

## Committee on Educational Policy

September 28, 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; Ankit Sayed '24. Recorder: Nancy Ratner, Director of Academic Projects. Director of Institutional Research and Registrar Services: Jesse Barba.**

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

### New Courses

The committee discussed and approved several new courses.

### “Return” Policy

Kingston asked the committee to return to its discussion of revising the “Return” policy. At the previous meeting Barba had explained that the Office of Student Affairs (OSA) would like to make a fairly large change to the Catalog language on readmissions, including renaming the section on “Readmission,” calling it the “Return” policy, which would more accurately reflect current practice, and pointing students to a web page where deadlines and procedures could be found, rather than specifying these in the catalog itself. As requested by the CEP, the OSA has now added a sentence clarifying that the OSA will coordinate and authorize all student leaves and returns and has directed students to the Leave and Return web page for detailed information. Barba asked whether this would be considered a substantive change that would also require faculty approval. Kingston thought that since the intention was not to make substantive changes to policy, but to move some details of administrative procedures from the catalog to a webpage and bring the language into better alignment with current practice, it was sufficient for the CEP to approve these changes and the committee agreed. The policy will now state:

#### ~~Readmission~~ Return

**The Office of Student Affairs authorizes and coordinates all student leaves and returns. All students requesting ~~readmission~~ return after voluntary leaves, ~~withdrawals, involuntary withdrawals, medical leaves, and academic dismissals,~~ and transfers must complete all return requirements by the appropriate deadlines (as stated on the Leave and Return web page). If return requirements are not met by these deadlines that student will not be permitted to return. They will then be eligible to seek return during the next academic term. ~~and all students on educational leaves who wish to return for the fall semester should write to their class deans as early as possible, but before March 15. For students planning to return for the spring semester, the letters should be received by the College before November 1.~~ All necessary steps in the return process are shared on the College's Leave and Return web page.**

~~Provisional Administrative Readmission following leave may be offered by the Office of Student Affairs to facilitate processes such as pre-registration and housing where appropriate. However,~~

~~students must complete all readmission requirements by August 15 for fall and January 5 for spring.~~

~~In some cases, additional information, such as an interview on campus, may be requested. Readmission requests from students seeking to return from academic dismissals and, in some cases from medical leaves, voluntary and involuntary withdrawals, will be referred to the Committee on Academic Standing or the Office of Student Affairs. In these cases, detailed letters requesting readmission, accompanied by grade reports of courses taken at an approved college or university, letters from employers, medical documentation, and other documents supporting the readmission requests should be sent to the Office of Student Affairs. Students on educational leaves should simply confirm their intention of returning to the campus before the above stated dates. Failure to meet these deadlines will jeopardize students' opportunities to participate in the student residence room selection.~~

### **Amherst Credit for Consortium Courses (including ROTC courses)**

Kingston next asked the committee to return to its discussion of whether students should receive credit for a military science course offered by UMass. The provost suggested thinking about this course as part of a broader question about what courses should be credit-bearing for an Amherst degree.

Hanneke noted that liberal arts courses have historically involved a process of exploration and curiosity. He further noted that some engineering courses are curiosity-based and would provide a background that would better prepare Amherst students for thesis work in physics. Such engineering classes, when well executed, involve students in design and collaboration, valuable skills that relate directly to the liberal arts. Amherst has a system of academic advising, and if advising is done well, he thought advisors should be able to determine when a Five College course should be credit-bearing at Amherst.

Sanborn pointed out that this particular ROTC course appears to be primarily about job training and does not fall into the liberal arts. If drawing a line, he would not support courses that primarily involved vocational training and said the same reasoning could be used to decide whether other Five College courses should be acceptable. Kingston agreed. While liberal arts courses could include practical hands-on work at times, the courses should also require students to engage in critical thinking. Sayed noted that Amherst currently offers a course about book publishing which includes some vocational aspects; if this is acceptable, he wondered why engineering courses that span both intellectual and vocational topics would not be acceptable. That said, he found the ROTC course to be more overtly vocational.

Kingston asked the committee whether it would want to consider changing the rules about Five College courses, reducing the limit (currently 14 courses over four years) while also allowing students to include a small number of courses not traditionally considered part of the liberal arts, if their advisor agreed that these courses made sense in the context of the student's intellectual path. He suggested a low limit on Five College courses, which could be exceeded only with approval from a class dean. Infante said she would support such a change. Sanborn said he thought Amherst students should be engaged in active open-ended learning. This ROTC course is about training.

Hanneke was interested in shifting the decision to approve Five College courses from the registrar's office to faculty advisors and was intrigued by the possibility of lowering the number of interchange courses that students could take through the Five Colleges from the current number of 14, which he thought was quite high.

Barba noted that it is rare for a student to take 14 Five College courses, and transfer students can only occasionally take Five College courses because they need to focus on courses for their Amherst major. In recent years he said there has been a decline in interchange courses taken by Amherst students, possibly because the bus schedule makes it difficult to schedule the courses. If the ability to take Five College classes were expanded to include more courses outside the liberal arts, he predicted that courses at the Isenberg School of Management would be particularly popular with Amherst students. He noted that the UMass business school is focused on applied behavioral science and cutting-edge thinking about management studies and is not purely vocational, so faculty might view these courses as acceptable. Khiry said the ability to take business courses would be very popular among particular groups of students, but he worried that it would also add to the current divisions on campus.

Barba added that the registrar's office finds it challenging to manage the requests for Five College courses in the ten days prior to registration and would be very pleased to turn this responsibility over to faculty advisors. He supported lowering the cap on Five College interchange courses but also pointed out that students who are trying to complete Five College certificate programs might find such a limit problematic.

Kingston said it was his impression that President Elliott would like to open the Five College curriculum more. That said, he personally believed courses that support intellectual exploration—broadly construed—should be permitted, but not courses that focus on job training, and in his opinion, the ROTC course in question does not support intellectual exploration. He suggested the committee clarify the kinds of courses that should be accepted. Sayed agreed. The ROTC course explicitly states that students will get a job after this course. He thought this was the antithesis of the liberal arts and very specific to ROTC.

Barba cautioned that if the decision to approve a course is made by the faculty advisor, these kinds of courses will eventually be approved. Advisors will be pressured by students and will ultimately relent. Sanborn thought the language would need to be more specific in guiding faculty about what is meant by liberal arts, and someone would need to do due diligence to maintain quality control.

Epstein pointed out that *US News and World Reports* now ranks military academies as top liberal arts colleges. Clearly not every course related to military training is vocational. Sanborn agreed but said this particular course provides officer training skills and should not qualify as liberal arts. Barba mentioned that military science is credited at UMass. One possibility would be for Amherst students to get credit on their transcripts for these at Amherst but not have them count towards Amherst College degree requirements. He said if the committee wants to leave decisions to advisors to decide whether a course meets Amherst's educational goals, the committee should first clarify the language about the process of approval and could lower the cap on the number of courses that would be allowed.

Sanborn said that, as an advisor, he would want basic guidelines and some sense of what others have found acceptable. Barba noted that faculty could always ask the registrar for advice. The registrar routinely denies some courses (e.g., My DNA, Music Appreciation) as not rising to a college-level course. Kingston suggested rewriting the policy, reducing the cap on the number of allowable interchange courses and articulating the kinds of courses that would count. The committee could then reconsider the issue. Barba said the committee could require students to provide a written justification for why the course should qualify as liberal arts and could consider limiting students to one interchange course per term. Sanborn volunteered to rewrite the policy.

Infante said her department is often asked to allow courses in Spanish for the professions and always denies those petitions; she favored allowing each department or program to decide whether to accept such courses. If the decision is left to the faculty advisor, she was concerned that the decision could put a tenure-track faculty member in an awkward position. Kingston noted that the Economics department does not accept business courses. He agreed the departments should make the decisions about accepting courses for the major, after the student had engaged in a discussion with the faculty advisor. The provost cautioned that faculty will always default to approving the course. Sanborn said he would draft a new policy and bring it to the committee to consider.

### **Half-course Policy**

Kingston next asked the committee to consider a proposal from Barba to rewrite the half-course policy. Barba said the half-course policy has resulted in a great deal of confusion for students and faculty alike. In an effort to clarify the policy, he drafted a possible revision, stating the minimum number of whole courses required for graduation and explaining that a reduction of the full course load of four courses each term is only allowed under certain circumstances. His proposed revision would state this explicitly and also state the number of half courses that would be allowed in the first semester and that students can only reduce their course load once per year. He hoped that a statement establishing the minimum rigor that is required would help students understand the policy. Kingston thought the policy should be simplified and recommended removing the sentence that limits transfer students to four half courses for credit, since that limit applies to all students.

Hanneke asked about moving to a credit hour system for official bookkeeping purposes. For study away, this would be useful. Kingston said lab courses might then move to 6 or 8 credit hours, which might ultimately have a bearing on the calculation of faculty teaching loads. Barba said his office applies credit hours behind the scenes. A bachelor's degree is 120 credit hours. He said some faculty seemed to be worried that students might try to fill their schedules with half courses at the expense of whole courses. Half courses cause a lot of confusion on campus. He also asked the committee to think about whether there should be more flexibility in the pacing of work. It is currently not permissible to take five courses one semester and three the next. Some students might find this helpful.

Hanneke said he found the reference to "32 full semester courses or their equivalent" confusing and suggested instead that this be spelled out explicitly: 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 courses (15 for transfer students), a minimum of 29 of which must be full courses (14 for transfer students), provided that they have met the residence requirement. Sanborn said he liked Hanneke's specific language and suggested the policy be reduced to two paragraphs—one enumerating degree requirements and one detailing course requirements. Kingston said he would draft new language and bring a revised policy to the next meeting.

### **Independent Scholar Policy**

Kingston mentioned that last year's committee had discussed a memo from the Committee on Academic Standing (CAS) suggesting revisions to the little-used independent scholar policy. At that time, the CEP had recommended ending the independent scholar option and had conveyed this recommendation to the CAS. The CAS has agreed, and sent a further memo to the CEP recommending that the policy be discontinued. Kingston asked the current CEP if it wished to discuss this further or to write to the Faculty Executive Committee (FEC) to recommend that it abandon the independent scholar

option. The committee decided no further discussion was required and asked the chair to inform the FEC that it recommended abolishing the policy.

The meeting adjourned at 10:50 a.m.