

Committee on Educational Policy

March 27, 2024

In attendance: Faculty: Christopher Kingston, chair; Mekhola Gomes; David Hanneke; Catherine Infante; Geoffrey Sanborn. Students: Zane Khiry '25; Gent Malushaga '25; Tom Nash '26. Invited participant: 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 Converse 309. The committee approved the minutes from the previous meeting.

Updates

Last week the provost wrote to the faculty to say that technical problems had prevented a small subset of courses to move through the course-approval process before the last faculty meeting, and that, after consulting with the CEP and the Faculty Executive Committee (FEC), she took the unusual step of having the faculty vote on the proposals electronically so they could be approved before pre-registration. In response, she received at least four inquiries asking why six of the instructors had not been mentioned by name in the course description. Although the names have now been added to the descriptions, Kingston said he did not see why this would be an issue since the approval of courses is not conditioned on the identity of the instructor. Many courses are taught by multiple instructors with new ones rotating in from time to time, and no additional approval is required when the instructor changes. Course approval, therefore, should indicate approval based on the content and structure of the course when taught by any qualified instructor. The committee agreed. Epstein also heard from one faculty member who had expressed misgivings about two courses that were offered just once a week, arguing that this structure is generally not pedagogically appropriate for our students. Kingston said that he shared this concern, and noted that the committee had seen a troubling recent increase in such course proposals, concentrated in a small number of departments. In this case, one of the courses is a senior seminar, and the faculty approved a number of senior seminars to meet once a week in its vote at the recent faculty meeting. The instructor of the remaining class had offered a rationale for offering the class this way, following pushback from the CEP. The committee decided to allow the courses to move forward.

Kingston then reviewed the remaining issues that the committee has on its docket and asked about other topics. Sanborn said he would like to discuss the ability that faculty have to require instructor permission before students can register for their courses since this creates an unnecessary barrier that may be intimidating to some students. Barba said this option was intended to allow faculty to fill spaces after the pre-registration period ended, but it has been largely a failure. Most students are reluctant to wait for the instructor's permission to register and, instead, choose to enroll in an open class. This has resulted in several high-demand humanities courses and psychology courses ending up with enrollments under their cap. Kingston said he would add it as a future agenda item.

Academic Integrity

Kingston then welcomed Scott Howard, associate dean of students, and Corey Michalos, director of community standards, to the meeting to discuss the issue of academic integrity at Amherst. Michalos said the number of academic dishonesty cases reported by Amherst tends to be higher than the number published in the data on disciplinary issues by many peer institutions, but this may give a distorted

image of the actual problem. As an example, he noted that last year the University of Virginia (UVA), with an enrollment of 17,000, reported 10 cases, while Amherst, with an enrollment of 1,800 students, reported 36 cases. At UVA a single infraction results in expulsion, so faculty may be reluctant to make the accusation, and accusations may be harder to prove. This raises the question, he said, of how much dishonesty should be tolerated. He said most students have no idea what is written in the current honor code—first- and second-year students have not been asked to sign the statement—and the result is a high volume of infractions for Amherst’s relatively small population, with what appears to be over-reporting for students of color, perhaps based on racial stereotypes. To increase students’ understanding of community standards, he has been helping to revise the honor code, reducing it from four pages to three sentences which directly address academic integrity and respect.

Michalos, continuing, said it would be helpful if the faculty were to define their expectations for academic integrity clearly in their own classes and agree on how the institution should resolve cases that are problematic. The current numbers suggest that Amherst may have a problem with academic integrity. He thought one reason was that students arrive at Amherst from a range of backgrounds, and some have never been taught what it means to paraphrase someone else’s work or when they are required to cite a reference. Once they enroll, students become confused about when collaboration with other students is expected and when it is impermissible—and this can differ for a class assignment (when it might be encouraged) and an exam in the same class (when it might not be allowed), making the practice extremely difficult for students to navigate. The problem seemed to reach a peak during Covid, when cases nearly doubled due to the ease of collaboration and the move to remote learning. He noted that expectations also vary across campus: some departments have developed clear policies; others expect faculty to manage cases on their own. He said students admit to cheating at higher levels than are being reported, and AI is rapidly changing the landscape.

Malushaga asked whether faculty at Amherst might simply be more willing to identify cheating than those at other schools. Michalos said there are multiple problems. As already noted, students do not easily understand when collaboration is desirable and when it is unacceptable. He tries to help students understand this. If a paper reads very differently from other papers the student has written, Michalos works with the faculty member and student to understand the reasons and, if necessary, address what constitutes dishonesty.

Asked about reporting rules, Michalos said faculty can share concerns about infractions with him at multiple levels. At the lowest level, the faculty member may not want to take any action but may want to make a note of a suspicion. He adds the information in that case to the student’s record but takes no action unless he sees a pattern forming. At the next level, the instructor might report a clear infraction, and he will then work with the student and instructor to understand how it occurred. He will also work with the instructor on how to manage the outcome—whether the student will fail the assignment, fail the course, etc.—and these outcomes are always based on the context in which the infraction occurred. If the instructor and student fundamentally disagree about the facts and the student does not accept responsibility for the violation, he initiates a review by the Community Standards Review Board (CSRB), the adjudication board composed of students, faculty, and staff. The CSRB is also convened if the sanction is potentially in excess of one semester of suspension. The first level is important because it allows his office to serve as the central clearinghouse and to track if a student is engaging in academic dishonesty in multiple courses.

Hanneke asked whether last year’s 36 cases included only those which had resulted in a finding of responsibility or whether Michalos had also included other reported concerns—including those

requiring no action—in those numbers. Michalos said the number just includes cases that resulted in a finding of responsibility. Hanneke said he appreciated that he could report possible problems without having the report necessarily lead to further action and was reassured that this would help track whether the infraction was a single error of judgment or part of a pattern of behavior. He thought the second option scares him because of its time-consuming nature and may raise fear of retaliation for untenured faculty; he thought most faculty would avoid it if possible. Michalos noted that faculty always have full control over the grade outcome for misbehavior, regardless of decisions made by his office about sanctions like probation or suspension, and students have the ability to appeal the decision using the grievance process.

Howard noted that most of the office's work is reactive, but the office would like to think strategically about how to partner with faculty and engage in more proactive conversations. They see a range of behaviors—from purchasing a paper written by someone else to looking over a shoulder at someone else's work; plagiarism alone can take 13 different forms.

Gomes said this is the first year she has experienced real problems, and she was inclined to blame the ease of using ChatGPT and Grammarly (she now finds its mechanistic voice, which invariably results in a poorly written paper, easy to recognize). She suspected that students, having grown up on Wikipedia, assume that anything they see on YouTube or ChatGPT will be accurate. She also finds that many report data—often inaccurate data from ChatGPT—without citations. She is unsure how to grade such unacceptable work.

Malushaga expressed surprise that students would submit something written by ChatGPT or use Wikipedia as their only source for an essay. Michalos said this is partly the result of the dissonance from class to class on whether these tools are acceptable. Howard said students tend to make poor decisions during moments of pressure, and some simply do not understand what is appropriate behavior.

Kingston asked whether Michalos thought the way faculty members structure their courses might contribute to students engaging in academic dishonesty. He asked how instructors could avoid overwhelming students with work and what might help students make better decisions. Michalos said every class should have a syllabus with a statement about the rules of engagement for the course, explaining what will constitute a claim of intellectual dishonesty, how the goals of the course are tied to academic integrity, and why this matters. Faculty should name the resources that students cannot use and provide timely reminders about what is allowed—at the beginning of an exam, before assignments are due, and so on. He said word choice matters and encouraged the use of positive language. Rather than focusing on cheating, for example, faculty should emphasize that academic integrity is the cornerstone of what students should learn at Amherst. However, integrity itself is not well defined. Howard said if faculty are very specific on their syllabus about their behavioral expectations, it helps students and also helps his office. Define behavior as a motivating ideal when explaining the reasons for not accepting work done by ChatGPT or its counterparts.

Hanneke thought it would be helpful if Michalos provided model language for faculty to include on their syllabus. He asked whether Michalos would support a mandatory reporting policy and what consequences might occur if there were one. Michalos said he would welcome a mandatory reporting policy and said it would not change what he does since he always gives options to the faculty member for how to navigate these matters.

Epstein asked if there would always be an investigation if a faculty member reported a suspected infraction. Michalos said an investigation would not necessarily follow. He always asks the instructor if he can talk to the student, and the faculty member usually agrees to the conversation. When punitive measures are not being considered, a conversation can become a valuable learning moment. Hanneke asked if this would result in a mark on the student's official record. Michalos said it would be on the student's record but it would not generally be shared with external parties. The office only reports a small part of the student's record, and a suspected allegation that did not result in a finding would never be reported as an infraction.

Barba said many people find the punishment process confusing. An instructor can assign a poor grade as a consequence of an infraction, but grades are considered independent of "punishment" since they do not result in a conduct letter after a formal litigation. Sanborn suggested Michalos share the information presented at the meeting at a department chairs' meeting and encourage faculty to partner with the office. Kingston thanked Michalos and Howard, and the meeting adjourned at 3:40 p.m.