

REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATIONAL POLICY TO THE ADVISORY BUDGET COMMITTEE

MAY 2009

INTRODUCTION

In March, the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP) began to consider ways in which current budget concerns might affect the Amherst College curriculum and to develop cost-cutting recommendations that could help guide the Advisory Budget Committee in its deliberations. As a general matter, the CEP does not take into account the financial aspects of its work, much of which is difficult to quantify in monetary terms. To inform ourselves as best we could on budget policy concerns within a tight time frame, we have met with faculty and students in an open meeting and as part of our ongoing committee discussions; we have met with the heads of both the library and IT; and we have received and considered a significant amount of data from our colleagues in the Office of Institutional Research. During that process we have engaged in a concerted conversation about a range of options that might help the College through this difficult time, and forward the recommendations that have emerged from that conversation.

At the outset, we articulated a set of core curricular principles that have informed, without determining, the contours and substance of our deliberations:

- The centrality of research and its indivisibility from and balance with teaching
- Embrace of curricular innovation
- A vision of the curriculum that is inquiry driven rather than strictly enrollment driven
- Faculty and departmental decisional autonomy
- Five-college collaboration where practical

These principles are derived from our sense of Amherst's traditions and current practices, and we believe they remain proper and helpful touchstones in this conversation. At the same time, we have not shied away from discussing options that might involve at least some amount of reimagining of Amherst's curriculum. We believe, though, that most such options should not be taken up at this moment either because they would not produce significant cost savings or because they would alter Amherst's curriculum in ways detrimental to our distinctive strengths. Rather, as we suggest below, the greatest and most immediate savings will flow from a slow-growth FTE policy.

Put another way, we recommend a certain creative conservatism in approaching curricular change in relation to the budget crunch. The next few years may be generative of new curricular thinking, but such thinking ought to come from the faculty as it works around and through the stresses that will inevitably result from the belt-tightening we recommend. Any major structural changes that do not directly produce budget savings in the relative near term should, we believe, be bracketed in current ABC deliberations.

In that light, we have formulated the following recommendations with an eye to the immediacy of their effects on the budget and their potential reversibility. We also take note of ebbing faculty and staff morale, and caution against steps that could further demoralize faculty and staff unless they can be proven to be a necessary part of a coordinated cost savings strategy.

RECOMMENDATION 1: SLOW-GROWTH FTE POLICY

The CEP recommends that the College not fall below 170 in its budgeted FTE count; and that over time the count be increased to the CAP goal of 183 at a slower pace than was envisioned by the CAP report.

The surest and quickest way to save money from a curricular perspective is to adopt a prudent policy in relation to new FTEs over the next few years; to hold visiting positions to a minimum; and to rely on already-existing mechanisms to cover core departmental courses.

Key costs:

- new FTEs = approximately \$100,000/yr (salary and benefits, including research and travel)
- visitor = \$85-90,000/yr
- course cost taught by emeritus professor = \$10,000/course
- five-college borrow = \$6500-\$7500/course

The CEP is concerned that we carefully navigate the straits between two competing pressures that are evident now: significantly higher student enrollments and a lower actual FTE count. Because of decisions emerging out of both the CAP process and the budget crisis, within a five-year period (beginning this past year) student enrollments will rise by 180. At the same time, in holding back four out of the allocated 8.5 FTEs by halting searches this year, we now hover around an actual FTE count of 160, in effect suppressing the size of the faculty well below not only the FTE count envisioned at this point in the CAP process (171) but also the pre-CAP FTE cap of 165. In other words, we already have in effect cut faculty numbers through attrition. Moreover, the current

crunch will be heightened next year because we will have fewer visitors than has been typical to cover curricular gaps created by both sabbaticals and staffing the First-Year Seminar program. If the actual FTE count does not increase to some extent, we anticipate a significant intensification of pressures in the classroom and on departments generally. For those reasons, we do not recommend a faculty hiring freeze at the current actual FTE count.

We recommend instead that the College set the FTE count floor at 170, the current budgeted number, and if conditions allow, increase that number over time (though not at the quick pace of 4 FTEs per year we imagined would be the case under CAP) so that we can add new FTEs in a prudent way as student numbers rise. It is important to note that while the CAP report envisioned an increase of 18 FTEs and 80 students (ultimately lowering our student-faculty ratio), because we are taking on an additional 100 students to counter the budget gap, adding 18 FTEs will in fact bring us back only to the pre-CAP student-faculty ratio unless enrollments are reduced once again at some point in the future.

We are concerned about the stresses of these steep enrollment increases if we slow faculty hiring. We also are concerned that slowing growth in the FTE count will hinder or postpone ongoing curricular innovation. Nevertheless, we see this option as the single most cost-effective way in which, from a curriculum-oriented perspective, we can save money over time. In practice, this recommendation means that, as was the case in the pre-CAP era, new FTEs will be a scarce commodity. (As has always been true, replacement FTEs will come from a pool of all available FTEs without the expectation that they will return automatically to the requesting department.)

This approach to budget control may be felt in some areas of the College curriculum more than others. In particular, without replacements small departments would feel the loss of a single faculty to sabbatical or departure more keenly than would large departments. It also will be more difficult to staff the FYS program and intensive sections if visitors are unavailable.

As a way to avoid hiring visitors except in the most pressing cases, to cover core departmental courses we recommend the following:

- Arrangements with available and willing emeriti to teach needed courses
- Early planning to seek out five-college borrow possibilities
- The teaching of overloads by current faculty, no more than once every two years per individual, in exchange for either salary or release time (the latter to be taken at a later date). We could imagine, for example, that if hands were scarce in a department due to a sabbatical or for other reasons, a faculty member could teach a 3-2 load one year and a 2-1 load the next.

We believe this route is preferable to a general increase in the faculty's teaching load, which would compromise our ability to do research and, as a result, our capacity to recruit top faculty. Such a change would if institutionalized be difficult to reverse, and its reversal would require an even more intense period of hiring than we envision might be the case under a slow-growth policy.

If holes should develop in the offerings of a department such that it is difficult to mount a major, we recommend that departments temporarily adjust policies that count "related courses" toward the major in order to take advantage of offerings in other departments and across the five colleges.

The FYS program must be staffed, and we recommend that the Dean of the Faculty make necessary arrangements with departments to do so, including offering scarce funds for visitors and borrows (as was the case this year).

If the economy recovers according to current projections, we hope that the FTE count could begin to increase at a quicker pace by perhaps 2012 so as to begin to balance out increasing student numbers and to implement fully current curricular proposals. Only after that point, should those projections be too rosy, would we recommend that the CEP and Dean of the Faculty begin conversations among departments about budget-driven structural changes to the Amherst curriculum. We wish to emphasize, however, that in the event that these conversations come to pass, every effort must be made to protect small departments. The CEP believes that these departments offer students what we advertise to be at the heart of an Amherst education: small classes, close contact with tenure-track and tenured faculty, and a rigorous, challenging education.

RECOMMENDATION 2: EXPLORE FIVE-COLLEGE POSSIBILITIES PRUDENTLY

The five colleges have long been an outstanding resource for both students and faculty, and in a number of ways have the potential to help contain costs over the medium to long term: via five-college borrows (as noted above); via joint appointments across two or more institutions; and via the consolidation of departments and services. Under current circumstances we recommend, however, that the College pursue mainly those five-college options that are reversible, focusing on five-college borrows and, more cautiously, on the judicious cultivation of joint appointments.

Joint appointments:

While Amherst has hosted or participated in a number of grant-funded fellowship positions with the other colleges and the university, at present we have one tenure-track joint appointment: half of a tenure-track position in Asian/Pacific/American Studies, shared among all five institutions, for which we are the host (i.e., tenuring) location. The benefits of such positions

are numerous from both a financial and curricular perspective: we can, by sharing costs, bring to Amherst scholars part-time in fields in which we might not wish to mount four courses, thereby either saving money (hiring only half rather than a full FTE) or enabling hiring in a greater number of fields.

Nevertheless, these appointments are not the silver bullets that will slay the budget gap, and are likely to remain few. They are not easy to arrange: as we have seen in the context of proposals for a five-college medieval historian, negotiations across institutions can be both cumbersome and delicate even among willing departments. Moreover, hiring especially junior faculty jointly across just two institutions, let alone five, can place both the faculty member and the institutions in potentially awkward positions. Unlike her peers, that young faculty member must negotiate the intricacies of multiple cultures, practices, and expectations and must be carefully mentored and supported in ways that tenure-track faculty located in one college do not require. Finally, even were such joint appointments to work smoothly, as some have and will, Amherst must be careful not to pursue this approach to “institutional efficiency” to a point at which we lose what is distinctive about Amherst: close and rigorous teacher-student interactions; a faculty deeply invested in Amherst both in and beyond governance matters; and a strong, focused community of faculty, staff, and students. We recommend that if joint appointments are pursued, they be pursued judiciously, and that arrangements be made generally across no more than two or three institutions.

Departmental consolidation across institutions:

We, like the ABC, have received a letter from a large number of Amherst faculty concerned about the vulnerability of small departments in tight financial times. We have also heard from faculty (particularly but by no means exclusively in the languages) in other ways, including at our open meeting, concerned over the perception that Amherst might wish to consolidate certain small departments across the five colleges. The CEP recommends that any such ideas be placed outside the ABC’s deliberations. We can associate no clear and immediate cost savings with them, and believe that such significant structural alterations to our current liberal arts curriculum ought to be proposed by the faculty and approached with great caution. We believe that we are in a more fortunate position than some of our peer institutions, and have not reached such a stage of crisis that we need to consider eliminating departments.

Consolidating other curriculum-related services:

While other committees (particularly the CPR) are in a better position to weigh in on the consolidation of non-teaching components of the College, the CEP wishes to express its hope that any such actions will be undertaken with utmost transparency of process. In particular, the compromise of library and IT services can have direct and negative effects on faculty teaching and

research, and the CEP recommends that faculty be given appropriate opportunity to participate in discussions if such services will be altered in significant ways.

Facilitating Five-College course coordination

Five-college interchange students are not counted in our advertised student-faculty ratio. Nevertheless, we note that Amherst “imports” significantly higher numbers of five-college **students** than we “export” by an average ratio of approximately 3 to 1:

	From Amherst	To Amherst
2008-09	447	1072
2007-08	465	1154
2006-07	405	1125
2005-06	375	1151
2004-05	297	1153

To state the obvious: we contribute in marked ways to the educations of students at our sibling institutions. Most Amherst faculty welcome these students enthusiastically, even when some come to our courses with measurably different levels of preparation than Amherst students generally bring. Amherst faculty individually set enrollment policies for interchange students at present, a practice we endorse given the varied course requirements and demands, and in some departments significant enrollment pressures, across the curriculum. Because the Amherst student body will grow faster than the faculty over the next few years, until we are able to balance those numbers it may be more difficult for five-college interchange students to find room in some of our classes.

To the extent that curricular pressure on our departments can be relieved by our students more fully availing themselves of courses offered on other campuses, as suggested above, we think that certain logistical problems need addressing, some of which may require a higher level of monetary outlay than is now in place. In particular, we recommend improving the current transportation system so that our students do not need to take a full-half day away from campus in order to attend classes elsewhere, particularly at Smith (a 1:10 hour bus ride each way at present).

RECOMMENDATION 3: PROTECT LIBRARY AND IT RESOURCES, AND RESEARCH SUPPORT, AS MUCH AS IS PRACTICABLE

Although they are not always made visible through faculty governance processes, the library and IT are the support structures of Amherst’s curriculum, and we urge their maintenance as much as is practicable so as to avoid both the short- and long-term erosion of the College’s educational edifice. Staff freezes at the library, for example, have significantly affected Amherst’s

social science departments insofar as we do not at present have a social science reference librarian to assist faculty and students in research. The imminent demise of the Blackboard online teaching platform will require almost half of our faculty to retool our online pedagogy, an effort that will require institutional support.

Finally, it perhaps ought to be reiterated that faculty research is the loam out of which the Amherst curriculum grows. Here, research is indivisible from teaching. Apart from its intrinsic benefit to the recruiting and flourishing of a talented faculty, research support enables us to enliven and challenge our students by connecting them with the broader world of intellectual practice. As such, we recommend insofar as is practicable the maintenance of current levels of research and travel funding.

ROADS NOT TAKEN

The CEP explored, to one extent or another, several options that we ultimately rejected, the most significant of which was the Dartmouth option. The Chair examined materials generously provided by Dartmouth in order to investigate the possibility of year-round College operation, but could find no evidence of major cost-savings: any increase in revenue would be offset by a concurrent increase in costs. Moreover, a look at Dartmouth's experience suggests that our usual broad array of courses and extracurricular opportunities would likely be attenuated in a summer semester, detracting from the focused academic and student culture we currently foster. It became apparent that adopting the Dartmouth model would neither save us money nor be easy to reverse should its effects be less than salutary, and so the committee decided to recommend against this option.

FINAL THOUGHTS

These recommendations have placed careful marshalling of FTEs at the heart of curricular cost control, understanding that this strategy will play out dynamically over time. The CEP urges a continuing conversation with the ABC as we monitor the effects of the budget crisis on the ongoing life of teaching and research at Amherst. We hope as we move forward that, even as we enter an era of straitened resources, Amherst will continue to embrace curricular innovation even if it must progress at a slower pace than has been envisioned in the past few years. We also hope that we protect our distinctive strengths as an educational institution whose curriculum flourishes precisely because we maintain strong traditional core liberal arts disciplines even as we reach toward new and provocative areas of intellectual endeavor.

Respectfully submitted,

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