Athletic Certification Process

Registrar's Office, Athletics, Provost's Office

The **athletic certification process** serves two important purposes: It ensures that student-athletes meet the required academic standards set forth by the NCAA, Southeastern Conference, and university in order to qualify for competition. And it supports students on their academic path as they build their class schedules and stay on track to earn a degree.

A recent audit confirmed that the process is meeting NCAA standards. But a consensus emerged that the process could be improved – to make it more efficient and more effective in serving USC's student-athletes.

An improvement team was chartered and given the mission to develop recommendations. This report presents the action set and the expected impact, along with a summary of what the team did to produce this plan.

PROJECT SPONSORS:

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TEAM MEMBERS:

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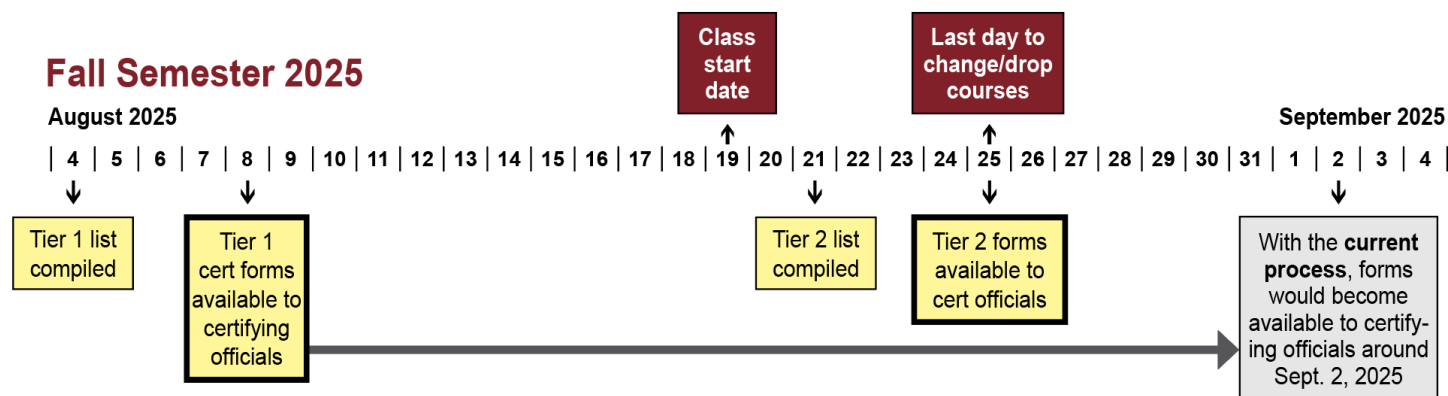

REPORT CONTENTS:

Summary: Recommended Improvements and Expected Impact

See pages 5-9 for more information about these proposed improvements.

Improvements	Expected Impact (see further below for additional impacts)
1. Use a two-tier approach to process certification forms in two phases, with the ready ones (about two-thirds) going first – instead of waiting and prepping all forms at once.	Moves up processing by as much as 3 weeks, giving certification officials and advisors a head start before their peak workload. (See next page for visuals.)
2. Use a dedicated Teams channel to manage certifications forms, amendment requests, and tracking in one place.	Eliminates email back-and-forth, saving the Registrar's Office 40 hours per semester and streamlining document tracking.
3. Advisors review and take action on forms as they arrive weekly, rather than waiting and processing in batches.	Reduces backlogs, enabling quicker reviews and fixes and possible course adjustments to keep student-athletes on track.
4. Dodie liaison takes the lead in watching for flagged forms and promptly reaching out to certification officials.	Cuts Registrar's Office workload by an estimated 40 hours per semester while keeping error resolution and amendment requests moving.
5. Auto-populate certification form PDFs hours pulled directly from Degree Works.	Reduces by 3 days the time to get ready forms to cert officials, and saves Registrar's Office approx. 24 work hours/semester.
6. Use Degree Works audit to determine degree applicable hours/progress toward graduation.	Speeds follow-up and error resolution because there's an authoritative source, potentially cutting return time by weeks.
7. Provide "fall-through" report to identify non-degree applicable courses.	Allows for quick identification of non-degree courses, reducing follow-ups and ensuring proper exceptions in Degree Works.
8. Clarify and strengthen the roles that are involved in the athletic certification process.	Strengthens role understanding and accountability – reducing errors, delays, and the risk of tasks falling through the cracks.
9. Establish a simple structure to clarify lines of communication and strengthen accountability.	Replaces variation and confusion with a standard, easy-to-understand way of organizing and interacting.
10. Require annual training for all CCOs and advisors.	Strengthens partnerships and know-how, which improves accuracy to better support student-athletes and compliance.
11. Hold joint education sessions for individual colleges.	Strengthens collaboration, reduces errors, and ensures consistency even as advisors change.

Expected Timeline

The two-tier approach would get the process moving much sooner – and this earlier start would ripple through the rest of the process and benefit everyone. Instead of a batch approach of processing all the forms at once, as is done currently, the phased approach sets in early motion the processing of certification forms for student-athletes whose schedules are unlikely to change, and also for early certifications. This is an estimated 60-70% of the total.

Fall Semester 2025

August 2025 ... **September 2025**

| 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 | 29 | 30 | 31 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

Class start date (↑ at 19)
Last day to change/drop courses (↑ at 25)

- Tier 1 list compiled
- Tier 1 cert forms available to certifying officials
- Tier 2 list compiled
- Tier 2 forms available to cert officials
- With the **current process**, forms would become available to certifying officials around Sept. 2, 2025

Fall Semester 2025
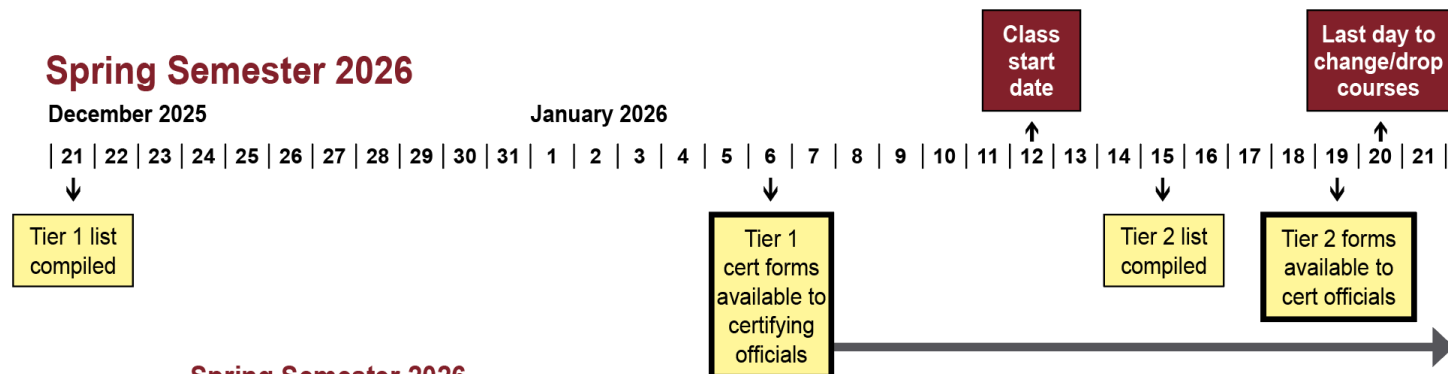**Target timeline with the new process:**

Tier 1 certification forms would be available to certifying officials **3 full work weeks sooner**.
Tier 1 includes student-athletes whose schedules are unlikely to change as well as early certifications. This is the majority of students – approximately 70% last fall semester.

Tier 2 certification forms would be available **1 full work week sooner**.
Tier 2 includes student-athletes whose schedules are still being worked on before or soon after the class start date.

Spring Semester 2026

December 2025 ... **January 2026**

| 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 | 29 | 30 | 31 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 |

Class start date (↑ at 12)
Last day to change/drop courses (↑ at 20)

- Tier 1 list compiled
- Tier 1 cert forms available to certifying officials
- Tier 2 list compiled
- Tier 2 forms available to cert officials
- With the **current process**, forms would become available to certifying officials around Jan. 27, 2026

Spring Semester 2026
Target timeline with the new process:

Tier 1 certification forms would be available to certifying officials **3 full work weeks sooner**.
Tier 2 certification forms would be available **1 full work week sooner**.

Improvement Scorecard

This "current vs. improved" comparison highlights some of the key results that are achieved with the proposed process.

	With the CURRENT process:	With the IMPROVED process:
Timeline (See previous page for visual)	Certification forms typically available to college certification officials about **2 weeks after** class start date	The schedule moves up significantly: Most forms (est. 60-70%) available **3 weeks sooner** and **before class start date**
		Remaining forms available **1 week sooner** and **about 1 week after class start date** (for schedules still being worked on before or soon after start date)
	Certification forms are typically worked on at a point of **peak workload** each semester	With forms arriving earlier, **processing can be done earlier** by certification officials and advisors – before workloads go from busy to busier
Registrar's Office	Has a hands-on role throughout the entire process, involving **12 steps**	The RO role is focused to **5 steps**
	Time-consuming work involving form creation, sorting, emails, and back-and-forth communication at multiple stages	Saves the Registrar's Office an estimated **104 work hours per semester**
Roles and Expectations	Roles, responsibilities, and the importance of this work are **not clearly defined or consistently understood** – which can result in confusion, delays, and tasks falling through the cracks	Establishes and supports **clear roles and consistent practices** to improve accurate and timely processing – so that student-athletes are well-served and compliance is ensured

Next Steps

Noted below are point people and target timeframes for the recommended actions:

Process-related improvements

1. Two-tier approach to process certification forms
Point people: BJ and Justin — Rollout goal: Fall 2025 semester

2. Dedicated Teams channel
Point people: BJ and Justin — Rollout goal: Early July (to be ready for Fall 2025)

3. Weekly review by advisors
Point person: Justin

4. Dodie liaison monitors flagged forms
Point person: Justin — Involved as needed: BJ

Tech-related improvements

5. Auto-fill forms from Degree Works
Point person: BJ — Also involved: IT (Raj, Samrat) to build out report — Rollout goal: August (for Fall 2025)

6. Use Degree Works audit
Point people: BJ and Maria — Also involved: Advising, IT — Further discussion and development needed for this action

7. Fall-through course report
Point person: BJ — Also involved: IT-Raj — In development, UA testing underway — Rollout goal: May 2025

Role-related improvements

8. Clarified and strengthened roles
Point person: Maria, in partnership with: Provost's Office, Advising — Target completion: End of June

9. Standard structure for colleges
Point person: Maria — Also involved: Angie, Charlies, Justin — Target to begin communicating with colleges: May

10. Annual training for CCOs/advisors
Point people: Charlie, Jane (Also involved: BJ, Kathy, Justin, et al) — Target completion: Mid-June (work is underway)

11. Joint college sessions
Point people: Charlie, Justin (Also involved: BJ, Kathy, Justin, et al)
Target completion: Mid-June (work is underway – met with two colleges in the spring)
Need to determine which colleges to meet and during which term – establish calendar.

Detail: Recommended Improvement Actions and Expected Impact

◼ **1. Use a two-tier approach to process certification forms in two phases – which builds in a three-week head start for most of them, and a one-week head start for the rest.**

- To initiate the process and ensure earlier distribution of the forms, the Dodie liaison will compile and forward to the Registrar's Office two lists of student-athletes.
  - **Tier 1** includes student-athletes whose schedules are unlikely to change as well as early certifications (approx. 70% last fall semester). The list will be sent to the Registrar's office well in advance of the class start date.
  - **Tier 2** includes student-athletes whose schedules are still being worked on before or soon after the class start date. The list will be sent to the Registrar's Office soon after the class start date.
  - Input from the student-athlete advisors (aka Dodie advisors) will be used by the Dodie liaison to compile these lists.

Expected impact:

- Gives a significant head start to the processing of certification forms each semester.
- Certification officials and student-athlete advisors will have the ready-to-process forms 2-3 weeks (fall semester) or 1-2 weeks (spring) sooner – before the academic advising period hits peak workload.
- Allows for earlier action and more time to make necessary changes to student-athlete schedules – which is essential for ensuring eligibility and keeping students on track with their classes and majors.
- Spread-out form distribution reduces bottlenecks, ensures faster processing, and allows cert officials to handle requests during less busy periods, improving overall efficiency.

◼ **2. Use a dedicated Teams channel to manage cert forms, amendment requests, and tracking in one place.**

- Certification officials will access their certification forms from the channel – and return completed forms via the channel.
- The Dodie team (the Dodie liaison and Dodie advisors) will have access to forms as soon as they are completed by CCOs, instead of waiting for the Registrar's Office to sort and post them.
- The amendment request document will also be stored and updated here.
- The following will have access to the channel: Registrar's Office team members involved in the process, Associate Athletics Director for Academics, campus certification officials, Assistant Director - Compliance, Associate AD for Compliance/Eligibility & Enrollment Services, Dodie liaison and backup.

Expected impact:

- Streamlines communication by centralizing all requests and documents in one place.
- Ends the individual back-and-forth emailing of certification forms, saving time and preventing documents from getting lost or delayed in crowded email in-boxes.
- Makes it easier and faster to track and retrieve information.
- Will save the Registrar's Office an estimated 40 hours per semester – because they'll no longer have to receive completed forms by email, sort them, and place them on the current drive.
- Adds transparency by allowing all parties to see when forms are requested, sent, returned.

3. Student-athlete advisors will review and take action on certification forms as the forms arrive, following a weekly cadence, rather than waiting for all certification forms and completing them in a batch.

- Cert officials submit certification forms to the Dodie office (via the Teams channel) as they process them. Advisors will review each batch weekly instead of waiting for all forms – checking for missing or incorrect data or other discrepancies.
- Advisors enter certification form details into the Dodie semester grid for tracking. Discrepancies are flagged for further clarification.
- When amendments are needed, advisors log these requests in a shared spreadsheet for review.

Expected impact:

- Replaces backlogs with smoother flow and quicker turnaround, as advisors process smaller numbers of forms on a weekly basis rather than waiting to process one big pile of forms
- Ensures that errors are fixed earlier in the semester
- Moves up the processing of amendment requests ahead of peak advising period
- Allows for an earlier start in helping student-athletes who need to make course changes to stay on track with their eligibility and majors.

4. The Dodie liaison will take the lead in watching for flagged forms and promptly reaching out to certification officials to request corrections or clarifications.

- When advisors flag certification forms for issues (such as missing information, mismatches with Dodie records, or unclear details that need confirmation, or other possible discrepancies), the Dodie liaison will contact certification officials directly – for prompt clarification, possible amendment, and resolution.
- The liaison will follow up on pending amendments to ensure timely response.
- Amended forms will be reviewed and confirmed accurate. Advisors will access corrected forms for accurate records.

Expected impact:

- With the current process, the Registrar's Office has been solely responsible for these steps: reviewing these flagged forms, deciding how to proceed with each, and contacting certification officials is cases where an amendment appears to be necessary. The future process removes the RO as the "middle person" who has to field all the flagged forms. They are still kept in the loop and provide clean forms if/when necessary, but their time on this is significantly reduced.
- Allows for quicker resolution of errors earlier in the semester, because certifications officials will receive amendment requests immediately instead of waiting for batch corrections.
- Strengthens accountability – with an additional person ensuring amendments are completed, requests are less likely to be missed or delayed.

5. Auto-populate certification form PDFs with "total hours earned toward degree" pulled from Degree Works.

Expected impact:

- Eliminates the current approach of preparing the forms manually.
- Will save the Registrar's Office an estimated 24 work hours each semester.
- Moves up by 3 days the time at which certification forms are ready for certification officials.

6. Use Degree Works audit as the authoritative source to determine degree applicable hours/progress toward graduation. (Count remaining courses and subtract hours from minimum hours required for degree.)

Expected impact:

- Makes is easier to identify certification errors.

- Speeds up resolution by reducing follow-up questions to certification officials, potentially cutting return time by weeks.

- Closes the loop in follow-up questions with certification officials potentially reducing return time by weeks.

7. Provide a "fall-through" report to identify non-degree applicable courses.

This report will be available to both certification officials and athletic advisors for review at any time.

Expected impact:

- Provides a targeted approach to quickly identify student-athletes enrolled in courses that do not apply to their degree requirements. Reviewing the report prior to certification forms being sent would allow advisors to make any necessary schedule changes before tier 1 forms are sent for review.

- Reduces follow-up time by ensuring certification officials make appropriate exceptions in Degree Works.

8. Clarify and strengthen the roles that are involved in the athletic certification process.

Currently, the extent to which roles are defined and understood is mixed. In areas where people understand their certification-related roles and activities, the process flows more smoothly. Below are descriptions of key responsibilities for each role – along with several proposals to strengthen effectiveness. Further below is the expected impact.

College Certification Officials:

- **Role:** Has signatory authority for all certification forms and less-than-full-time letters (to verify a student's enrollment status when they are taking fewer credits than required for full-time status)

- Acts as a single point of contact for consistent communication with the Registrar's Office, the Dodie Liaison, and Department of Athletics

- Ensures that experienced advisors fulfill their role, to enhance accuracy and accountability

- Assists advisors to ensure that deadlines are efficiently met

- **Proposed:** Must ensure that college advisors are trained and supported in advance and throughout in all their activities relating to the athletic certification process

- **Proposed:** Must be a level 3 or 4 advisor or have advisor oversight. Seasoned advisors are best equipped to succeed in this role.

- **Proposed:** Write these certification-related duties into job descriptions. (May already be the case for some.)

College Advisors:

- **Role:** Advise assigned student-athletes to determine course selection and complete athletic certification forms

- Go to their certification official for guidance and support whenever needed

- **Proposed:** Must be a level 2 or 3 advisor with at least 3-4 years of advising experience at USC, to ensure that people in this role bring deep understanding and expertise.
- **Proposed:** Write these certification-related duties into job descriptions. (May already be the case for some.)

Dodie Liaison:

- **Role:** Reviews discrepancies identified by advisors, and consults with them as needed to confirm and clarify the issues reported.
- Takes the lead in watching for flagged certification forms, and promptly reaches out to certification officials for requested corrections or clarifications.
- Communicates with the Registrar's Office as needed.
- Has a designated backup.

Registrar's Office Liaison:

- **Role:** Preps certification forms, puts them in the certification Teams channel, and notifies certification officials with instructions
- When needed for amended forms, preps and put fresh certification form in the certification Teams channel
- Remains informed of completion numbers as well as long-delayed and missing forms – and communicates as needed with certification officials and/or the Dodie liaison to resolve
- Communicates on other issues with the Dodie liaison when needed
- Has a designated backup.

Expected impact:

- Eliminates confusion over "who" does "what" in the process, which lessens the risk of certain activities falling through the cracks.
- Strengthens accountability at the college level for completion promptness and accuracy.
- The "level" requirements for CCOs and advisors ensure a high level of knowledge and likely proficiency in performing certification-related activities.

■ **9. Establish a simple structure for certification to clarify lines of communication and strengthen accountability – without creating a bureaucracy and slowing things down.**

- Begin with the five colleges that have the most student-athletes: HRSM, Arts & Sciences, Business, Public Health, and Information Science.
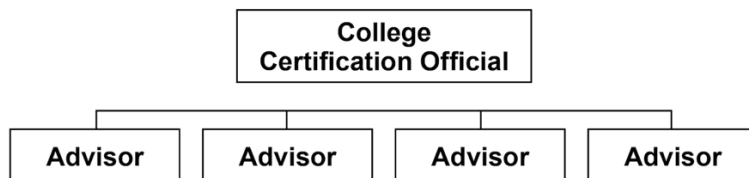
- The model allows for adjustments in the number of advisors based on departmental needs.

- Annually, the CCO determines and communicates to the Registrar's Office and Athletics the people who will be filling the CCO and college advisor roles – along with a backup signatory and/or advisor to ensure timely completion of certification forms in case of absence.

Expected impact:

- Currently, there is wide variation in how people in this process are identified and organized. In some units there is no structure at all – and much confusion over who's doing what. A simple structure will give everyone a standardized, easy-to-understand way of organizing and interacting to process certifications more efficiently.
- This model has worked extremely well at HRSM, with certifications forms being processed more quickly. Plus, the stability of their structure has strengthened the relationship with Athletics and the Registrar's Office, because they know who to contact whenever issues arise.

10. Require annual training for all CCOs and advisors.

- Hosted by the registrar's office and athletic department.
- Covers NCAA/SEC rule updates, advisor changes, and process improvements.
- New: Include recap of previous semester's certification data.

Expected impact:

- Provides an annual opportunity to highlight why this process is important – and who does what (roles) to ensure that student-athletes are well-served and compliance is achieved.
- Builds relationships and partnership among the different people.
- Keeps all stakeholders up to date on key regulations and process changes.
- Improves accuracy by ensuring all involved advisors understand certification standards, processes, etc.

11. Hold joint education sessions for individual colleges.

- Athletic academic advisors and college advisors meet to discuss curriculum updates, review trends and challenges affecting certification, share tips and proven practices, etc.
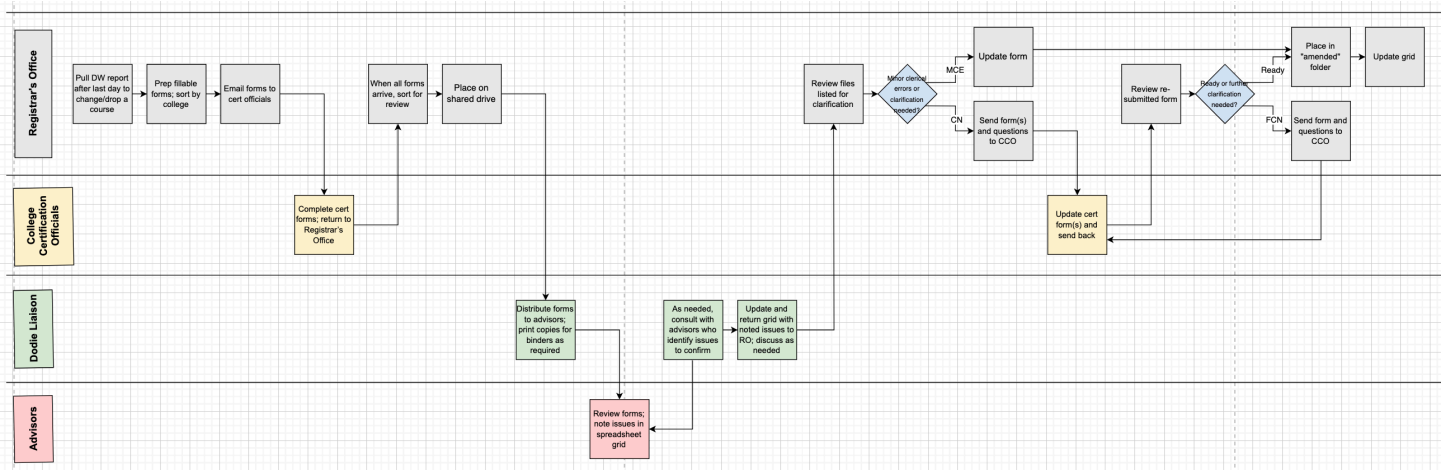
Expected impact:

- Strengthens collaboration between Athletics and academic advisors.
- Builds alignment across departments, reducing errors and miscommunication.
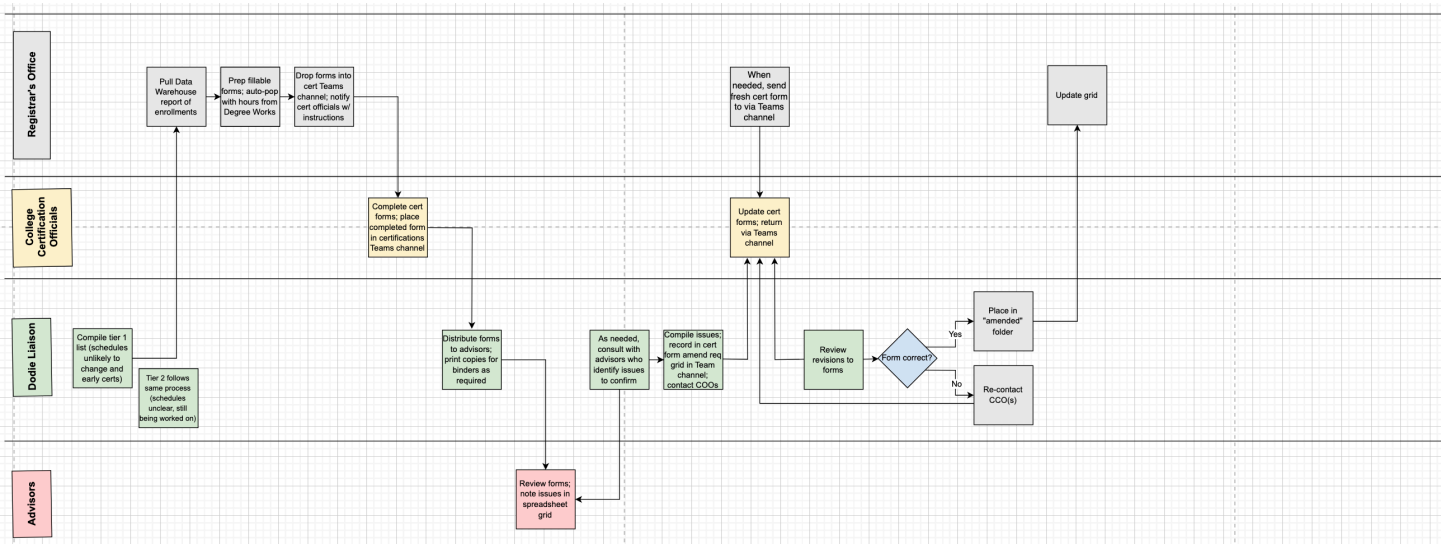- Neutralizes the hazards of advisor turnover by ensuring consistent knowledge transfer.

Process Maps

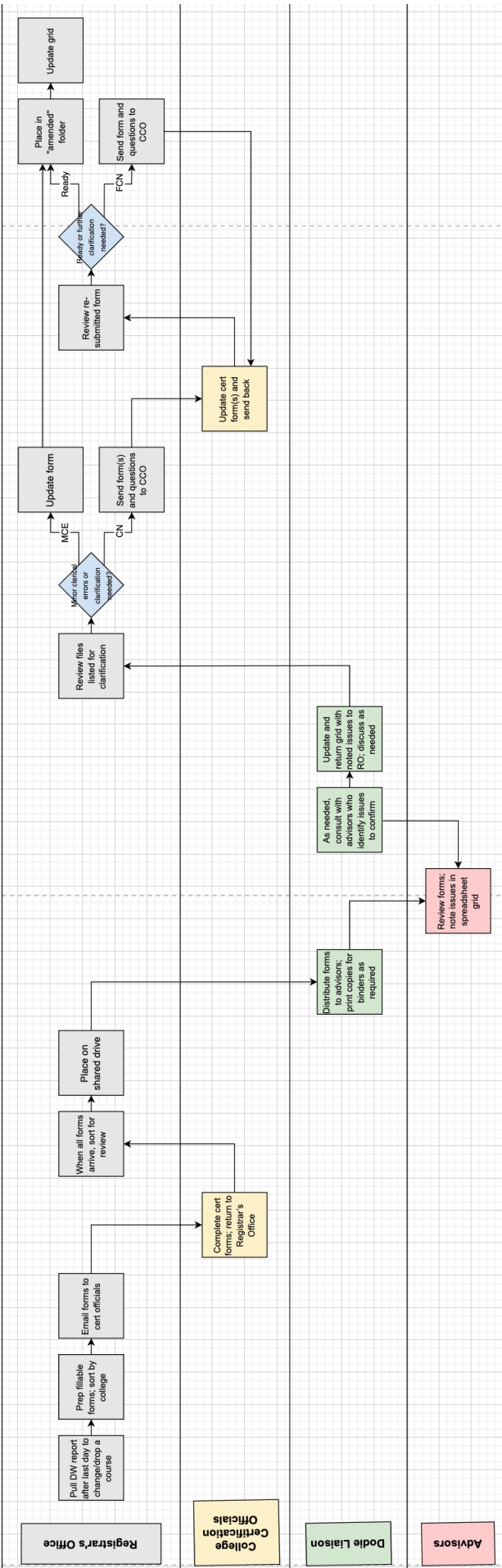(See next two pages for larger maps with notes.)

Current-State Process:

Future-State Process:

Current-state process

Registrar's Office

- Pull DW report after last day to change/drop a course
- Prep fillable forms; sort by college
- Email forms to cert officials
- When all forms arrive, sort for review
- Place on shared drive
- Review files listed for clarification
- Minor clerical errors or clarification needed?
  - MCE → Update form
  - CN → Send form(s) and questions to CCO
- Review re-submitted form
- Ready or further clarification needed?
  - Ready → Place in "amended" folder → Update grid
  - FCN → Send form and questions to CCO

College Certification Officials

- Complete cert forms; return to Registrar's Office
- Update cert form(s) and send back

Dodie Liaison

- Distribute forms to advisors; print copies for binders as required
- As needed, consult with advisors who identify issues to confirm
- Update and return grid with noted issues to RO; discuss as needed

Advisors

- Review forms; note issues in spreadsheet grid

Future-state process

Registrar's Office

- Pull Data Warehouse report of enrollments
- Prep fillable forms; auto-pop with hours from Degree Works
- Drop forms into cert Teams channel; notify cert officials w/ instructions
- When needed, send fresh cert form to via Teams channel
- Update grid

New process eliminates time-consuming loop of Registrar's Office review and communication with certifying officials re corrections

College Certification Officials

- Complete cert forms; place completed form in certifications Teams channel
- Update cert forms; return via Teams channel

Tier 1 cert forms ready about 3 weeks sooner compared to the current process. Tier 2 ready 1 week sooner.

Certification officials and advisors get a head start before their peak workload.

Teams channel takes the RO out of the time-consuming loop of having to receive and sort completed forms and then place them on a shared drive.

Dodie Liaison

- Compile tier 1 list (schedules unlikely to change and early certs)
- Tier 2 follows same process (schedules unclear, still being worked on)
- Distribute forms to advisors; print copies for binders as required
- As needed, consult with advisors who identify issues to confirm
- Compile issues; record in cert form amend req grid in Team channel; contact COOs
- Review revisions to forms
- Form correct?
  - Yes → Place in "amended" folder
  - No → Re-contact CCO(s)

The two-tier approach allows for the process to be set in motion much sooner – starting with early certs and students whose schedules likely won't change.

Advisors

- Review forms; note issues in spreadsheet grid

Advisors review and take action on forms as they arrive weekly, rather than waiting and processing in batches.

Appendix – Team Activities

The team followed a three-step process to develop its recommendations.

1. Discovery Phase

- Reviewed a map of the current process to gain a shared understand – and to begin identifying likely inefficiencies.

- Reviewed data to gain a deeper understanding.
  The data sample on the right is from a much larger study of numbers reviewed by the team. →

- Used the map and data to pinpoint parts of the process with the biggest potential for improvement.

2. Possibility Phase

- Generated potential improvements based on the above discovery.

- Reviewed all potential improvements in terms of effort/impact.

- Added detail to the proposed actions.

- Reached consensus on a go-forward action set.

- Developed a map of the proposed future-state process.

3. Planning Phase

- Reviewed the future-state process map for refinement and agreement.

- Reviewed and confirmed the action set. (See page 2 for summary, pages 5-9 for detail.)

- Developed an action plan to guide development and implementation of the changes.

Time from "certification forms sent" to "certification forms received"

	Fall 2024
Average:	**13.4 days** (Avg 9 days for early certification requests)
Range:	**6 to 26 days**

	Spring 2024
Average:	**22 days** (Avg 11 days for early certification requests)
Range:	**2 to 57 days**