

## **Committee on Educational Policy**

**October 5, 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.

### **New Courses**

The CEP approved three new courses.

### **FTE Letter**

The provost reported that this will be a particularly challenging year for FTE decisions, as she anticipates no more than five FTEs are likely to be available this year. The committee decided to include the scarcity of available FTEs this year in its letter to department chairs inviting proposals.

### **Revised Half-Course Policy**

Kingston asked the committee to return to the half-course policy and discuss some possible revisions. The committee noted that students are sometimes confused by the current policy. Barba explained that the current policy is unclear about how many half courses students can take each semester and how taking a fifth course overload relates to subsequent course reductions. Another source of confusion relates to credit hours and what constitutes "in residence." While Amherst defines courses as whole and half-courses, many other institutions use a credit-hour system, including other schools in the consortium. Amherst has made changes in recent years to the study-away policy and now considers students to be "in residence" during study away. Using the more common approach to credit hours, students studying away are required to complete 15 credit hours, the typical requirement at other institutions.

The committee decided to clarify the credit hour expectations during study away, study at the Five Colleges, the half-course credits available to transfer students, the number of full courses required for an Amherst degree, and the rules under which students may expect to be able to take fewer than the full course load. After some discussion on how best to clarify this policy, the committee recommended the following revisions. The committee noted that, in addition to being clearer, the revised policy includes two changes: (1) a fifth full course in one semester will now allow a student to enroll in three plus one-half courses in a subsequent semester (much as an extra half course does under the current policy), and (2) a student's one withdrawn or failed course may now be in the senior year. Barba said he

would share these recommendations with the class deans, and the chair will then send the recommendation to the Faculty Executive Committee (FEC):

#### 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 ~~must 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 a 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 C- (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 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.**

### **Revision to the Five College Interchange Policy**

Kingston asked the committee next to return to the policy governing Amherst credits for Five College courses. Sanborn suggested revisions that would define more clearly the rationale for approving Five College courses, while modestly expanding the courses that might be acceptable. He said his revised wording continues to prohibit credit for courses that fall into the category of job training—courses that primarily consist of preparations to enter a specific professional or vocational field—and moves the approval process for most courses to the student's advisor, with the provost and dean of the faculty having final say in less clear cases. Under this expanded policy, Amherst students could, for example, potentially receive credit for an engineering course that involved students in theoretical or critical inquiry.

Some noted that moving the approval process to the faculty advisor would give greater leeway to faculty but could lead to some more questionable courses. Barba said the registrar could provide periodic reports to the provost on the courses that advisors are approving as a way to monitor the decisions. Most education and nursing courses would continue to be prohibited; some business management courses might straddle the line. Also prohibited are courses that are insufficiently rigorous—for example, courses in music appreciation or a Gen Ed biology course called My DNA—and the registrar would continue to prohibit those.

The committee recommended removing a clause about exceptions and then discussed reducing the number of Five College interchange courses available to students. The committee thought the policy currently permits too many interchange courses and recommended significantly reducing the number from 14, but not in a way that would jeopardize participation in Five College certificate programs or the

world language program. Barba said he would look at the number of courses that students have taken through the Five Colleges in recent years—those numbers have been declining—in the hope that this could provide the committee with some guidance about where to set the cap for interchange courses. While relaxing the rules somewhat about courses that would become credit-bearing, the provost suggested her office should be able to permit exceptions to the cap at times, for example for a very advanced STEM student who has exhausted the Amherst curriculum or a student deeply engaged in world languages only offered by the interchange, such as Korean, Swahili, or Hindi. The committee agreed there should be oversight by the provost's office to allow such exceptions and also to prevent abuse and added language to give the provost ultimate authority. Hanneke and Kingston said they would draft a memo explaining the reasons for these recommendations, emphasizing that decisions about interchange courses will still rely on whether they involve critical inquiry and creative thinking, and bring the issue back to the committee.

### **Pass/Fail Policy**

Khiry asked the committee whether it would consider revisiting the pass/fail policy. Students are concerned that requiring students to get a signature from their professor could disproportionately harm those students who are already at risk (disadvantaged students, neurodivergent students, depressed students, etc.) and discourage them from seeking to change their course to pass/fail. Neurodivergent students, especially, believe the institution has not supported their needs and worry about giving discretion to the faculty to make these decisions.

Kingston said the new pass/fail policy reinstated some aspects of an older policy (when pass/fail had to be declared during add/drop, with advisor and professor approval on a paper form). Subsequent well-intentioned policy changes had unfortunately led to some unintended and in some cases undesirable outcomes, leading to the most recent revision. The result is a policy that gives the professor more power (indeed, the previous policy left the professor totally ignorant and powerless, with lamentable consequences), and while it makes it harder for students to use the pass/fail option for GPA management (indeed, that was part of the goal), it is still more generous than the original policy. He thought the new policy was a substantial improvement, particularly in combination with the new honors policy which should help to relieve some of the more extreme grade anxiety. He thought the committee should let this policy operate for a period before legislating further and said he hoped faculty would exercise their newfound power in kind and supportive ways.

Barba said the registrar would be reminding students of the policy deadlines so as to avoid confusion at the last minute. Sanborn asked whether the students were citing hypothetical cases or actual cases. Khiry said he was unsure. Students were concerned that their needs were not being considered. Gomes suggested the student government collect data on genuine cases of difficulty (these could be reported anonymously), and then return to the CEP, which could then consider the data.

Hanneke said that when students seek out a conversation with instructors about having difficulty, they can use that conversation to create a plan that will help the students engage more effectively with the course. Barba said it might help if the faculty were to state their pass/fail policy on their syllabus or at

the beginning of the course. Khiry agreed; it would not feel like faculty members were using their discretion to discriminate if their policy were publicly stated on the first day of class. The chair said the committee should wait to see how the policy works before recommending further changes. For now, he thought the policy provided flexibility to work with the instructor and will allow students to find an honorable exit path if necessary. Sanborn suggested the student government use this trial period to gather data. The provost said students may find they get the additional support they need if they go and speak with their faculty members if they are experiencing difficulties in a course.

The meeting adjourned at 10:50 a.m.