

## **Committee on Educational Policy**

**December 7, 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.

### **Target-of-opportunity request**

The committee discussed a request for a target-of-opportunity (TO) hire.

### **Five College Exchange policy**

The committee briefly discussed a revised draft to alter the Five College Exchange policy, adding that the petition process would only be activated after the registrar had a chance to approve or deny the majority of requests, based on past policies. The committee will return to this policy in January.

### **Fall registration for first-year students**

At 10:10 a.m. Kingston welcomed Angie Tissi-Gassoway, chief student affairs officer and dean of students, Kiara Vigil, dean of new students, and Becky Catarelli, registrar, to the meeting to discuss the committee's proposed changes to the registration process for first-year students. Kingston explained the reasons for looking for a different approach—in particular, that the current approach unfairly disadvantaged students whose slots fall at the end of the day, leaving them unable to register for courses in some of the most popular fields. He said the committee is interested in replicating the process used for regular registration for first-year students, with faculty advising them about their registration choices via Zoom in August and then meeting with the students in person during Orientation. The committee thought this would result in a more equitable process.

Tissi-Gassoway asked for more information about the issue that requires fixing. She also wanted to know what equity means in practice? Vigil echoed her questions and asked whether the CEP has collected any data on this topic. Both said that they had no concerns about the current process.

The committee said they were basing their concerns on their own experiences as advisors. Sanborn asked Vigil and Tissi-Gassoway if they had feedback from frustrated students. Tissi-Gassoway said she had not. On the other hand, she has heard from students who were grateful to be enrolled in four courses when they arrived because it reduced their anxiety. Catarelli said she has heard a few complaints, but not many. Vigil said students need a sense of certainty when they arrive. The randomized lottery for advising slot times may feel inequitable to some, but the resulting certainty of registering for four actual courses reduces students' anxiety. She said running the process on Zoom can be an intense experience, even with help from a curated group of faculty (across disciplines) who provide support to the students.

Kingston said this year, as part of the curated group of faculty on Zoom, he met with a number of students who had been shut out of a lot of courses. This had resulted in a good deal of stress for those students. Although they were told they could take the courses the next semester, the frustration of being locked out of everything—not just one course—felt especially unfair. He noted that the lottery that assigns slots is not entirely random, since transfer and SummerBridge students receive first priority for registration. This might also lead to students being funneled into classes in non-random ways, affecting the levels of diversity in classes and the opportunities for students to make broad connections. Tissi-Gassoway thought it would be reasonable for SummerBridge students to be included in the randomized slots in the future.

Hanneke added that the problem is not that students are closed out of a single course; those with late slots are closed out of many classes. He thought it would be preferable to have a system in which students might be closed out of one course, but not four. He also noted that departments are now creating their own processes to deal with the problem, so before this trend spreads, he thought it would be good to find a solution for everyone. He also spoke in favor of scheduling the Zoom sessions with advisors over a longer period (perhaps over a period of perhaps three weeks) would have advantages, although he noted that Zoom is a poor medium for a student's first meetings with a faculty advisor and is particularly challenging for students who lack the technical skills or access to the internet.

Infante said she was interested in having students meet with their advisor in person during Orientation. Sanborn added that studies on retention say students need two things: a cohort and contact with a professor. He did not believe Zoom interactions were helpful. It's a cold medium and does not lend itself to creating a sense of connection. He would like there to be a scheduled meeting with advisors during Orientation.

Tissi-Gassoway said Orientation used to run for two weeks, and it was simply too long and laborious for all those involved. President Elliott would like it to be at most a week, so it will be a very busy week, and it should be a robust program that engages the faculty and students. The College has not had an Orientation director for the last two years—her office is just posting the position now—and a new director would present an opportunity to build a creative program. She thought it would be possible to make some aspects of this process more predictable while making it better for students. The College cannot address technical inequities before students arrive, but once they arrive, the College can address some of those gaps. She described herself as open to whatever is right for the community. At most institutions, students are registered for classes before they arrive on campus. She thought it was important for students to have certainty about some things before they arrive. The provost said many campuses are moving to early advising and registration. Williams registers students in July. That said, she worried that doing it too early might compromise the quality of the advice students would get.

Kingston asked if the registrar could enable students to register for one course at a time by gradually increasing the cap on the number of registered classes from one to four over a period of hours or days, while enforcing course caps and allowing students to register first-come first-served. This would still give certainty and would provide more equity. Catarelli said Workday cannot manage this. Sanborn suggested that, alternatively, after the first round, students who have the worst luck could register before everyone else as a way to mitigate the randomness of the lottery. Hanneke asked whether other schools require the students to be present to register. Students could submit a ranked list of courses to the registrar, who could then process them in their absence. Barba explained that most schools have a required curriculum and offer enough courses to ensure that students will be able to fulfill their requirements.

Vigil said spring registration is chaotic and unpleasant. She would like to give students a first experience that helps them manage the chaos and does not think the registration process used in other semesters should be the students' first experience at Amherst. Students who are not savvy and who lack support at home will find this process difficult. She was also concerned about introducing a process that would require faculty to be present at these times. While she agreed that advising in person is ideal, she thought students would still prefer the certainty that comes from doing this process earlier in the summer.

Catarelli said some assistance from particular departments might be helpful. For example, students could express interest in the Psychology and Math courses, and those departments could then run a lottery to manage the registration process. Kingston said it would be especially helpful if the lottery occurred prior to registration. Vigil agreed. It is the persistent student who gets into the intro psychology course, although Catarelli said that was not necessary this year because the department added a section.

Barba said that the old system allowed students to register for most of the courses they wanted and then dropped them the next day, leading to a lot of stress. In the end, the pattern of who was dropped was highly problematic, and less than half of all students had a viable schedule at the end of registration. In the current system, students are disadvantaged for all four courses if their appointment occurs at the end of the day. Instructor permission requirements set by departments further complicate registration. Students often choose other courses because they want certainty. The CEP was imagining a dream round in which everyone would register for whatever courses they wanted, which would be followed by a day when faculty and administrators would help the students who get dropped from courses find alternatives. Tissi-Gassoway asked about the next steps. Kingston said the CEP will continue to discuss this next semester, but in the end, the Office of Student Affairs designs Orientation, and the CEP was grateful that they had taken the time to hear their concerns.

The meeting adjourned at 10:55 a.m.