

Providing Support for Graduate Student Petitions: Increasing the Odds of Achieving Desired Outcomes

At Lehigh, one often hears, “A student can appeal anything.” While this may be true, it is also true that not all petitions are successful. The Committee on the Standing of Graduate Students (SOGS) meets every other week, including some meetings in the summer, and we typically hear between four and 12 petitions at each meeting.

Our desire is to see that petitions that should be approved are approved and ones that should be denied are denied. The best situation would be for every petition to provide the information needed to make an informed decision and for petitions to be treated equitably. In order for this to happen, it is important that faculty members make sure they provide enough information to make clear why they support or oppose a petition.

This brief guide outlines the petition process at Lehigh and offers some ways to enhance the likelihood that a petition is judged appropriately. Many of these suggestions may seem obvious to you, but members of SOGS can tell you that we view petitions at every meeting that do not follow them. Further, associate deans often send back proposals that fail to provide the necessary information and this slows the process by which petitions are considered.

A brief description of the petition process at Lehigh, arranged chronologically:

1. A student obtains a petition form and writes (1) What action he/she wants taken [“I respectfully request: ...] **and** (2) Why that action is more appropriate than the action already taken [“Reasons: ...”]. The student fills out the top of the petition, providing contact information, and then signs and dates the form.
2. The signed form then goes to the student’s academic adviser. That adviser reviews the petition, makes a recommendation [“Approve” or “Deny”], provides any justification for his/her recommendation, and then signs and dates the form.
3. The doubly signed form goes next to the graduate coordinator who reviews the petition and any attachments, makes a recommendation [“Approve” or “Deny”], provides any justification for his/her recommendation, and then signs and dates the form.
4. The triply signed form next goes to the department chair who reviews the petition and any attachments, makes a recommendation [“Approve” or “Deny”], provides any justification for his/her recommendation, and then signs and dates the form.
5. Now carrying four signatures, the petition form goes to the dean’s office where the associate dean reviews the petition and any attachments, makes a recommendation [“Approve” or “Deny”], provides any justification for his/her recommendation, and then signs and dates the form.
6. The petition leaves the college at this point and goes down to the registrar’s office. The registrar reviews the petition and any attachments, checks the student’s record for any additional relevant information, and determines if the petition is covered by a recent precedent by the SOGS committee. If so, the registrar acts on the petition based on that precedent. If not, the registrar distributes the petition electronically to all members of SOGS and schedules it for discussion at the next SOGS meeting.
7. The SOGS committee meets to discuss the petition and then makes a decision on whether to approve or deny it. The registrar’s office then notifies the petitioner of the decision of the committee.
8. If a petitioner is not satisfied with this decision, he or she may appeal to the Graduate and Research Committee (GRC). This appeal should be in the form of a letter to the GRC that the student delivers to the chair of the GRC. In this letter, the student should make clear (1) what action he or she wishes taken instead

of the action taken by SOGS, (2) why the action taken by SOGS was inappropriate, and (3) why the requested action is the more appropriate action.

9. The GRC as a whole will then consider the student’s appeal and issue its decision.

Now some suggestions for faculty in supporting or denying a graduate student petition:

Suggestion	Explanation
Make sure requested action is clearly indicated:	If student does not make clear in his/her statement on the petition what he or she is requesting, don't sign the petition. Instead, send it back to the student for clarification. A petition that is unclear about what it is requesting should never move forward and you cannot make a recommendation on such a petition.
Always make a recommendation:	Before you sign your name, write "Approve" or "Deny." It is not enough to simply sign your name. Don't make those after you in the petition process guess what you intended. If they are uncertain, they will likely send the petition back to you and that slows the process down.
Always include an approved plan with requests for doctoral extensions:	When a graduate student is requesting an extension to the 7-year period, the petition must have attached to it a timeline for completion that includes key milestones (like qualifying examination, comprehensive exams, proposal presentation, research/data collection, dissertation write-up, and dissertation defense). The doctoral adviser needs to state in writing that he or she believes that this new schedule is reasonable and that the student is capable of meeting it. While this does not bind the adviser, he or she should be candid about the likelihood of the student finishing. It is not a kindness to prolong the timeline of a student who is not likely to finish.
Provide documentation for petitions to drop a class after 10 days with a refund:	Any time a student petitions to drop a class and receive a refund, a statement from the instructor confirming last day attended must be attached to the petition. This determines how much the student gets back in refund. If this statement is not included, SOGS will not act on the petition until it is provided.
Recognize that dropping a class and getting a full refund is rare:	It is important to recognize that receiving a full refund is rare. Fortunately, there is a medical refund and it is quite generous.
For extended absence, request a leave of absence, not an extension:	If a student has been (or expects to be) away from graduate study for one or two years for professional, personal or health reasons, consider requesting a leave of absence rather than an extension. Leave of absences for changing jobs, family events, and medical reasons are almost always granted and they extend the doctoral clock automatically.
For anything unusual, give a justification:	While many requests are straightforward, other requests are not. If there is anything unusual about what a student requests in a petition, attach a statement telling why you support it or don't support it. This need not be a long statement, but it makes a big difference to those after you in the petition process if you state your reasons for the recommendation you make.
Only approve deserving petitions:	If a petition is worthy of support, approve it. If, however, you do not think it should be approved, deny it. It is not fair to the signers that follow you in the process for you to pass the task of denying to them. Ideally, a petition should come to SOGS with unanimity in recommendations.