

Committee on Educational Policy

November 9, 2023

In attendance: Faculty: Christopher Kingston, chair; David Hanneke; Catherine Infante; Geoffrey Sanborn. Provost and Dean of the Faculty: Catherine Epstein, ex officio. Students: Zane Khiry '25; Ankit Sayed '24. 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, contingent on approval from one member.

Responses to faculty emails

Keyword for Jewish Studies

Kingston reported that he had received an inquiry from Professor Sarat on behalf of a group of colleagues interested in putting together a listing of all of the courses that are offered on campus under the rubric of Jewish Studies, as to whether such a rubric could be included on the website and listed under the academic offerings of the college. He had informed Prof. Sarat that in the absence of an official program or major, the Catalog cannot host a page on Jewish Studies. He suggested Sarat consider proposing a keyword for courses on Jewish studies. Keywords have the advantage that they require no maintenance or monitoring, although it is unclear how often students actually use these to search for courses or how consistently faculty add the relevant keywords to their courses. An alternative would be for Sarat to assemble a list of courses and post them on a page on a department website or on his personal website.

Grammarly

Kingston turned next to an email from Professor Sitze in which Sitze had expressed serious misgivings about the administration's recent decision to make Grammarly available to all students without first consulting with the CEP and the FEC. Sanborn said faculty will never be able to prevent all students from using Grammarly. There will always be a few who will choose to use the tool, even though its use might not be fully sanctioned by their instructors or in the students' best interest. He noted that good writing requires clear thinking, and the software does not teach students to think. Kingston noted that the AI Task Force, of which he is a member, is likely to recommend that a governance mechanism be established for making decisions about whether to make AI tools available in the future.

Policy on assigning work over breaks

Kingston turned finally to an email from Professor Carter who shared her concerns about the request that faculty not assign work that will be due after the Thanksgiving Break. She noted that this policy would result in work piling up for students just before their break. She thought it might be preferable to allow assignments to be submitted by Tuesday during the break to provide more flexibility, but not the Tuesday after break.

Kingston said he was not persuaded by Carter's arguments and thought the request about homework was appropriate. Kingston read an email from Hanneke (who was absent for this portion of the meeting) in which Hanneke agreed with Carter that requests of this sort should come from the CEP rather than the administration. Hanneke thought faculty would interpret the provost's encouragement as a requirement and feel significant pressure to conform. He also noted that the message assumed a style of pedagogy (pre-class readings with follow-up written assignments) that are not universal. He would have preferred that the provost had discouraged *additional* work over the break, treating the break as if it were a weekend and assigning a typical weekend's worth of work. Infante was concerned about Carter's suggestion that homework could be due on the Tuesday of break.

Epstein asked the committee whether it thought her message was appropriate. Kingston said he thought the message from the provost was appropriate because it requested and encouraged compliance without requiring it. A formalized policy (requiring monitoring and enforcement) would be more problematic. Sayed said he thought it better not to have work due immediately after break. He preferred flexibility for when students will complete their work. Khiry agreed. He had no objections to being assigned problem sets which can be helpful, but he did not think papers that require a lot of thought should be assigned over break.

Grade inflation and criteria for awards

Kingston next returned to the discussion of criteria for the top academic awards. He reported that the president of the Amherst chapter of Phi Beta Kappa (PBK), Professor Staller, had informed him that the criteria for award of PBK are determined by the faculty who are members of PBK, rather than by the College. Staller had also said that the criteria for PBK are currently under discussion and that the use of GPA as a sole criterion was likely to be discontinued. Turning to the Woods-Travis prize, Kingston said he did not think the committee's advice on this topic should be overly prescriptive since it will be the FEC that ultimately recommends to the faculty who should receive the award, so he had just drafted broad recommendations including the completion of an honors thesis; taking courses that span the curriculum; taking courses at a high level; GPA; and other contributions to the life of the College.

Sayed said he wondered if the list of student organizations should include affinity groups when referring to "making notable contributions to the extracurricular life of the College (participation in student organizations and government, athletics, the student newspaper, committee service, or other activities that contribute to the greater good within our community)." The committee thought that group was already implied by the reference to student organizations and government. Barba asked how the FEC would know about those activities. Kingston said this assumed leadership or prominence. Barba said citizenship prizes are awarded this way, but it would introduce a capricious element. Sayed suggested the FEC ask the student's advisor. Kingston said this is an academic prize. Perhaps the CEP should remove the citizenship piece.

Sanborn, though troubled by the phrase "outstanding excellence," said criteria for this should include a thesis with *summa* honors, courses taken at an advanced level, a high GPA, and breadth across the curriculum. Barba said the registrar could send the FEC a list of the students qualifying for *summa* and PBK.

Infante asked whether these bullet points would remain internal. Would students know about the criteria for the award? Most thought these would remain internal. Epstein suggested just retaining the criteria in the top four bullets, dropping the extracurricular contributions. Asked where the FEC would

draw the line for the criteria, Kingston suggested the registrar could identify students with *summa* theses and high GPAs whose enrollment in advanced courses and courses across the curriculum were above the median for their class, and submit a shortlist to the FEC. Epstein suggested moving courses that span the curriculum higher on the list. She thought the intention should be to honor students who had taken more than one course in each division.

Hanneke suggested not including a numeric reference to GPA, but Sanborn thought it gave useful information to the FEC. Although Infante liked Sayed's suggestion to ask the students' advisors, Barba said there was insufficient time for the FEC to do that. He thought the decision would need to be based on readily available materials—the student's transcript, *summa* recommendation, and perhaps other senior prizes. He also noted that departments differ in how they approach *summa* nominations. Kingston said he will send a letter with the committee's recommendations to the FEC.

First-year fall course registration

Updating the committee on the plan for fall course registration for new students, Barba said the registrar met with the dean of new students, and they decided that the three-phase registration would be the best option, with exact dates still to be decided. They thought it would be best if the advising period occurred in early August, followed by a registration period when no caps are enforced. For the sake of efficiency and equity, the registrar will take responsibility for roster management and will keep an eye on students who are dropped from multiple courses in this process. Students who are dropped during roster management will then have a day to register for replacement courses on a first-come, first-served basis. While this may feel stressful for some students, Barba said entire departments will have empty courses after preregistration so many seats will be available. He was concerned that this might introduce more gamesmanship but thought there was no way to avoid that.

Sanborn asked if it would be possible to give students who are dropped from multiple courses in the first round an earlier slot to find replacement courses. Barba said the registrar would ideally schedule the final registration round to occur during Orientation. Sanborn said he thought bringing an academic element to Orientation would be a positive thing, in part because it would help students who were experiencing difficult social adjustments. The committee briefly discussed whether it had the authority to ask that Orientation include time for advising meetings and final registration now that the faculty orientation committee is defunct. Epstein thought Tissi-Gassoway was receptive to having a conversation and was interested in bolstering the focus on academics during Orientation; the problem is that there is a very tight schedule, and the CEP cannot dictate what occurs.

Barba said there should be programming about the process so students will understand how it works. Currently, the process prioritizes certainty; this process will prioritize fairness. Kingston asked Barba to investigate whether students who get dropped from multiple courses could get an earlier opportunity to register in the second round. Barba said he would and noted that this will change the nature of advising because it will require advisors to advise students for the first round before the beginning of the semester. Hanneke, who arrived at the meeting prior to this discussion said if this is spread out over three weeks in August (with advanced notice), he did not anticipate a problem for advisors. Kingston said he will write to Tissi-Gassoway and Vigil to share the committee's thoughts and to invite them to meet again with the committee if they wish.

Letter soliciting new courses for 2024-25

Kingston asked the committee to review the draft of a letter inviting new courses for the 2024-25 academic year. The committee discussed whether faculty are permitted to teach two sections of the same course rather than two separate courses. Epstein said faculty are expected to teach two different courses each semester, not two different sections of the same course, while noting that during the pandemic this rule had been temporarily relaxed. Kingston said the committee will continue this conversation at its next meeting.

The meeting adjourned at 10:55 a.m.