Leave of Absence Policy Report
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Introduction
Yale currently has two policies regarding students who take time off during their time at Yale: the leave of absence policy and the withdrawal policy. Both options are available to all students.

Under a leave of absence, students in good standing may request to take time off for up to two semesters, and a leave normally includes the “right to return with prior notification of the residential college dean but without further application” back to Yale.

Withdrawals work differently. Students may take medical or personal withdrawals, but unlike the leave of absence, “right to return” is not guaranteed until students meet certain requirements (including an application, medical clearance if the withdrawal is medical in nature and, normally, successful completion of 2 term courses while the student is on leave, for all withdrawals).

Background
Yale’s current Leave of Absence policy allows students in good academic standing to request permission to take a leave of a maximum of two terms that do not need to be consecutive. This policy also includes withdrawals for medical or personal reasons, which have no stated maximum length. While away from Yale, a student’s status changes. Students do not have access to campus facilities or activities. Health insurance is available to students on leave if they apply for continued membership and pay a membership fee.

Peer Institutions
Many schools offer similar policies as Yale.

Brown gives explicit statistics on the number of students that take leaves and return from leaves. There is no credit completion policy, and the university checks in on students at least once a semester. Students on leave have access to healthcare and are allowed on campus (including gym membership, campus events, and access to libraries in special cases). (Medical Leave | Personal Leave)

Cornell explicitly states differences between a health leave of absence and a personal leave of absence and describes possible advantages for choosing either. The policy includes very clear and defined steps on how to obtain a health leave of absence, with specific mentions of impact on international students. Students have access to health insurance for the remainder of the health plan’s year and can pay for an extension. There is no credit completion policy for return. (Leave Policy)

Columbia students on leave are typically not eligible for health coverage, but students on medical leave can request continuation of health coverage. Student status is maintained in certain ways, with email active for six to nine months and the ability to enter campus and facilities (such as the gym). For the first year back, students pay the same tuition as they would have when they left, with no increases. If the school determines that the student is not prepared to resume the
program where he or she left off, the school is required to make reasonable efforts to assist the student, such as providing a refresher course and allowing the student to retake a pretest, as long as they do not place an undue hardship on the school. These are provided at no extra cost to the student to enable the student to resume and complete the program. (*Leave Policy*)

**Data Analysis**

A focus group study was conducted on October 12th with five students. Focus group feedback indicated that students did not feel supported while on leave, during the reinstatement process, or when returning to campus. One student mentioned that it “felt like Yale was trying to take care of itself and not me.” Some students also felt that the requirements to come back were not reasonable financially or logistically, as in the case of international students who had to deal with enrolling in a different university system to take two credits. One student said, “Being able to take two classes while you’re away makes the assumption that you have money lying around to pay for two extra classes. All of the resources should be going towards me getting better.” Overall, students strongly believed that there needed to be changes to Yale College policy on the withdrawal and leave processes to make it more supportive and beneficial for students taking leaves.

**Recommendations**

1. Clarify the definition of “financial hardships” so that students know if they are eligible to fulfill their two credit requirement at a community college, rather than a four-year university
2. Create a standardized document for Residential College Deans so that every Dean knows exactly what the rules and regulations are (i.e. specifying which transfer credit can be used for credits or distributional requirements)
3. Create a letter that Deans can use to provide outside universities or scholarship entities proof of possible reinstatement at Yale
4. Create a mentorship program for withdrawn students so that students can reach out to others who have previously taken leaves

**Progress**

- Met with Dean Sodi, *Assistant Dean of Academic Affairs for Yale College; Director of Academic Advising and Special Programs* (October 4; October 22)
  - Discussed research on policies at peer institutions
  - Advocated for the creation of a mentorship program for withdrawn students so that students can reach out to others who have previously taken leaves
  - Suggested questions for the FAQ section for the Leave of Absence/Withdrawal Website based on comments brought up during focus group meetings
  - Presented the results from the focus group meeting (financial difficulty, the impact of the “student” title, etc.)
- Focus Group (October 12)

Challenges
- Some students exposed to sensitive experiences may not want to disclose personal information that may impact policy advocacy work dealing with withdrawal processes.

Next Steps
- Early January: Wait for Dean Sodi’s meeting with the Leave of Absence/Withdrawal Committee
- January 18: Meeting with the Financial Aid office to explore potential opportunities for students on leave to find alternatives to fulfilling the requirements to get back on campus (ie. fulfilling the two credit requirement at a community college rather than a four-year university)

Conclusion
Research from peer institutions and focus group data show a need to change the current policy to provide increased support to students. Leave of Absence/Withdrawal Committee meetings led by Dean Sodi are underway to address the concerns of students brought up during the focus group meetings. We can’t move further until we get feedback from Dean Sodi about whether or not the committee is open to the aforementioned recommendations.