

## **Committee on Educational Policy**

**October 12, 2023**

**In attendance: Faculty: Christopher Kingston, chair; Mekhola Gomes; Catherine Infante; David Hanneke; Geoffrey Sanborn. Provost and Dean of the Faculty: Catherine Epstein, ex officio. Students: Taha Ahmad '24; Zane Khiry '25; Ankit Sayed '24. Recorder: Nancy Ratner, Director of Academic Projects.**

Chris Kingston, chair of the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP), called the meeting to order at 9:30 a.m. in Porter Lounge, and the committee approved the minutes from the previous meeting.

### **Course Requirements Policy**

The chair informed the committee that the class deans have recommended removing “would normally be” from the final sentence describing course requirements and replacing the phrase with “is” to clarify the expectations. In addition, the new accessibility director would be interested in adding a sentence that would address a reduction in the expectations for students who require accommodations. Kingston recommended waiting to address these requests until the next meeting when Jesse Barba will be present.

### **Five-College Exchange Policy**

The committee then turned to a draft of new language explaining proposed changes to the Five-College Exchange policy and a list of FAQs that help to explain the effects and intentions behind the changes. The provost noted that not all courses are open to Amherst students due to enrollment caps at the other colleges and universities. She also mentioned that Amherst offers a full sequence of most languages that students want to study, but not Korean. Students interested in studying Korean have access to a very strong program through the Five Colleges. Students also have access to several joint Five College majors.

The committee discussed courses that could count for credit and courses that would not. Kingston mentioned that his department does not allow students to apply the UMass accounting course towards the major, but students can receive credit towards graduation for the course. Asked about credit for language courses taken during study abroad, Gomes said individual departments decide whether courses taken during study abroad will count towards the major. The committee thought the FAQs covered the essential points.

Kingston said he will write a cover letter and send the following revised policy language and FAQs to the Faculty Executive Committee (FEC).

## **Five College Courses**

Amherst, Hampshire, Mount Holyoke and Smith Colleges and the University of Massachusetts have for some time combined their academic activities in selected areas for the purpose of extending and enriching their collective educational resources. Certain specialized courses not ordinarily available at the undergraduate level are operated jointly and open to all. In addition, students in good standing at any of the five institutions may take a course, without cost, at any of the other four if the course is significantly different from any offered on their own campus and they have the necessary qualifications.

~~The course must have a bearing on the educational plan arranged by the student and his or her advisor. Professional, technical and vocational courses are not generally open for Five College interchange credit. Those courses accrue credit toward degrees other than the Bachelor of Arts degree which is offered at Amherst College.~~

~~Individual exceptions must be approved by both the advisor and Dean of the Faculty on the basis of the student's complete academic program at the College.~~

The Premedical Committee reminds health pre-professional students that required courses (biology, chemistry, mathematics, physics) should normally be taken at Amherst College and not at other Five College institutions.

**BECAUSE AMHERST COLLEGE IS COMMITTED TO THE KINDS OF CRITICAL INQUIRY AND OPEN-ENDED EXPLORATION THAT ADVANCE THE IDEALS OF THE LIBERAL ARTS, IT DOES NOT ALLOW TWO TYPES OF COURSES TO COUNT TOWARD ITS BACHELOR OF ARTS DEGREE: COURSES THAT ARE DEEMED INSUFFICIENTLY RIGOROUS BY AMHERST STANDARDS AND COURSES THAT FALL INTO THE CATEGORY OF JOB TRAINING—COURSES THAT PRIMARILY CONSIST OF PREPARATIONS TO ENTER A SPECIFIC PROFESSIONAL OR VOCATIONAL FIELD.**

To enroll in a **Five-College course**, an Amherst student **S** must have the approval of his or her **THEIR** advisor, and the Dean of the Faculty. ~~Only under special circumstances will permission be granted by the advisor and the Dean of the Faculty for an Amherst student to enroll in more than two Five College courses per semester.~~ **THE PROVOST AND DEAN OF THE FACULTY HAS THE FINAL AUTHORITY TO DETERMINE WHETHER A COURSE IS ELIGIBLE FOR CREDIT TOWARD AN AMHERST COLLEGE DEGREE.** If permission to enroll in a course is required for students of the institution at which the course is offered, students from the other Five Colleges must also obtain the instructor's permission to enroll.

**AMHERST STUDENTS MAY ENROLL IN AT MOST TWO FIVE-COLLEGE COURSES PER SEMESTER, BEGINNING WITH THEIR SECOND SEMESTER, AND AT MOST SIX DURING THEIR AMHERST COLLEGE CAREER. COURSES BEYOND THESE LIMITS MAY BE TAKEN WITH APPROVAL OF BOTH THE ADVISOR AND THE PROVOST AND DEAN OF THE FACULTY (OR THEIR DESIGNEE).**

Free bus transportation among the five institutions is available for interchange students.

Students interested in such courses will find more information on the [Registrar's website](#). Lists of courses being offered by the other institutions are accessible there and on the other institutions' websites.

Other aspects of Five College cooperation are described in the [Student Code of Conduct](#).

## Memo on Five College Courses catalog revision

### **What's changing?**

The proposed policy clarifies the language about which Five College courses are allowed to count for Amherst College credit. It streamlines the decision-making process about individual courses, moving that decision from the Registrar to the student's Advisor, while reserving ultimate authority with the Provost and Dean of the Faculty. The proposed policy also caps at six the total number of Five College courses a student can take, while providing a path for additional courses if required.

### **Is this a big change?**

No and yes. The old language banned "professional, technical, and vocational" coursework. The new language still bans "job training," but clarifies how to decide whether a course falls in that category. The overall spirit of the policy is not changing, so in that sense it is not a big change.

That said, the old policy language was imprecise; in particular the word "technical" is broad enough to encompass many of the courses we teach right here at Amherst College. Because the approval decisions often have to be made during the crunch of drop/add, we have gotten into the practice of turning down many courses that probably should count for credit. By streamlining the approval process, this new policy will likely increase the number of Five College courses being taken. That would be a change, and it may even reverse the current downward trend in Five College enrollment.

### **What sort of courses have been turned down under the old policy but would survive under this one?**

Many engineering courses involve critical inquiry, design, problem solving, intellectual rigor, and collaboration among diverse individuals and groups. Although such courses should pass muster under the current policy, they are often hung up during drop/add because the Registrar's office must seek the opinions of professors on our campus or an Associate Provost. There is also a trend of adding more job-related words to course titles, which can spark confusion. We already approve many engineering courses through our Dartmouth exchange program.

A recent example is *Fundamentals of Semiconductor Devices*, E&C-ENG 344, taught in the UMass Electrical & Computer Engineering Department. In Fall 2023, two students sought to enroll in the class and were turned down by the Registrar. It was only through the intervention of a department chair that the course was approved. The course is technical, but it is about the science of semiconductors; it is not a training course to be a semiconductor fab technician. The new policy allows advisors to make that decision, based on their own expertise and their knowledge of the student's educational plans.

### **What's the role of the Provost and Dean of the Faculty in approvals?**

In the new policy, the Provost and Dean of the Faculty retains ultimate approval authority for any course. This would not require approval of every individual enrollment, as is the current practice through the Registrar's office. Instead, the Provost's office would provide oversight by analyzing enrollment trends, resolving conflicting rulings from advisors, and providing guidance to advisors who are unsure whether a course meets the criteria for credit.

### **Won't students just try to do a shadow major in business?**

The restriction forbidding job training remains in place. In addition, the new policy clarifies that this means "courses that primarily consist of preparations to enter a specific professional or vocational field." Some courses taught at the UMass Isenberg School of Management may meet the criteria of "critical inquiry" and "open-ended exploration" that we look for in a course, but most of them are pre-professional.

To allay any fears about students using the Five College exchange to avoid Amherst College courses, the new policy institutes a cap of six Five College courses during a student's Amherst career. The existing policy already caps the courses at two per semester. To be clear, very few Amherst College students currently exceed six Five College courses during their time here.

### **What about students who have an educational focus that requires more Five College courses?**

With three Five College departments and programs, 15 Five College certificates, and four centers for specialized study, some of our students, such as those studying certain languages, may need to take more than six courses at other institutions. The new policy allows for this with the approval of both the student's advisor and the Provost and Dean of the Faculty.

### **Would the new policy mean my department or program has to count Five College courses for our major?**

No. Departments and programs decide which courses fulfill requirements for their majors. This policy only affects credit towards an Amherst College degree.

### **Anything else?**

The new policy adds an additional category for courses that cannot be taken for Amherst credits – those “deemed insufficiently rigorous.” In practice, we have never allowed such courses. Now it will be official.

### **Comprehensive Exam Policy**

Kingston next asked the committee to look at the comprehensive exam policy. The current catalog language includes a requirement that students successfully complete the comprehensive requirement by the seventh week of the final semester of their senior year. Since some departments require successful completion of courses or successful completion of a thesis, which often occurs at the end or close to the end of the semester, this deadline is rarely enforced. He asked whether this sentence should be removed. He also noted that about a quarter of departments have no meaningful comprehensive requirement and wondered whether the policy should be dropped entirely.

Sanborn suggested replacing the comprehensive requirement with a capstone requirement. The provost said there could be other ways to assess a student’s education, such as questions that would examine whether students have achieved rigor in their major. The committee noted that accreditation currently assumes that departments assess a student’s mastery. Catalog language would need to change if the comprehensive requirement were dropped.

Sanborn said the College Catalog should accurately represent the college experience. The English department went from a timed written comprehensive exam to an all-day symposium in which students presented talks based on their best work, but because the new approach was thought to be overly burdensome, they ended up dropping it. Epstein said the History department could not agree on what the comprehensive exam should cover so it now just requires a presentation by students. The failure of the faculty to agree about what is important—one factor leading to the adoption of the open curriculum—is now making the comprehensive requirement problematic.

Hanneke noted that departments have learning goals; they should know whether students are meeting those goals by asking them to participate in something summative in nature. He found this more meaningful than assessing their learning through a list of courses taken.

Kingston thought students would find a capstone experience meaningful. A suitably designed capstone would mark the academic achievement of students becoming part of a knowledge-based community in a more meaningful way than an experience described primarily as an “evaluation” such as the current comprehensive requirement or the shared experience of taking department courses does. Sanborn said he would support requiring a capstone event. Instead of students just declaring a major, taking courses, and then graduating from college, students should have an experience that marks their completion of the major. Unlike the comprehensive exam, which can be perceived as an attempt to weed students out, a collective capstone experience could showcase what students have achieved and bring students together to celebrate their achievement.

Infante supported a capstone and suggested one type of capstone could require students to reflect—either orally or in written form—on their education. Such a capstone could even take the form of a portfolio. In the absence of some sort of capstone, students in a major would never have the experience of all being in a room together. She too thought the capstone would build a sense of community. Kingston also supported the idea of a capstone experience that places students at the center of the department, analogous to how students who sat around the edge of Johnson Chapel during Convocation sit in the center of the chapel at Senior Assembly. Hanneke said the experience should draw on the major, asking students to synthesize what they have learned. Infante and Sanborn volunteered to draft a new policy to replace the comprehensive examination policy.

### **First-year Registration Process**

Kingston turned next to the first-year registration. This year, he found that students who had early registration slots got all the courses that they wanted, whereas students with later slots sometimes found that many of the courses they had selected were already full. The Psychology department, for example, has addressed this problem by preventing any first-year students from registering and then holding a lottery at the end of the day in an effort to create equity in access. Other departments have adopted other strategies. However, this solution creates additional problems, as students denied entry to courses are forced to register for courses they do not wish to take. As instructors grant permission requests, students who gain a spot withdraw from courses, creating a cascading effect on choices made by other students. He asked what better alternatives might be possible. He suggested a system in which everyone registers for one course on Monday, another on Tuesday, etc., or a points system for allocating scarce seats in popular courses. He noted that changing the timing could also be helpful, perhaps moving first-year registration earlier in the summer.

Gomes said some students inadvertently find a path to disciplines they may not have at first been interested in when they are not able to register for a course in the first semester. Khiry said this had been his experience; he substituted a history course when he was closed out of the introductory economics course and, finding the course interesting, ended up majoring in history.

Hanneke said the two-week preregistration works well and wondered if an abbreviated version of this could occur for first-year students over a much shorter period. All students would register on the first day. Faculty (or the registrar) would cut rosters on the second day. Students who have been cut from a roster would then select different courses on the third day. Alternatively, students could submit a rank-ordered list, and an algorithm could assign students to classes. Kingston said scheduling issues would complicate such an algorithm since taking a course precludes taking another at the same time. Sanborn said students could select time blocks and rank order their course preferences within each block.

Kingston said he liked Hanneke's idea of open registration, followed by a day of roster management, followed by a second registration round. Would it be possible to compress three weeks of preregistration into a three-day period? Faculty could delegate roster management to the registrar if they favored random assignment, or could manage rosters themselves if they had a desire to manage

the demographic balance of students in the class. He suggested the committee continue discussion at the next meeting when Barba will be present.

### **Grade Inflation and its Impact on Awards**

Kingston noted that Amherst has a serious problem with grade inflation, with some faculty feeling pressure to give students high grades, and this affects many other things. Hanneke said faculty need a shared understanding of a rubric of what each grade means. Personally, he thought an “A” should be restricted to students who have achieved mastery at a very high level—work so outstanding that a faculty member might mention it to others. Gomes said she would like to know why students think an A- is a failure. Ahmad said grade inflation is not unique to Amherst; students are experiencing it across the country.

Epstein said changes to the grading system—students no longer receive more points for A+ grades, for example—will soon require the College to find a new way to calculate top awards like the Woods Travis prize and Phi Beta Kappa. She asked the committee to think about whether it makes sense to decide the recipients of these awards based on a numerical calculation or whether other aspects—a senior thesis or a student’s distribution of courses across the curriculum—should be included in the decision about the awards. Kingston said the committee will continue this discussion at its next meeting, and the meeting adjourned at 10:52 p.m.