

Committee on Educational Policy

November 16, 2023

In attendance: Faculty: Christopher Kingston, chair; Mekhola Gomes; David Hanneke; Catherine Infante; Geoffrey Sanborn. Provost and Dean of the Faculty: Catherine Epstein, ex officio. Director of Institutional Research and Registrar Services: Jesse Barba. 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.

Anthropology and Sociology

Kingston reported that the Anthropology and Sociology department, which currently offers three majors—Anthropology, Sociology, and a joint major in Anthropology and Sociology—would like to discontinue its joint major and offer just two majors, one in Anthropology and one in Sociology. The department noted that no students have opted for the joint major in recent years, and students will still have the ability to opt for a double major, one in Anthropology and one in Sociology. The committee agreed to drop the major, and Kingston said he would let the department know that it could proceed with the change.

First-year fall course registration

Barba reported that the registrar's office has considered the proposal for students to register for courses using a three-part registration process. This process, which would promote greater equity, would be similar to the process used for course registration after the first semester. For this to succeed, first-year students would need to meet remotely with their faculty advisors during the first three weeks of August. During this period no caps would be enforced, and all courses with available seats would be open for registration. The registrar's office would then have about five days to cut rosters. Barba said the registrar's office believes this will work best if the first day of Orientation can be used by students to meet with their faculty advisors to discuss alternate courses. The registrar would then re-open registration on the second day of Orientation and leave it open until the end of add/drop. Students who have been dropped from a roster would use that time to register for alternative courses.

Sanborn said he thought it was important to create an opportunity for new students to meet with their faculty advisors in person soon after arriving. Orientation is a busy time, and the committee acknowledged that Vigil, the dean of new students, and Tissi-Gassoway, the chief student affairs officer, both of whom are responsible for organizing Orientation, might object to carving out the first day for meetings with advisors. Kingston said he would invite Vigil and Tissi-Gassoway to a future meeting.

Course proposal letter

Returning to the letter soliciting new course proposals for the 2024-25 academic year, the committee noted that although in previous years, the letter has stated that course descriptions will automatically include a line at the end of each course proposal advising students with documented disabilities to consult with Accessibility Services and reach out to the faculty member as soon as possible to ensure that accommodations can be made in a timely manner, course descriptions on Workday do not include this information. Committee members noted that this advice is provided to students directly, and thought faculty should be advised to include this advice on their course syllabi, instead of attaching it to every course in Workday. Kingston said he will consult with staff in Legal Services and the Office of Accessibility Services to make them aware that the language is not appearing in course descriptions on Workday.

Sanborn suggested revising the section that discusses course caps, noting that the goal is to encourage departments to offer some larger and some smaller classes and to aim for an average of at least 18 students across all courses in the major. The committee agreed.

Hanneke asked Barba if he could provide data with the caps and enrollments for all courses, organized by department, to provide some context when the committee is reviewing courses. He thought departments might also benefit from access to this information. Barba agreed to provide this information. The committee also agreed that co-taught courses with low enrollments, while potentially valuable in some cases, should be taught infrequently and balanced out by courses with higher enrollments. Epstein noted that the CEP has previously discussed the matter of co-taught courses (e.g., see minutes of February 16, 2023), and agreed that faculty should participate in no more than one co-taught course per year.

Comprehensive evaluation policy

The provost reported that the Faculty Executive Committee (FEC) supported the CEP proposal to replace the “comprehensive evaluation” requirement with a required capstone experience. The FEC, however, had concerns about introducing the term “capstone” because that term is used by several majors to refer to senior-year work that is separate from the major’s comprehensive requirement and could lead to confusion. The FEC asked that the committee consider substituting “summative experience” or other language to describe this concept. The FEC also suggested changing “department” to “major” in the policy.

The committee agreed to substitute “major” for “department,” but after some discussion about alternatives to the word “capstone,” the committee decided to retain the term. Members noted that “summative experience” would not capture the kind of student-centered experience that the committee thought should be conveyed. They thought the capstone terminology captured a broad range of approaches, and the capstone experiences that some departments are already providing to students—senior seminars, research projects, exams, presentations, and so on—could all be encompassed within this approach and would be better understood by most people. Kingston said he will write to the FEC.

Five-College interchange policy

Epstein also informed the committee that the FEC had concerns about the CEP's proposed changes to the Five-College interchange policy and was returning the policy to the CEP. In particular, the FEC objected to a policy that would rely too heavily on advisors for approving Five-College courses. Instead, the FEC suggested the registrar could prepare a list of courses that are pre-approved as a way to expedite the approval process. Some members of the FEC also questioned whether it was appropriate for Amherst to make a judgment that other institutions' courses were insufficiently rigorous to meet Amherst standards.

Kingston noted that the registrar has long determined that some courses are inappropriate due to the level at which the courses are offered. Barba added it is a fundamental principle of Amherst governance that Five-College courses are treated as Amherst courses and are subject to Amherst College governance to determine their suitability. As such, the registrar (on behalf of the Amherst faculty) is responsible for validating that interchange courses are appropriate for Amherst credit.

One alternative mentioned by the FEC was to cap the number of Five-College courses a student could take, without requiring a judgment of rigor or pre-professional status, with the understanding that departments could decide whether such courses would count as electives toward the major. Kingston said he opposed just introducing a cap on interchange courses with no determination of appropriateness. The FEC's main objection appeared to be asking advisors to determine which courses are acceptable. Infante agreed that there should be a standard for credit. Barba said the registrar often sends courses to the department to evaluate, erring on the side of rejecting a course, if in doubt. Decisions about courses that straddle the borderline are made by an associate provost. It could be the departments that would decide, rather advisors.

Hanneke said ideally it would be the CEP that would make this determination, but there is no time for that to happen. There could be an early deadline for students to petition for courses, even though they would not be able to register for the courses until several months later. The registrar could retain a list of courses that have been pre-approved. Epstein suggested leaving the decision instead to departments to maintain pre-approved lists, just as is done for study away courses. Kingston said that would work for courses that fall squarely within departments or majors, but not for courses that fall outside Amherst majors; faculty in economics, for example, would not want to oversee decisions about business and finance courses offered by Smith College and UMass. Who would decide which engineering courses should be accepted? Some thought there could be a petition process for courses that fall outside Amherst majors, with deadlines that would allow time for the CEP to discuss them (e.g., November for spring courses, April for fall courses). Kingston said the committee would continue this conversation at its next meeting.

The meeting adjourned at 11 a.m.