

Committee on Educational Policy

February 14, 2024

In attendance: Faculty: Christopher Kingston, chair; Mekhola Gomes; David Hanneke; Catherine Infante; Geoffrey Sanborn. Provost and Dean of the Faculty: Catherine Epstein, ex officio. Students: Zane Khiry '25. Director of Institutional Research and Registrar Services: Jesse Barba, invited attendee. Recorder: Nancy Ratner, Director of Academic Projects.

Chris Kingston, chair of the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP), called the meeting to order at 2:15 p.m. in Porter Lounge. The committee approved the minutes from the previous meeting.

FTE rankings

Kingston asked the committee to return to its discussion of FTE requests.

Proposal for a new course evaluation system

Kingston next turned the committee's attention to a proposal for a new course evaluation system. Barba, a member of the task force looking at packaged course evaluation systems, said IT built the current course evaluation system in-house, and while IT has been able to rescue the course evaluation system temporarily, the software is now suffering from problems that IT can no longer support. The goal of the task force is to purchase packaged software that will be easier to maintain and easier to distribute, with better response rates from students. Barba noted that the packaged software under consideration—software used by Smith College—is the only company that can replicate much of the current course evaluation process. Explorance Blue can adopt the core evaluation questions in essay form (faculty will not be forced to use Likert style questions) and can provide reports for course evaluations from each student in two formats: attaching names for reappointment and tenure cases; removing names for faculty members reading course evaluations for their own course. It will not be able to offer the infinite flexibility of the current system, which allows senior faculty to write their own questions. Senior faculty can decide whether to use the common evaluation form, choose questions from a preloaded question bank, design their own questionnaire, or opt out of the automated process. Faculty members could decide whether students will receive the questions via email or Moodle.

Epstein said the Faculty Executive Committee (FEC) had examined a report from this task force and has been discussing the options with the Tenure and Promotions Committee (TPC). She thought the CEP should also consider certain aspects of course evaluation. Epstein said she thinks the course evaluations should be open for eight days before classes end, so that faculty who teach once a week could choose to do the evaluations in the penultimate class, and that they should remain open for just a day or two after classes end. The CEP thought that time frame was appropriate. Members said they did not believe the timeline should extend after classes end and preferred a deadline before final exams begin. Barba noted the software would send automated reminders if students do not submit their evaluations.

Kingston said he hoped this automated system would result in course evaluations being framed more consistently across departments, but Epstein said that while the framing could be consistent, each department might differ on who speaks to the students in advance of the students filling out the evaluations. In some cases, the department chair might come in to talk about the process with students,

in other cases assistant professors might do so with their own students. The committee endorsed the idea of adopting the automated course evaluation software. The provost said the TPC will also consider whether this software is appropriate.

Data Science Initiative

The provost next shared a memo from a group of faculty interested in a Data Science Initiative (DSI) that would bring together an interdisciplinary group of 25 faculty from eight departments, distributed across all three divisions. This DSI group would like to create a forum for faculty research talks, panels, invited talks by external experts, and workshops and tutorials on using DS beyond traditional fields. These would be organized around the theme of Data and Society. The proposal emphasized that the DSI is not designed to lead to a program or a major. Rather, the DSI hopes to enrich the intellectual life of the faculty. It asks for a modest annual budget to cover material for workshops, refreshments for activities, invited speakers' travel and accommodation, and occasional honoraria.

Epstein said she believes the DSI advisory committee should have a charge, and she said she was not opposed to appointing a DSI director to manage activities. Gomes asked whether this should be part of the Center for Humanistic Inquiry (CHI) since data are now widely used in nearly every discipline. Epstein said this group does not want to be subsumed under the CHI. She mentioned that she has already provided \$15,000 to support lectures and help from an ADC. Kingston noted that there is a lot of faculty interest and no desire to create a major. He suggested the director's position could be considered college service. Epstein said that although she has already provided some support for this initiative, she wanted to consult with the CEP before taking further steps. Hanneke and Kingston both said they fully supported the idea behind establishing this working group of faculty, and no one on the committee opposed the idea. Kingston said he thought the idea of linking data science to society resonated well with the recent initiative to link scholarship to the "greater good."

Asian American and Pacific Islander Studies (AAPIS) Major

The committee next turned to a proposal for a new major in Asian American and Pacific Islander Studies (AAPIS). The committee thought the proposal for a new program and major was compelling and well-crafted, with evidence of sustained student interest over time and broad support among faculty and alumni. The recent "cluster" hires mean that the necessary pieces to support a vibrant major in this important field are now or will soon be in place.

Khiry noted that students are passionate about this. Hanneke agreed that the proposal makes a strong intellectual and moral case for the major but wished the practical case had addressed the relative dearth of courses, low enrollments in current APIS offerings, and the relatively small number of faculty interested in being part of this major. He noted that comparing the program to German did not strengthen the case, and comparisons to BCBP were less apt, since BCBP majors take most of their courses in existing departments.

While this major is clearly desired by students, Kingston said he also hoped that diverse groups of students would find ways to talk to each other rather than isolate themselves increasingly in their own spaces. Once established, he thought it likely that this major will draw students away from American Studies and Asian Languages and Civilizations (ASLC). He also was concerned about the proliferation of closely related majors, an issue that the CEP may need to consider more closely in the future.

Gomes said the program has strong support from ASLC and is drawing on substantial student interest. AAPIS courses in ASLC already attract high enrollments; she expected additional courses to contribute to the ASLC program and draw many students. Sanborn said the English department has many majors interested in the topic and faculty who would want to be a core part of the program. The committee agreed unanimously that this is an important and needed field and asked Kingston to inform the FEC of its strong support.

African Studies Program

Kingston next asked the committee to consider a relatively brief proposal for establishing an African Studies program. Previously the CEP had received a self-study and external evaluation investigating the possibility of an African Studies major.

Khiry asked why this has been proposed as a separate program from Black Studies rather than a sub-offering, since Black Studies already has courses on these topics. Sanborn asked if the Black Studies department had considered becoming an Africana Studies department, so as to bring classes on Africa and classes on the African diaspora into a closer relationship with one another.

Epstein said the College requested an external review a few years ago and learned that Black Studies does not wish to be responsible for African studies. It does not believe African Studies is represented in its curriculum, and while it would be willing to house the program, they do not currently have the faculty to staff an African Studies program. The department lacks key lines for an African Studies Program and key courses in its curriculum. This proposal recommends an initiative that would eventually transform into a program, providing a way for faculty in this area to start building community and convince colleagues in other departments to create lines.

Infante said there is little representation for North Africa at Amherst, despite its importance. Epstein agreed and added that North Africa does not fit easily within Black Studies. She said, like data science, she wanted to inform CEP of interest in this area, but did not think any further steps were needed. Restricted funds will support the needs for now. If no department wants to support lines, that will create problems. This is just an intellectual working group for now. Hanneke requested that the group use a term other than “program” to describe itself. Programs at the College host majors, and while this proposal countenanced eventually mounting a major, at this time it seems more like a working group of faculty with a common interest. Kingston said it was puzzling and disappointing that the proposal, though relying heavily on the external review as a rationale, was opposed to the external review’s emphatic recommendation to integrate African Studies within a renamed and reimagined Black Studies department. Infante said many are concerned about faculty who are divided between departments. There might be a need to rethink this practice. Kingston agreed, and suggested that the long-standing department-based structure may at some point become a constraint given the proliferation of programs and departments in closely-related areas of study, and that some kind of pan-department organizing structure might be useful. Sanborn said that the proposal does not address student demand. Success of the program will depend on student interest. Kingston added that just one or two students a year have participated in the Five College African Studies certificate program. He nevertheless thought it an important topic and encouraged faculty to join together to discuss this further.

The meeting adjourned at 3:40 p.m.