interaction (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991), and the use of active learning and assignments contextualized to real world tasks and practices (Astin, 1993; Kuh, Pace, and Vesper, 1997).

New methodologies require additional professional development and the management of instructional practices. Such professional development has been shown to impact the learning environment, and students' perceptions of it (Stes, De Maeyer, Gijbels, & Van Petegem, 2012; Henderson, 2007). However, managing instructional practices requires a degree of oversight that some faculty reject. It also requires reaching a more transient adjunct instructor population, for whom professional

development often involves challenges of scheduling and pay, and who consequently may use less engaging instructional strategies (Lei, 2007).

Finally, it was suggested that the College consider the withdrawal policy itself, to see what impact it might have. A casual inventory of withdrawal policies at peer institutions through the League for Innovation in the Community College, and beyond, showed that CPCC's 75% withdrawal deadline was actually typical. Still, those other institutions had somehow avoided CPCC's culture of withdrawal.

While the college began many efforts to improve its relatively low success metrics, the Withdrawal Pilot was designed under the guidance of Terri Manning, Associate Vice President for Institutional Research, to see if the average 22% course withdrawal rate could be improved. This was a simple goal addressed with a broad range of strategies, not a focused research activity designed to isolate a particular solution. Pilot faculty implemented first day strategies to get students involved in meaningful, interesting work on the first day, rather than the traditional reading of the syllabus; mini learning communities (created within each class section to foster collaborative learning and peer-to-peer support); individual student conferences at least once per semester; positive teaching techniques to create a supportive environment and high expectations to foster self-efficacy; active learning to maintain student engagement; and authentic assignments to maintain high academic relevance. However, there were no formalized training or calibration sessions to ensure standardization of implementation for these strategies. Students in the 11 pilot sections signed a contract stating they would not withdraw from their course without permission from the instructor, and in fact were prevented from doing so until registration opened

for the following term, which was just before the 75% point in the term, the deadline for withdrawal from courses without academic penalty. Absent students were contacted by instructors, who promised to work with students whose life circumstances changed during the term, in order to help them complete the course. Instructors also referred some struggling students to Counseling and Advising for help. The results of this kitchen sink approach were positive. Students in the pilot sections had 10.4% fewer W's. While F grades did increase by 6.3%, overall there were 3.9% more successful (A to C) grades than there were for students in randomly selected comparison sections.

Given these results, along with continued faculty discussion, one strategy stood out as likely to lower student withdrawals, while being relatively simple and inexpensive to put in place: a policy preventing early course withdrawals. However, some individuals were concerned about a possible negative impact on student progress. The assumption was that if we didn't allow students to withdraw, more of them would fail, and that there would be more of a negative academic impact of an F versus a W grade. However, a large English grade dataset from another North Carolina community college showed that students earning an F grade in a lower course earned a C or better in the subsequent course at the same rate as students who earned a WP (Withdrew Passing), and at a higher rate than students who earned a WF (Withdrew Failing). Students earning an F also registered for the subsequent course at a higher rate than students who earned either a WP or a WF. Data from CPCC has provided a similar picture for courses in other disciplines. Students earning an F are at least as likely to succeed and persist to the next course in a given discipline as students earning a W.

With this qualm answered, a subcommittee of the College's Retention Committee recommended in May of 2006 that the withdrawal deadline be moved from the existing 75% point in the term to the 25% point. During subsequent discussions in fall term 2006, it was decided that the recommendation would include only this element of the pilot interventions, as it was deemed to be something that could be done quickly, at very little cost. The Retention subcommittee had also recommended that the college require all instructional programs and divisions implement a policy requiring some minimum attendance percentage for their students, and that the college create an online attendance-taking system for all instructors to use, with automated attendance tracking and reporting. Pilot instructors found that it was beneficial but time-consuming to keep up with which students had been absent how many times, and proactively contact and counsel those students who had missed more than one class in a row.

The recommendation to move the withdrawal deadline forward to the 25th percent point in the term was taken to the College Senate for review at its March 2007 meeting. The group approved switching to a 25% withdrawal date. Subsequently, the Instructional Deans' Council (now the Learning Council) and Enrollment and Student Services Council each reviewed the proposal and asked for a compromise 35% withdrawal date at the request of some instructional divisions. Of particular concern were some one-credit classes, within which the 25% date can come very early in the term, particularly when the courses are offered in compressed formats. The President's Cabinet approved the policy change to the 35% date, to start in the fall term of 2008.

In September of 2007, a subgroup of the Retention Committee was charged with developing a marketing plan regarding the new W policy, to be instituted in Fall 2008.

The group developed a phased communication plan to prepare the college community for the change from the existing 75% withdrawal date to the new 35% withdrawal date. The following communication plan was decided upon.

1. Consensus was that marketing of the change to students, faculty, and staff should be done in two stages: early/informal (prior to the start of Spring Term 2008) and later/formal (after start of Spring Term 2008 but prior to Fall 2008 pre-registration).

2. During the early/informal stage, communication should focus on faculty and staff. Managers should limit discussion to announcements that the policy will be changing in Fall 2008. The group did not want to confuse people about the W policy during registration for Spring Term.

3. The later/formal stage would begin after Spring Term was underway, in late January. This would include print, email, and intranet banner advertising directed at students, faculty, and staff. Part of this formal campaign would be communications to staff from the appropriate unit VPs explaining in simple terms the reason for the change and offering customized messages regarding what the changes would mean to the work of employees in specific areas. Marketing staff and Retention Committee members were to work with the VPs on crafting these messages.

4. The Community Relations and Marketing Services area took primary responsibility for all formal marketing communications, with input from other involved people. The content of all marketing materials would be reviewed by the members of this group and shared with Cabinet for final review.

5. A separate W policy change group including key Registration and ITS staff members would be meeting beginning October 4 to work on the logistics of the change, to include ensuring that:

   - students receive the message of the change when they register,

   - students see a message about the change when they log into the student intranet portal, and

   - each online syllabus for Fall 2008 contains a message regarding the change.

6. A representative of the College Senate's Student Welfare Committee would be the liaison with College Senate regarding W policy change issues.

In October of 2007, upon completion of the marketing planning detailed above, a group representing various areas involved in the implementation of the new W policy effective for Fall Term 2008 met to brainstorm and discuss logistics of implementing this new policy. The group unanimously agreed that the following steps needed to be taken in order to prepare for the change in the W policy:

1. ITS changes to support implementation to include:

   - a way for students to affirm they have received a message about the change when they register for Fall 2008 and Spring 2009 classes

   - a message about the W policy change on all student schedules printed out from the web

   - a message about the W policy change on every online syllabus

2. Actions taken to ensure student notification of policy change at official points of in-person registration to include:

   - signage in a prominent location near every point of in-person registration

   - a message about the W policy change to be distributed to every student registering in-person

3. Other computer-based messages to support implementation to include:

   - a message about the W policy change on the Blackboard and Moodle online instructional platforms for students taking online courses

   - a message about the W policy change to be displayed when students were about to take placements tests via computer

4. Other paper-based messages to support implementation to include:

   - a message about the W policy change to be printed on receipts from cashiering

   - a written message about the W policy change to be distributed to students registering with faculty advisors or other College staff working in areas other than Registration

The group agreed to hold subsequent meetings on an as-needed basis, but subsequent meetings were informal gatherings of staff working on one aspect or another of the implementation of the new policy.

All aspects of the marketing and implementation plans occurred as described above, and the new 35% W policy took effect in Fall Term, 2008.

The Impact

The simple act of moving the withdrawal deadline forward in the term appears to have significantly and positively impacted student success. Course withdrawal rates have been cut virtually in half, while the number of students earning A to C grades has increased significantly.

There was a significant change in course withdrawal rates. Historically, course withdrawal rates had ranged from 14.6% in the Summer 2002 term, to 33.2% in Fall 1997, during the year when CPCC transitioned from the quarter system to the semester system. After the shift to a 35% withdrawal deadline, course withdrawal rates have ranged from 9% to 12.1%. Figure 1 shows this dramatic change in rates. Figure 2 depicts the mean course withdrawal rates of 21.1% before and 10.6% after the policy change.
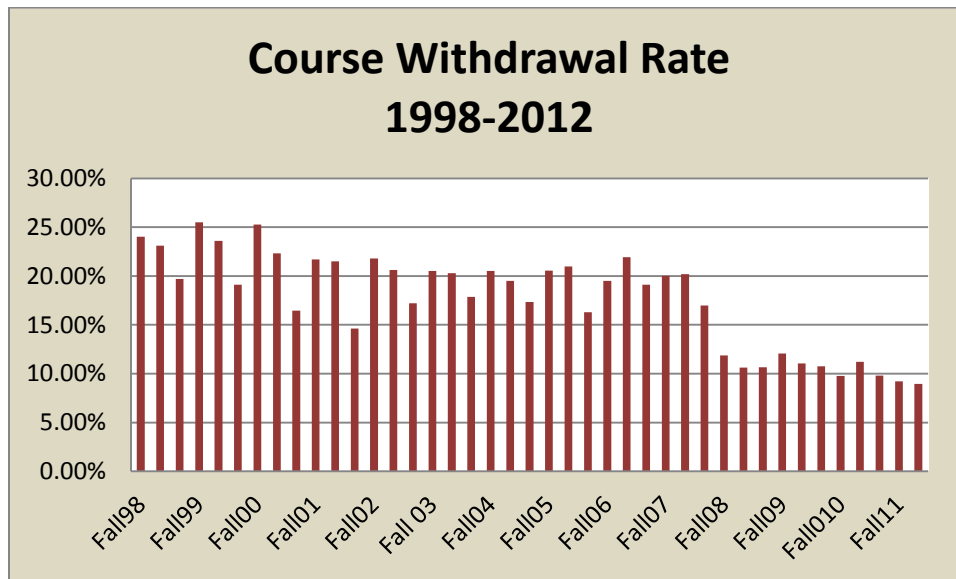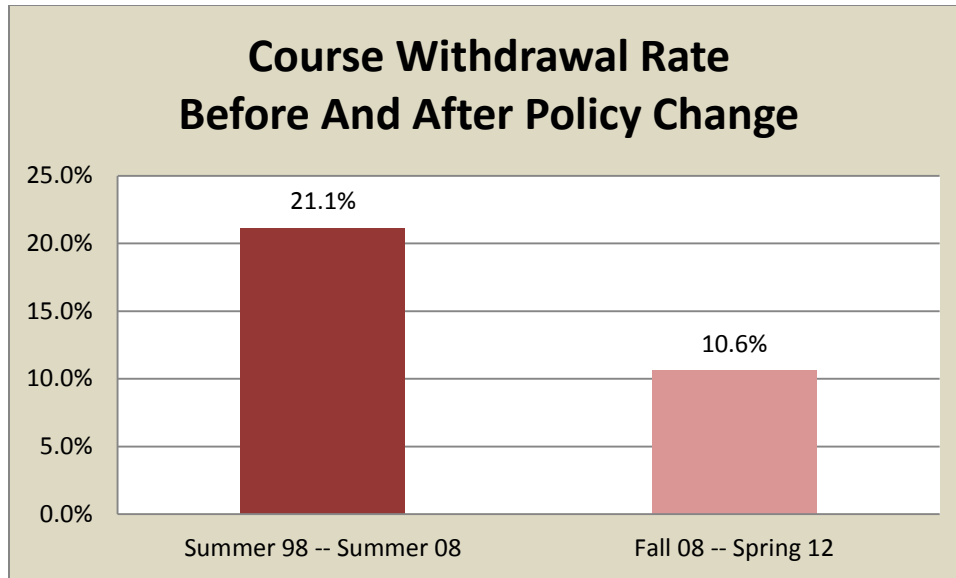

Course Withdrawal Rate 1998-2012

Figure 1. Bar graph showing mean course withdrawal rates from Summer 2008 through Spring 2012.

Course Withdrawal Rate
Before And After Policy Change

	Summer 98 -- Summer 08	Fall 08 -- Spring 12
	21.1%	10.6%

Figure 2. Bar graph showing composite means of course withdrawal rates before and after the policy change.

Of course, the ultimate goal was to effect an increase in course success rates. Historically, aggregate curriculum course success rates (the rate of A to C grades in each course) had ranged from 59.5% in Fall 1998 and Fall 1999, to 74.8% in Summer 2002. After the shift to a 35% withdrawal deadline, course success rates have ranged from 67.4% in Fall 2008 and Fall 2009, to 73.9% in Summer 2011. Figure 3 shows this narrowing of the range in success rates. Figure 4 depicts the mean course success rates before and after the policy change, which rose from 64.9% to 69.2%. This 4.3% increase represents 3,870 additional successful course completions per year, attributable largely if not wholly to the change in the withdrawal deadline.
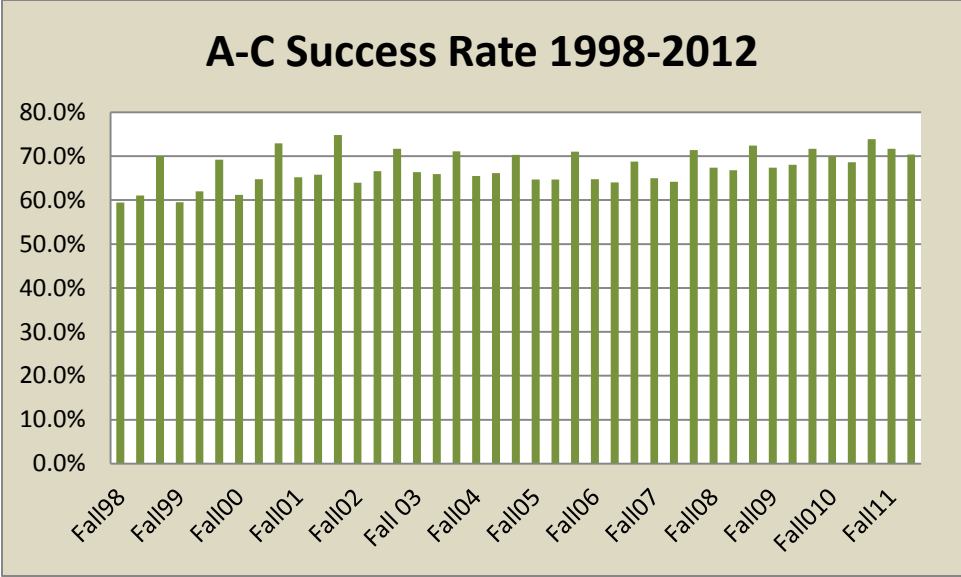
A-C Success Rate 1998-2012

Figure 3. Bar graph showing mean course success rates from Summer 2008 through Spring 2012.

A-C Success Rate Before And After Policy Change

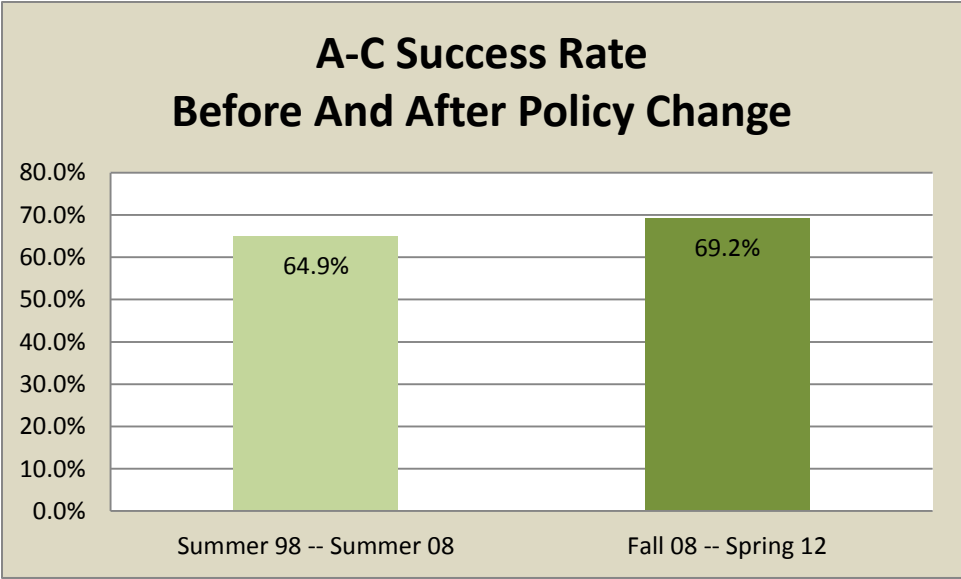|	Summer 98 -- Summer 08	Fall 08 -- Spring 12
	64.9%	69.2%

Figure 2. Bar graph showing composite means of course success rates before and after policy change.

Looking at all curriculum course grades together, it is clear what the trade-offs were. In addition to the fall off in W grades, there is a surprising rise in A grades, a more moderate rise in C grades, and a slight uptick in B grades (see Figures 5 and 6). D and

F grades have both risen, while W and Other grades have declined. D grades are considered unsuccessful, since grades of C or better are required to meet prerequisite requirements within course sequences, and objective measures such as placement test validation and new statewide accountability measures take this C or better standard into account. Other grades principally include I's, Audits, and credit by exam. The conversion of unsuccessful grades (D and F) and stop-out grades (W and I) supports an interpretation that the policy change did what it was intended to do by encouraging students to commit to their classes early in the term.
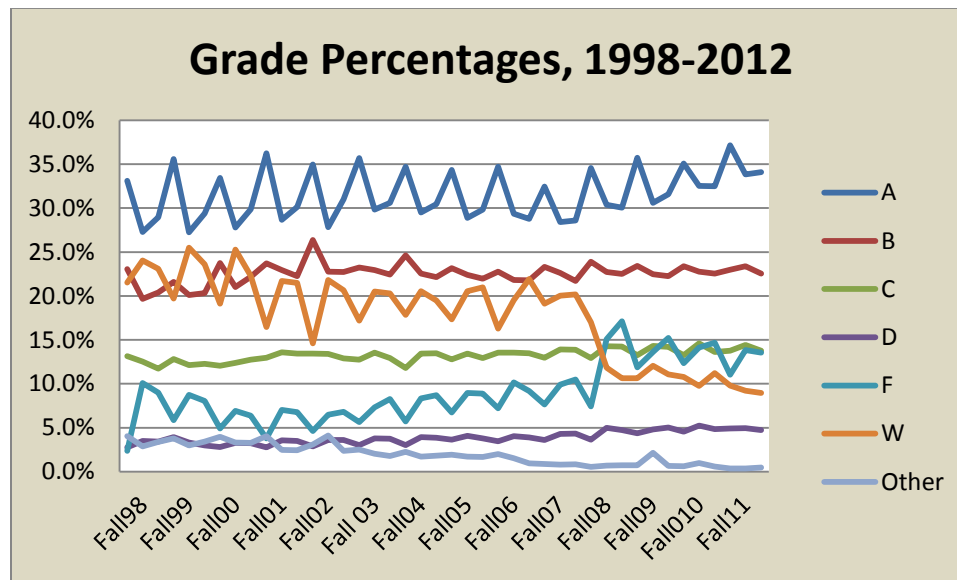

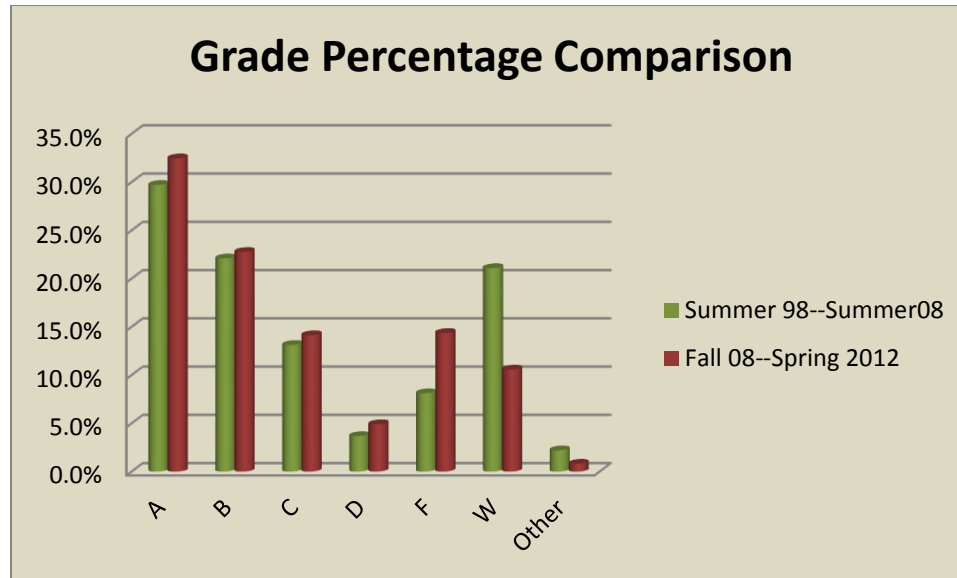*Figure 5*. Graph of grade percentages from Summer 2008 through Spring 2012.

Figure 6. Bar graph showing comparison of grade percentages before and after policy change.

Discussion

Not all solutions to complex problems are themselves complex. In this case, a student culture of withdrawal was not caused by the previous late (75% point) deadline for course withdrawals, but the culture of student withdrawal appears to have been half-solved by the change to the 35% point deadline. The change cost nothing but effort in the form of staff time and minimal material costs to market and communicate the change to staff and students. Even with the apparent success of the W policy change in effecting improved retention and student success, there are occasional but persistent efforts from some faculty to shift the deadline to a later point in the term. It is suspected that the purpose of the change and its results have become less a part of the fabric of the CPCC culture, as memories fade and the staff turns over. Doubtless it would be impossible to reduce course withdrawal rates to 0, but reducing them beyond current levels would likely take strategies that would be more involved and complex to

implement and manage: different instructional practices; more successful and far-reaching efforts at student engagement beyond the classroom; structural reforms to guide and manage student progress through courses and the College.

Some efforts to expand interventions to promote engagement have taken place at CPCC. In 2008, the same year the W policy was modified, CPCC contracted with a vendor to create an online attendance system to be used in face-to-face classes, and required instructors to keep daily attendance. Attendance for online classes was to be drawn directly from the learning management systems, Blackboard and Moodle. And in 2012, the College approved a policy stating that "Instructors are responsible for establishing course attendance requirements and for informing students of those requirements on course syllabi distributed at the beginning of the academic term." Instructional strategies from the original Withdrawal Pilot have not been formally implemented across the College, but training of new faculty and on-going professional development activities now focus on strategies that enhance student learning, such as effective communication with students, and active and collaborative learning.

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