

Committee on Educational Policy

October 19, 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: Zane Khiry '25. Recorder: Nancy Ratner, Director of Academic Projects. Director of Institutional Research and Registrar Services: Jesse Barba, ex officio.

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.

Grammarly AI Writing Tool

Kingston, co-chair of the Gen AI Task Force, said the College recently decided to provide access to Grammarly, a writing tool that uses AI. Generative AI and gen AI-adjacent technologies are becoming more sophisticated in their ability to improve writing. Professor Umphrey, also a member of the task force, has written to the committee to register her concern that the decision to provide these tools to students was made without faculty consultation, and to ask that the CEP be asked to weigh in on future decisions of this kind, as they impact pedagogy.

Sanborn said the tool is getting smarter, but it is limited in its usefulness because it uses predictive text—it relies on common syntactical choices—and is not adept at the kind of close reading Amherst expects, unable to think the way a human mind can. The spelling and grammar checks have been available to students for a long time. The more holistic and expressive aspects of writing that English faculty expect will not be affected by the tool.

Gomes pointed out that students also use Zotero and other citation generators, which often introduce errors to the citations. The role of the faculty is to teach students not to rely on these tools, useful as they are; students must learn to check the accuracy of what the tools have generated. The provost said the challenge is that many tools exist, and the CEP cannot weigh in on all of these tools. Faculty should understand what tools are available and how to work with these. She reported that companies have contacted the Loeb Center to say that students are using ChatGPT to produce poorly written cover letters. She agreed with Gomes that this is an opportunity for education, not for policing IT's purchases.

Barba said ChatGPT is useful for summaries and outlines and does that really well. But cheaters can be lazy, and the tools will make mistakes. Kingston was concerned that students would lose something if they are not taught how to write. Students should not just rely on the tools to correct their grammar. Hanneke compared Grammarly to the software Mathematica, which is capable of answering many of the problems taught in the Math department's calculus courses. He thought faculty needed to clarify their policies on how students may use the tools, which may at times be valuable and at times be problematic. If the faculty thinks the tool will be an unmitigated problem, IT should not purchase the tool.

Kingston asked where the line should be drawn for such tools. Sanborn suggested tools be made available if a department thinks it could be useful. Epstein noted that the Writing Center supports this tool which is very helpful for international students. The question for her was whether students were

learning how to write by looking at the changes made by the tool. She said AAS had originally funded this tool, and students found it useful. Khiry agreed that students really wanted it to be available.

Epstein wondered if someone from IT should perhaps meet with the CEP each year to explain the tools available to students. Infante thought faculty might find it helpful to have a workshop on how they can use the tools in their classroom.

Sanborn pointed to the equity and access issues related to the software. Faculty in the English department want the Writing Center—which is run by professionals, not by peer tutors as at many other institutions—to help students learn the basics of grammar so they can use their time in the classroom to focus on the development of ideas. To some extent, this is what Grammarly AI also does. He thought the CEP could issue a statement in the minutes advising faculty how to use this tool to best effect. Gomes agreed that the tool could be useful for pedagogical purposes. She said it is a question of academic freedom if it affects how faculty teach.

Hanneke asked if faculty had requested the software. He thought IT should only purchase software that addresses the skills faculty are trying to teach. He was not troubled by the idea that some faculty might oppose the software, as long as some faculty members also supported it. He teaches students how to use software and forbids its use at other times, and he thought faculty could treat this software in similar ways. It is important to communicate to students the reasons for allowing, requiring, or forbidding these tools. Kingston agreed that IT should only purchase the software if a faculty member had requested it. Epstein said that was not the case with this software, which had been requested by students. Sanborn said he would recommend purchasing this software. Epstein thought software should have faculty support in the future.

Barba asked if questions like this could be considered by the Faculty Computing Committee (FCC), which could then periodically issue a report to the faculty. Epstein said the FCC is often populated by faculty from STEM rather than humanities backgrounds and questioned whether the make-up of the committee should be altered if this became one of the committee's main tasks.

Degree Requirements Policy

Kingston asked the committee to return briefly to the policy stipulating the requirements for an Amherst degree. Barba said the class deans reviewed the policy changes recommended by the CEP and asked whether the committee would be willing to substitute “is” for the phrase “would normally be” to remove any ambiguity. In addition, the new accessibility director, GL Wallace, asked if the committee would be willing to include language about reduced load accommodations to ensure that students understand they could qualify for access to this accommodation. The committee did not favor either of these changes. Barba reported that the class deans supported removing the rule against seniors taking a reduced load, the only substantive change in the policy other than clarifying that fifth courses could be used to reduce a load once a year. The committee supported sending the following revised policy to the Faculty Executive Committee (FEC):

[Course Catalog - Regulations and Requirements - Degree requirements](#)

DEGREE REQUIREMENTS

Each student is responsible for meeting all degree requirements and for ensuring that the Registrar's Office has received all credentials.

The Bachelor of Arts degree is awarded to students who:

1. Complete 32 full semester courses and four years (eight semesters) of residence **(INCLUDING STUDY AWAY)**. Transfer students must complete 32 full-semester courses or their equivalent, at least 16 **OF WHICH MUST BE TAKEN at Amherst OR IN THE FIVE COLLEGES**, and have been in residence at Amherst for at least two years (four semesters) **OF RESIDENCE AT AMHERST. STUDENTS MAY COUNT UP TO FOUR HALF COURSES (TWO FOR TRANSFER STUDENTS) TOWARDS THESE REQUIREMENTS (WITH TWO HALF COURSES COUNTING AS ONE FULL COURSE)**.

All students who have withdrawn from or failed a course during any semester except the last two (final year) shall be allowed to graduate with 31 full courses **(15 FOR TRANSFER STUDENTS)** or their equivalent, provided that they have met the residence requirement.

~~Transfer students in that situation must also have completed at least 15 full courses or their equivalent at Amherst.~~

2. Complete the requirements for a major in a department or a group of departments, including satisfactory performance in the **comprehensive evaluation**.

Standard full courses are equal to four semester credits each. Half courses are equal to two semester credits.

Our course system considers all standard full courses to have equal weight toward completing the degree requirements. Courses typically meet for three hours a week, with the expectation that an additional nine hours of academic engagement be spent in class, lab, discussion, studio, film viewing, and/or preparatory work.

3. Attain a general average of 1.67 in the courses completed at Amherst and a grade of at least C in every course completed at another institution for transfer credit to Amherst.

[Course Catalog - Regulations and Requirements -Course Requirements](#)

STUDENTS ARE NORMALLY REQUIRED TO COMPLETE THE EQUIVALENT OF 32 COURSES, A MINIMUM OF 30 OF WHICH MUST BE FULL COURSES (SEE DEGREE REQUIREMENTS). All students except Independent Scholars are normally required to elect four full courses each semester. Students may elect one or two half courses in addition to four full courses at their discretion and without special permission. **STUDENTS IN ANY SEMESTER EXCEPT THEIR FIRST AT AMHERST MAY ALSO ELECT TO ENROLL IN THREE FULL COURSES AND TWO HALF COURSES IN A SEMESTER**. Half courses are not normally included in the requirement of thirty-two courses for the degree; however, with the permission of the academic advisor and the class dean, a student may combine two half courses to be counted as equivalent to a full course if (1) the student

completes the 4.5 courses in one semester and 3.5 courses in a subsequent semester, or (2) the two halves match within the same semester in a manner designated by the offering department, with the approval of the offering department (in this case, the student's program will be three or four full courses and two half courses). No more than four half courses may be so combined for credit toward the degree. **STUDENTS WHO HAVE COMPLETED COURSES IN EXCESS OF WHAT WOULD NORMALLY BE REQUIRED FOR THEIR CLASS STANDING MAY, ONCE PER ACADEMIC YEAR, AND WITH THE PERMISSION OF THEIR ADVISOR(S), ENROLL IN THREE FULL COURSES AND ONE HALF COURSE.**

In exceptional cases a student may, with the permission of both the student's academic advisor and class dean, take five full courses for credit during a given semester. Such permission is normally granted only to students of demonstrated superior academic ability, responsibility, and will. Fifth courses cannot be used to accelerate graduation. On occasion, a student who has failed a course may be permitted to take a fifth course in a given semester if, in the judgment of the Committee on Academic Standing, this additional work can be undertaken without jeopardizing the successful completion of all courses taken in that semester. Students may only retake a course for which they have received a failing grade or from which they have withdrawn in a prior semester.

A student who by failing a course incurs a deficiency in the number of courses required for normal progress toward graduation is usually expected to make up that course deficiency by taking a three- or four-semester hour course at another approved institution during the summer prior to the first semester of the next academic year and no later than the semester prior to the student's last semester at Amherst.

Students may not add courses after the last day of add/drop at the beginning of each semester or drop courses after this date except as follows:

In any semester prior to the final year, a student who experiences severe academic difficulty and has exhausted all academic resources (e.g., met with professors during office hours, received tutoring, met with class deans, etc.), may be allowed to withdraw from a course without penalty and graduate with 31 courses. This exception may be invoked only once, and requires permission of the instructor, advisor and class dean. The deadline for withdrawal requests is the end of the tenth week of the semester.

Further exceptions shall be made for disabling medical reasons or for reason of grave personal emergencies, and shall be made by the class dean.

All course deficiencies must normally be made up prior to the first semester of the final year, except those arising in the final year, in which case they must be made up prior to graduation. All make-up courses must be approved in advance by the registrar.

Courses taken by a student after withdrawing from Amherst College, as part of a graduate or professional program in which that student is enrolled, are not applicable toward an Amherst College undergraduate degree.

Comprehensive Exam or Capstone Policy

Kingston next asked the committee to review Infante and Sanborn's newly drafted capstone policy which would replace the comprehensive requirement, if approved. Sanborn said he thought departments should have an event in the context of the major that would bring people together, and this language is designed to support such an event. Hanneke wondered whether the language was flexible enough to allow departments to have different events for students completing a thesis project and those completing some other capstone experience. He thought the wording was sufficiently flexible to allow this event to take various forms.

Kingston thought it was important that the academic capstone take place during the academic year and not just be a celebratory event at commencement or after the semester has ended. Barba pointed out that the regulations require departments to inform the registrar of a student's successful completion of all requirements of the major, so this would have to occur before the end of the student's final semester. The committee felt that the proposed policy better reflects what departments actually do and asked the chair to send the following recommended revisions to the FEC:

Comprehensive **CAPSTONE** Requirement

~~A part of the major requirement in every department is an evaluation of the student's comprehension in his or her major field of study. This evaluation may be based on a special written examination or upon any other performance deemed appropriate by each department. The mode of the evaluation need not be the same for all the majors within a department, and, indeed, may be designed individually to test the skills each student has developed. ——— The evaluation should be completed by the seventh week of the second semester of the senior year. Any student whose comprehension is judged to be inadequate will have two opportunities for reevaluation: one not later than the last day of classes of the second semester of the senior year, and the other during the next college year.~~

EVERY DEPARTMENT AT AMHERST COLLEGE DESIGNS A CAPSTONE EXPERIENCE (CE) FOR ITS SENIORS. THE CE CAN TAKE VARIOUS FORMS, BUT IN ALL CASES, STUDENTS ARE EXPECTED TO USE THE KNOWLEDGE AND SKILL THAT THEY HAVE GAINED IN THE MAJOR IN THE SERVICE OF AN ACADEMIC ENDEAVOR. SOME EXAMPLES OF CES ARE DEPARTMENTAL SENIORS, ANALYSES OF CURRENT ARTICLES, PRESENTATIONS OF STUDENT WORK, EXAMS, AND METACOGNITIVE REFLECTIONS. IN ADDITION TO DEEPENING THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE IN THE MAJOR, CES ARE MEANT TO HEIGHTEN THE FEELING OF BELONGING TO A KNOWLEDGE-BASED COMMUNITY, A COMMUNITY THAT INCLUDES FACULTY AND STUDENTS ALIKE. FOR THAT REASON, CES OFTEN CULMINATE IN EVENTS THAT BRING SENIORS AND DEPARTMENTAL FACULTY MEMBERS TOGETHER. THE CAPSTONE REQUIREMENT SHOULD BE COMPLETED, AT THE LATEST, BY THE LAST CLASS DAY OF THE SECOND SEMESTER OF THE SENIOR YEAR.

First-year Fall Registration Process

Kingston next asked the committee to return to the various ideas broached at the previous meeting that would improve the fall first-year student registration process. Barba said the point system would not work with Amherst's system, and students would register strategically, rather than registering for the courses they truly wanted to take. Hanneke asked Barba about condensing the three-week registration process used for other preregistration periods into a three-day period for first-year students in the fall. Barba's concern was that faculty would not want to spend a day cutting their rosters. He noted that the registrar could randomly cut the rosters for the faculty. This would be burdensome to the registrar's office, but it could be done.

Sanborn said problems of unfairness would be mitigated if the registrar randomly cut rosters. He supported this idea. Kingston asked if the random process could give priority for replacement slots to any student who has been randomly cut from three classes. Barba said Amherst's course registration is not a nimble system, so he thought this would require a technical evaluation of the process. He added that this approach would affect the orientation schedule, adding another day that would be devoted to registering for class.

Sanborn was intrigued by the greater fairness of having the registrar cut rosters and asked whether this would introduce other problems. Barba said the process is staff intensive and may have technical problems. The Math department prefers to balance its rosters, moving people around, so that department might object. For the registrar to cut rosters, there would need to be a radical reduction in the number of classes requiring instructor permission for first-year students. The vast majority of cuts, he thought, would involve the most popular time slots of the most popular courses. Barba said he will ask his staff about this idea and also ask the staff about Kingston's idea of having all students register for one course, then a second course, etc.

Sanborn said he would support whatever is most fair. Barba said one alternative would be for the timing of the process to change, such that faculty would advise students over the summer, and students would register for the first round over the summer. This would give his office more time to cut the rosters. Alternatively, it could occur over two or three days of orientation, rather than all taking place in one day. He thought it was preferable to have the process occur during orientation.

Infante asked if students could be guaranteed at least two slots. Barba said having registration early in the summer becomes a problem when a first-year seminar gets canceled late in the summer so students need to be reassigned, which frequently occurs. He will run these ideas by his staff. Kingston said the committee will return to this topic next week.

The meeting adjourned at 10:51 a.m.