

Committee on Educational Policy

October 26, 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: Ankit Sayed '24. 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.

The committee decided to meet on Wednesdays during the spring semester at 2:15 p.m. to 3:40 p.m.

Courses

The committee then approved two new courses.

First-Year Fall Registration

Barba said the class deans have several ideas about how to manage registration for first-year students. In addition, the registrar is examining whether it would be possible to create a three-day fall registration period for first-year students, and the dean of new students is also considering how this might affect students if it occurred during Orientation. Barba thought the final round of a multi-day registration should occur while students are on campus so the students could turn to their advisors for guidance or his office for assistance, but he thought the first day of the pre-registration round could occur during August before students arrive. This would give the registrar more time to cut rosters and manage the process. Sanborn supported using part of Orientation for pre-registration. Including academic, not just social, activities, in Orientation would provide a better reflection of college priorities. Most members of the committee said they preferred in-person advising meetings during Orientation. The committee decided it would return to this conversation after the registrar's office, class deans, and others in the Office of Student Affairs have had a chance to consider the options.

Grade Inflation and Calculation of GPA for Awards

Turning next to the effect of grade inflation on the awarding of [Phi Beta Kappa](#) and the [Woods-Travis Prize](#)—prizes which are traditionally awarded based on high GPA—Provost Epstein asked whether there were other criteria which should contribute to the awards besides GPA. Barba explained that relying solely on GPA produces some perverse situations: study away magnifies the effect of the A grades that a student has received at Amherst, and a medical withdrawal better serves the top students than receiving an A in a course. He added that the senior class currently has 24 students with an A average or higher. In a few years, after A+s fade away, more than 5% of the class is likely to have a straight-A average. This leaves ambitious students with no incentive for risk-taking.

Gomes noted that the Woods-Travis Prize is supposed to be awarded for “outstanding excellence in culture and faithfulness to duty as a scholar.” She thought this definition was sufficiently broad to allow additional criteria for awarding the prize. Hanneke suggested requiring a *magna* or *summa* thesis for the

Woods-Travis Prize. Sayed asked at what point the number of students receiving the award would devalue the honor.

Epstein said Phi Beta Kappa rules are set nationally. She thought the Woods-Travis Prize had been shared once, but it involves cash and would be devalued if the prize were shared by a number of students. Kingston noted that the CEP did not have jurisdiction in this matter, since it is the Faculty Executive Committee (FEC) that decides who will receive the award, but he thought the CEP could recommend to the FEC that it expand its criteria beyond a high GPA to include such things as a thesis or a good distribution of courses, including multiple advanced courses taken at the 400-level. Epstein supported including criteria beyond the GPA as an indication of what Amherst values. Committee members indicated they supported considering a modest breadth requirement, or perhaps looking at the number of departments in which a student has taken courses.

Barba said the distribution of grades is badly skewed, leading to problems at both the top and bottom level, complicating awards and also making it hard to determine when a student is actually struggling. The average GPA at the 90th percentile for seniors is currently 3.97 and only drops to 3.90 at the 75th percentile and to 3.77 at the 50th percentile. At the tenth percentile, the average GPA only falls to 3.30 and to 3.00 at the third percentile.

Sanborn thought a *summa* thesis could serve as evidence of a student's "faithfulness in duty as a scholar." Sayed said students consider a thesis to be an inefficient use of time by students hoping to go to law or medical school. Students are planning strategically how to get the maximum number of As. Epstein said students are being poorly advised if they think this because the letters the thesis advisor can write will serve a student far better than another A grade. Gomes agreed; the thesis provides a far stronger foundation for graduate school.

Hanneke asked about the reference to "excellence in culture" for the Woods-Travis Prize and how students would demonstrate that. Barba said some schools look at community service for Phi Beta Kappa. He also noted that last year 48% of grades were As, an indication that grade inflation has recovered from Covid and is again increasing. Kingston said that an untenured faculty member had contacted him to express frustration at feeling pressured to give As. The committee noted that grade inflation is a big problem; grades have been gradually increasing over time with the majority of grades now an A. Students only receive grades of B- or below at the tail end of the grade distribution. Barba shared charts showing that grade inflation is especially bad in the arts and humanities, which give significantly higher grades than STEM or social science courses (the average grade is 3.76 in courses in the arts and humanities, compared to 3.62 in Science and Math and 3.65 in Social Sciences). Grades dipped briefly following Covid and then continued to climb, with increasing compression at the top.

Barba said grade inflation also affects external fellowships. Students with high GPA are not necessarily ranked at the top of the class at Amherst. Gomes said this also has implications for the open curriculum. Students may avoid courses that might result in lower grades. Hanneke said the College could stop relying on GPA or adopt a policy of not releasing rank in class. Barba said that already is the policy, but external fellowships require an indication of class rank. Kingston said in the past a student with A+ grades across the disciplines would indicate real excellence, but others noted that the assignment of A+ grades varies across departments, so it too was an imperfect measure. Sanborn said the grade compression is one reason for adding other criteria for awards. Sayed said students would optimize for courses with the highest grades if an A+ were reintroduced.

Kingston asked how the committee wanted to proceed. Should the committee recommend that there be a thesis requirement for the Woods-Travis Prize? Should it recommend that additional criteria be considered for Phi Beta Kappa? Should there be a rubric for these awards? He thought there was insufficient time for departments to nominate students, so a rubric would have to include relatively quick and calculable factors, with a threshold for eligibility, such as GPA. It could, for example, require completion of a thesis and receiving *magna* honors. The committee noted that a thesis is a high impact practice and that was a good reason for including it as a prerequisite. Kingston said he would draft a memo and bring it back to the committee.

Distribution of 100/200/200/400-Level Courses

Barba said the data suggest that the availability of a course—in particular, the time when it is offered—determines how many students will take the course. In fact, scheduling has created a de facto curriculum for first-year students, determined by when courses are offered. He will update the heat map so the committee can see the slots when introductory courses (those with low barriers for entry) occur. Could there be a broader rotation for determining the slots for those courses? He thought departments should be aware of how scheduling affects course enrollments. The English department is experimenting with assigning levels to faculty for the courses they want to teach, but the autonomy of professors makes this kind of experiment hard to coordinate.

Epstein said when she first arrived she thought faculty should teach one course at each level each year. She now believes it would be better if faculty taught three courses at the 100- or 200-level and one course at the 300- or 400-level each year. The fundamental problem is that the curriculum needs more courses to be offered at lower levels, but many faculty prefer to teach upper-level courses. Kingston said the number of seats available is also important. If there are more seats for 100- and 200-level courses, it helps students. In essence, Epstein said, all faculty should aim to teach about 35 students each semester, with higher enrollments in the lower-level courses and lower numbers in upper-level courses.

Barba said the College previously had some very popular large general interest lecture classes—he mentioned a course that is still taught on Roman civilization, and introductory courses no longer taught in Russian literature and environmental history. At times, these courses served as a funnel for students into a major.

Kingston said the problem may be that faculty do not fully understand the importance of introductory level courses at accessible times for creating pathways into majors. Barba said it helps to signal the level by including “an introduction to...” in the course description. Sanborn said it is also necessary to reconfigure the schedule. Kingston said that the Committee on Student Learning is currently looking at the schedule and that he hoped they would bring a proposal to the CEP. Sanborn asked if Barba had comparative data on how other institutions schedule their classes. Barba said he did. Most other schools include more 8:30 classes as a regular time. The committee could define prime time hours and introduce a cap and trade system for utilizing those slots and also introduce rules about scheduling introductory courses during high peak times.

Infante asked about systems in which the registrar assigns times for courses to be taught. It would not be popular, but it could create a better distribution of courses. Sanborn said there must be a rational objective way to maximize the number of teaching slots. He asked about the history of this schedule, and Barba explained that it originated at a time when all courses were taught M/W/F or T/TH/S. Courses are no longer taught on Saturday (and infrequently on Fridays), but the system remains. Epstein added

that Amherst tries to maintain a schedule that will be close enough to the other Five College schedules to allow participation in the interchange, and the schedule is further complicated by athletics and arts events that occur in the afternoon and evening. A change would involve a major culture shift. Sanborn asked about the daily schedule at the other schools in the consortium. Barba said some are 50-minute centric, some 80-minute. Kingston suggested starting on Tuesday/Thursdays at 9 a.m. instead of 8:30 a.m. to encourage more faculty to offer courses at those times.

Sanborn said the schedule is not set in stone; there need to be more time slots, and courses need to be scheduled more intelligently. Hanneke said departments are supposed to include information on their web sites to guide new students on where to begin, but not all do. This too should change. Kingston said the committee would return to this issue at the next meeting.

Two Week Limit on Remote Teaching

Kingston said the committee had received a letter from Professor Fong (appended below) asking that the committee reconsider its rule limiting remote teaching to no more than two weeks. He asked if there was any interest in reopening the conversation to expand the length of time a faculty member could teach in remote mode. After a brief conversation, the committee wanted to reaffirm the two-week limit and noted that most department chairs will work hard to help faculty who find themselves in a difficult situation. Barba said a change in the direction that Fong suggested would also affect reaccreditation. The committee then as a whole reaffirmed its original decision that remote teaching should not exceed a period of two weeks.

The meeting adjourned at 10:50 a.m.

Letter from Fong:

Dear President Elliott, Provost Epstein, Associate Provost Tobin, Director Ratner, and Members of the Faculty Executive Committee and Committee on Educational Policy,

I write to propose that “two weeks” be changed to “six weeks” in the amendment to the Faculty Handbook proposed by the CEP and quoted in the Faculty Executive Committee’s September 18, 2023 [minutes](#), so that it will instead be:

“Faculty are expected to hold all scheduled classes. If faculty members are unable to teach class in person, they may reschedule the class, teach remotely, or communicate material asynchronously (for example, via recorded lectures) for no more than the equivalent of ~~two~~**six** weeks of classes during the semester. Alternatively, they may arrange for a colleague to teach in their place. In the event that faculty need to teach more than the equivalent of ~~two~~**six** weeks remotely, they should be in touch with the chair of their department to make other arrangements for the teaching of their classes.”

Prior to the pandemic, Amherst College has never had such restrictive rules about faculty decisions to reschedule a class, teach remotely, or communicate material asynchronously (for example, via recorded lectures), so why now? I see no reason why the pandemic should have caused the legislation of a new, permanent, much more inflexible and draconian restriction on faculty freedoms with regards to how an instructor runs a class. Instructors should be trusted to do what is best for their classes, just as we were trusted before the pandemic. But since the CEP seems to want to legislate this new restriction, I propose as a compromise increasing the number of weeks that faculty have discretion over from two to six, in the interest of harm reduction. Since classes are in session for 13 weeks, letting

faculty have more discretion for six weeks would still allow Amherst College to say that the majority of class meetings have to be in person and scheduled at the time they were originally scheduled for.

In addition to needing alternative teaching modes for contingencies that can be planned for but may still create unavoidable conflicts with class times, such as jury duty, conferences, guest lectures at other schools, weddings, funerals, and medical appointments that cannot be rescheduled due to the difficulty of getting timely appointments in light of increasing healthcare provider shortages, faculty may need to decide quickly, just hours or minutes before a class starts, to use an alternative teaching mode due to infection with COVID-19 as well as other illnesses, injuries, childcare emergencies and other family and caregiving emergencies, unexpected travel bans and visa restrictions, flight or traffic delays on the way back to campus, and inclement weather that makes the commute to campus dangerous. Contingencies like those described above may emerge suddenly, without enough time for an instructor to go through the often slow, laborious, and stressful process of requesting permission from a chair or other administrator and trying to find a colleague willing and able to substitute-teach. While it is likely to be rare for one instructor to have to deal with six weeks' worth of the above contingencies in one semester, such situations are likely to disproportionately impact instructors who are especially vulnerable and disadvantaged.

Many of these contingencies also occurred before the pandemic and the intensification of climate change (and were dealt with at the faculty's discretion, since prior to 2020 there has never been any rule about how often faculty who were unable to teach class in person, could reschedule the class, teach remotely, or communicate material asynchronously). But the pandemic and the increase it has caused in illnesses (acute and post-acute COVID but also other illnesses that have become frequent and intense due to COVID infection's tendency to dysregulate immune systems,--for lists of peer-reviewed articles documenting these problems, see [here](#) and [here](#)) disability, death, and shortages of healthcare workers, flight crews, teachers, childcare, disabled care, and elder care workers, illnesses, and disabilities) has further increased the frequency of contingencies such as infection with COVID-19 as well as other illnesses, childcare emergencies and other family and caregiving emergencies, unexpected travel bans and visa restrictions, flight or traffic delays on the way back to campus, funerals, and medical appointments that cannot be rescheduled due to the difficulty of getting timely appointments in light of increasing healthcare provider shortages, and the increasing frequency of natural disasters and extreme weather due to the intensification of climate change has also increased the frequency of childcare emergencies and other family and caregiving emergencies, flight or traffic delays on the way back to campus, and inclement weather that makes the commute to campus dangerous.

Some faculty may not wish to disclose their own or their family members' health conditions, or their dependent care or other family situations, to chairs, administrators, or colleagues, for fear of embarrassment, stigma, and discrimination. Faculty may also be reluctant to impose extra substitute-teaching obligations on their already stressed and overworked colleagues, most or all of whom may not be qualified to substitute-teach a particular instructor's particular class. Substitute-teaching arranged hastily at the last minute is likely to be of much lower quality than an alternative teaching mode chosen by the instructor of a class that fits the needs of that class. Untenured faculty may worry that needing a colleague to substitute-teach for them could negatively impact their future chances at tenure, promotion, or contract renewal. Colleagues may also resent having to substitute-teach at the last minute, on top of their already challenging workloads. If a substitute teacher is required after someone has used up their two weeks of alternative teaching modality time, untenured faculty may feel obligated to substitute-teach despite not wanting to.

Those (disproportionately women and younger, and thus untenured, faculty) who have to care for children or disabled or chronically ill family members, those who are themselves disabled or chronically ill, and those (disproportionately faculty of color and untenured faculty) with family members who live further away from Amherst and/or have fewer resources thus are more likely to need emergency care and assistance from family members are especially likely to need to use alternative teaching modes for more than two weeks, and also especially likely to fear stigma, embarrassment, and resentment if they reveal very private family or health situations and impose on their colleagues to substitute-teach. Such faculty are likely to be disproportionately women, immigrants, faculty of color, and/or untenured faculty, since women are especially likely to have dependent care responsibilities, since family members of immigrants and people of color are likely to have fewer financial and social network resources to provide dependent care than family members of white non-immigrants, since family members of immigrants and faculty of color are more likely to be living in places more diverse than western Massachusetts, since immigrants and newer and younger faculty are more likely to have surviving family members living far away who have not yet had a chance to move closer to Amherst and/or may not want to make the sacrifices to do so given the possibility of the untenured faculty member needing to move elsewhere due to not getting tenure or contract renewal, and since newer and younger faculty are more likely to be untenured, women, immigrants and/or people of color given recent diversification efforts. On the [Faculty Governance survey](#), a preference for hybrid or virtual faculty meetings was especially strong among assistant professors (82%), faculty of color (80%), and women faculty (73%)--three groups that have long faced particularly significant inclusion and equity challenges, which have been exacerbated by COVID-19 and climate change.

Concern about these issues may cause faculty to teach in person even when alternative teaching modes would be better for their own as well as their students' health and safety, as well as for the quality of the teaching. Faculty who anticipate such issues may also be motivated to try to teach only one or two days a week, thus exacerbating the prevalence of classes that meet only once a week and the bunching of class times in the middle of the week.

When a contingency makes it difficult or impossible for an instructor to come to class in person, rescheduled classes and remote and asynchronous teaching are likely to be pedagogically superior to the alternatives of substitute teaching or having the instructor come in person to class while injured, in pain, sick and infectious, and/or distraught at leaving their children and other dependents who need care in unsafe conditions. Remote and asynchronous teaching got a bad reputation during the pandemic because there were many weeks at the start of the pandemic and the start of each semester when all faculty were suddenly and unexpected required to teach remotely and asynchronously, including many faculty who disliked and were bad at these modes of teaching and had not planned on or prepared for them. The quality of remote and asynchronous teaching will be much better when faculty have discretion over when and whether to use them, and can develop thoughtful plans in advance for how best to use them if a contingency occurs.

The option to reschedule a class, teach remotely, or communicate material asynchronously for alternative teaching modes should therefore be available at instructors' discretion, without requiring any to seek special permission from chairs or other administrators, for at least six weeks per course.

Please put a link to this message in the minutes of the Faculty Executive Committee and the Committee on Educational Policy. Thanks for your consideration, and best wishes for the challenges ahead.