

Committee on Educational Policy

April 10, 2024

In attendance: Faculty: Christopher Kingston, chair; Mekhola Gomes; David Hanneke; Catherine Infante; Geoffrey Sanborn. Students: Gent Malushaga '25. Provost and Dean of the Faculty Catherine Epstein; Invited guest: 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 2:15 p.m. in Porter Lounge. Kingston mentioned a few possible issues that have arisen, including rules about triple and quadruple majors; whether to adopt a policy preventing course withdrawal after a student has failed a class for academic dishonesty; and whether to remind faculty that courses should not be populated based on when the students have registered. The committee asked the provost to remind faculty of course registration policies at the upcoming faculty meeting. Hanneke said he would be interested in seeing the data on triple and quadruple majors and the number of students whose majors are cross-registered with other divisions versus those that are within a single division before discussing triple and quadruple majors. Barba said he would assemble that information before the next meeting.

Revising the Course Schedule

Kingston welcomed David Hall, chair of the Committee on Student Learning (CSL), to the meeting to discuss a proposal that would expand the number of blocks in the course schedule, extend the part of the day when courses could be scheduled, and use classrooms in a more efficient manner. Hall said the current course schedule at Amherst is causing some significant curricular challenges. Among the problems is a clustering of courses at certain times (typically in the middle of the day), which prevents students from fully exploring the open curriculum and causes a shortage of appropriate classrooms for courses that are taught in periods of high demand. These problems have been recently exacerbated by the growth of the faculty, which has resulted in an appreciable increase in the number of courses taught. The growth of classrooms has not kept pace, nor can anyone realistically expect it to.

Hall said the existing schedule prioritizes MWF 50-minute and T/TH 80-minute cadences and also includes a few opportunities for MW 80-minute courses. There are neither official time blocks in the evenings nor any (other than labs) that run past 4 p.m.

Turning to challenges that accompany the existing schedule, Hall said course offerings tend to cluster between 10 a.m. and 1 p.m. This reduces the ability for students to take a wide variety of courses across the curriculum. The heavy use of classrooms at peak times also makes it difficult to assign appropriate classrooms to courses. The early end of the typical academic day (before 4 p.m.) does not scale well for a future in which there are perhaps more faculty and more course offerings. Compounding this last issue, faculty meetings now begin at 3 p.m. on some Fridays, making the 3-4 p.m. MWF 50-minute meeting times no longer particularly useful. He also noted that transit times between some academic buildings exceed the ten-minute gap between course starting times, and the existing schedule is relatively inflexible with respect to extending the time between classes.

Turning next to the proposed new schedule, Hall said it would extend the academic day somewhat earlier in the morning (from 8 a.m.) and later into the afternoon (to 5:30 p.m.). Every day would have the same pattern, with back-to-back 80-minute slots that each overlap only one 50-minute slot (except

in the early morning block A). The schedule also adds a special Monday evening set of meeting times (blocks G and H). The late afternoon MWF 50-minute times (blocks E and F) can avoid the difficulties with the occasional Friday faculty meeting by becoming 75-minute meeting times on those weeks. Hall did not anticipate that the earliest and latest times would be highly subscribed compared to the popular midday offerings. Nevertheless, the expansion space would help distribute the course offerings over the entire day.

Continuing, Hall said the proposed schedule de-densifies the MWF 50-minute meeting times, but in so doing it also permits the introduction of non-overlapping MWF 80-minute meeting times. Thus, choosing an 80-minute MW course does not mean blocking out courses that meet in two separate 50-minute slots, as is true for the existing schedule. The symmetry of the proposed schedule could easily permit course meeting times that are not typically useful or possible within the existing schedule, such as three 80-minute meetings per week within the same block, or two 80-minute meetings and one 50-minute meeting within the same block. It would be relatively easy to add five minutes transit time between course meetings by reducing the MW and T/TH 80-minute course meetings to 75 minutes. The MWF 50-minute course meetings are necessarily de-densified as a result of moving 80-minute course meeting possibilities to MW without introducing additional overlap. Hall said the CSL felt on balance that this is an acceptable trade-off, as the trend of course offerings college-wide is towards two 80-minute meetings and away from three 50-minute meetings per week. Hall noted that the CSL approached the challenge by dividing the problem into two parts—first, by proposing a new schedule that opens up more course meeting times by extending the academic day, and second, by establishing guidelines to ensure that the additional teaching times are used.

Hall said his goal at this point is to learn concerns that the CEP has about this proposal before the CSL sends it forward. Sanborn praised the schedule proposal for its greater flexibility, its symmetry, and its clarity. Hanneke, noting that orchestra and choral groups are now offered for credit, asked if they should be required to reserve specific slots to increase the transparency. Infante said she wondered about the optimal times for scheduling introductory language courses to avoid conflicts with other intro classes.

Sanborn said the combination of additional slots and the guidelines for filling them will help departments negotiate how they distribute their classes across the new schedule. He supported adding guidelines. Hanneke said he also liked the idea of guidelines. He hoped the result of the guidelines might make it possible for the CEP to measure whether departments were complying with CEP expectations, including whether departments are teaching more 100- and 200-level courses and assigning them to slots throughout the day so they are accessible to students. The committee noted that faculty should be able to request time slots but they should not expect to be guaranteed those slots. The committee also noted that students have repeatedly requested multi-year schedules for classes required for their major to allow them to plan ahead and decide when to study away. The CSL might recommend this as part of the proposal for a new schedule.

Hanneke asked about the athletes' responses to this schedule. Hall said students reported that if their sports were in season, they would probably avoid block F, but they also said that they would take a course in that block if it were required for the major or a course that the students really wanted to take. After 4 p.m., the student athletes thought they would probably not take classes while in-season. Hanneke asked Barba if he could create an enrollment heatmap comparing enrollments of in-season athletes, out-of-season athletes, and non-athletes. Barba said he would attempt to find the data. The CEP noted that faculty find it deeply frustrating when athletes disappear from class so they can participate in games on Fridays, but no schedule would prevent this from happening. Kingston said he

would prefer the schedule if it were shifted to begin half an hour later, as he felt that there would be a much greater willingness to schedule 80-minute classes at 9 a.m. rather than at 8.30 a.m., but he liked the proposed schedule and encouraged Hall to send this forward soon with an explanation of the rationale and goals for introducing a new schedule. He thanked Hall, and Hall departed at 3:20 p.m.

Target-of-opportunity

Kingston asked the committee to consider a request from the Classics department for a target-of-opportunity (TO) appointment

Formal policy for course withdrawals following academic integrity violations

Kingston said the question has informally been raised as to whether the College should adopt an explicit policy that prohibits a student from withdrawing from a course if the student has failed the course for academic integrity violations. Barba said the withdrawal can be denied with the justification that a final grade has been issued. There have also been cases where a student has failed an assignment for academic integrity and subsequently taken a "P" for the course or withdrawn. This has been allowed in the past, as the penalty in these cases was simply the failure of an assignment, and there would be no clear grounds to deny the student's use of policy options. Kingston said that he was not persuaded that a formal policy was necessary, and would trust that the class deans, who must approve all withdrawals, would continue to exercise appropriate discretion depending on individual circumstances.

The meeting adjourned at 3:45 p.m.