

## **Committee on Educational Policy**

**April 17, 2024**

**In attendance: Faculty: Christopher Kingston, chair; Mekhola Gomes; David Hanneke; Catherine Infante; Geoffrey Sanborn. Provost and Dean of the Faculty Catherine Epstein. Students: Gent Malushaga '25; Tom Nash '26. 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. The committee approved the minutes from the meetings on March 27, 2024, and April 10, 2024.

### **Course proposals**

The committee approved additional new courses and courses with major revisions.

### **Triple and quadruple majors**

Kingston next asked the committee to consider whether it is educationally advantageous for students to pursue more than two majors. He also shared letters on this topic from a student and a faculty member who held opposing viewpoints. Barba shared data showing that the number of triple and quadruple majors has grown from four or five per year (2019-2022) to 10-12 per year for the last two graduating classes (2023-2024). Sanborn said the trend toward declaring multiple majors might be viewed by students as a way to appeal to graduate programs or employers. He thought this might have grown out of a mistaken understanding of what graduate programs actually value. To discourage this trend, he suggested a policy that would allow students to graduate with no more than two majors. Students could still take a wide range of courses—including many of the required courses for multiple majors; they just could not declare additional majors.

Malushaga agreed that the open curriculum was best experienced through a range of coursework. He noted that students can easily fulfill the requirements for closely-aligned majors because those majors include a lot of overlapping coursework. Since the ease of pursuing these majors defeats the purpose of a liberal arts education, he thought the solution should target multiple majors within the same division.

Epstein said one way to manage this might be to allow students to receive credit from any course towards no more than one major. Barba wondered whether a department should have internal policies governing how courses taken in other departments will be applied to the major. Hanneke said there is currently no disincentive to approve the same courses for similar majors such as astronomy and physics. He worried that a policy against using a course for two majors and requiring a substitute course could actually result in a student taking more courses in similar subjects instead of fewer.

Sanborn said there are currently very few ways for students to distinguish themselves from their classmates, so if graduating with multiple majors is an available option, students will gravitate increasingly towards multiple majors. He thought it was important to discourage this arms race. To tamp down this trend, he strongly supported not allowing students to get credit from the institution for more than two majors; this would not prevent students from enrolling in courses that might constitute a major but might limit the number of those courses that the students would take.

Kingston disagreed, saying he thought students who had multiple passions should be allowed to pursue them unless the coursework overlapped so completely that the students were severely limiting their education. The paragon of the liberal arts is a broad education, so instead he suggested limiting students to two majors in a single division.

Sanborn noted that students who pursue multiple majors have less incentive and less time to write a thesis. Those students will not graduate with the satisfaction that comes from completing something and achieving some real depth in a field

Malushaga said he thought fewer students would have multiple majors if they were unable to apply the same courses to multiple majors. Barba agreed. Certain majors—for example, American Studies and Sociology and Education Studies—have close synergy with each other and with other majors, encouraging this trend. He noted that some majors have introduced rules that reduce the synergy. As a result, students combine the statistics major much less frequently with math and more frequently with majors in other fields, including biology and the social sciences.

Gomes noted that these synergies can be quite beneficial to students in interdisciplinary departments; students use what they learn from overlapping majors to achieve grounding in the discipline. If two majors require the same course, she thought the rules should allow this. Not allowing it would simply result in students taking even more courses in the same departments.

Sanborn said limiting the number of majors would require students to be more serious. He supported outlawing double dipping. Kingston noted that the current policy effectively encourages pursuing multiple majors in closely related fields, in the sense that having completed one major, the “cost” of completing another major with overlapping course requirements is lowered. He too thought students should not be allowed to count the same course for two different majors.

Hanneke asked how many triple majors write a thesis. Barba thought very few wrote theses, since they lacked the time. Most quadruple majors have combined two sets of synergistic majors. He added that he worries that Amherst may look less rigorous if it is possible for a student to graduate with four majors.

Infante asked about certificate programs. Barba said these are rarely used—students probably complete about 10-15 certificates a year—and his office usually only learns about these after students graduate. Workday is more robust and can track certificates and internal tracks within a major, so this information will become more available in the future. Most of the certificate programs are not well advertised, and some are not always logistically possible since they rely on cooperation among the Five Colleges.

Kingston, noting that most departments currently have to agree to double dipping, proposed eliminating double dipping and requiring students in each major to complete a minimum of 8 distinct courses that are not counted toward other majors. Nash said he thought eliminating double dipping would hurt double majors. Barba said eliminating double dipping would affect double majors in math and computer science. Some departments have specific statements as to whether they allow double dipping. Sanborn asked for the data on the number of courses taken by double majors for each field. Barba said it is difficult to count these due to all of the cross-listed courses but he would try to count the number of double majors and total number of courses students have in those majors and present this in a two-way grid. He also noted the difficulty enforcing rules against double dipping if the department is not encoding courses in Workday.

Infante said there might be fewer incentives for faculty to cross-list courses if departments do not allow double dipping. Malushaga pointed out that this would not limit students from taking courses, just prevent them from receiving credit for an additional major. He volunteered to draft language proposing a policy that would go into effect with the next entering class—in fall 2025—stating that students could not count any single course toward more than one major. Sanborn said each major should constitute an achievement for the student.

### **Instructor permission**

The committee then discussed whether the course proposal form should continue to allow instructors to require their permission before students can register for their course. Kingston said he thought there was some confusion about what the instructor consent option means and its proper use. Students who do not meet the prerequisites can always petition an instructor for entrance into their course. However, he found it difficult to imagine cases in which students who meet the prerequisites should be denied admission to a course unless the course is over-enrolled. Barba added that faculty can manage their fall enrollments by having two caps— a lower one for pre-registration in order to preserve some spots for first-year students, and a higher total cap for the course during fall semester add/drop. Kingston suggested removing the instructor permission option during the first round of pre-registration - when all courses are supposed to be open to all qualified students - while continuing the current policy of allowing faculty teaching over-enrolled courses to implement instructor permission following roster management week, so that they can manage a waitlist after hitting the cap. Since many currently approved courses require instructor consent, he suggested removing instructor consent from all courses while notifying faculty and providing a mechanism for them to reaffirm the use of the instructor consent option where appropriate. He suggested the committee decide how to proceed at the next meeting.

The meeting adjourned at 3:45 p.m.