

## **Committee on Educational Policy**

**May 1, 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. 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 previous meeting.

### **Breadth Requirement**

Kingston mentioned an appeal from a transfer student who wanted courses taken prior to Amherst to fulfill her breadth requirement. Noting that transfer courses were explicitly excluded from the breadth requirement when the policy was discussed and passed by the faculty, and given the logistical difficulties that would arise in categorizing courses taken outside Amherst, he said that the requirement is so modest that he thought the committee should retain its stance of not permitting appeals. The committee agreed.

The provost then said she thought cross-listed courses should count towards the breadth requirement, regardless of how they appear on the student's transcript. Kingston said this was originally not permitted because it would greatly increase the registrar's work at an extremely busy time for that office. Instead of asking the registrar to review all cross-listed courses—a time-consuming process that must be done manually—he proposed allowing students to appeal to the registrar by a particular deadline (for example, March 1) if their cross-listed course appears on their transcript in a department that would not otherwise meet the breadth requirement. He thought this would reduce the work for the registrar and move the onus for checking their courses to the graduating student. Malushaga noted that most students do not understand that the department that appears on their transcript matters. He thought there should be some communication to students about this. Barba said he was worried that students would petition to count courses taken at the Five Colleges or taken while studying away, but Kingston said the appeals process would apply only to courses taken at Amherst College, since courses taken elsewhere are explicitly excluded by the policy. The committee supported allowing petitions for cross-listed courses, provided the petition is received by a posted deadline.

### **Policy Proposal to Limit Number of Majors**

Kingston next turned to the policy that the committee had approved the previous week to limit students to no more than two majors. He noted that, while composing the letter to the Faculty Executive Committee (FEC) proposing this revision, he noticed that the failed 2018 proposal to outlaw triple majors had included substantial additional changes intended to clarify the catalog language regarding the major requirement, and that a faculty member at the conclusion of the December 2018 faculty meeting suggested that some of those changes might be brought back to the faculty for reconsideration, which was never done. He therefore wanted to check with the committee whether he should send forward the wording approved last week, with this new recommendation to simply limit majors to no more than two, or to revive the 2018 language. He added that he was inclined to stick with the simpler proposal that had been agreed last week, and Sanborn agreed. Infante suggested adding a reference to

“programs,” but otherwise keeping it the same. Malushaga said it might be unclear whether students have to declare each major before the end of their sophomore year, with no subsequent changes. Kingston suggested changing the wording to “cannot have more than two majors” (rather than “cannot declare more than two majors”) to allow for a subsequent change in a student’s chosen major. Hanneke supported adding references to programs and also interdisciplinary majors. Kingston said he would make those changes and run the final letter by the committee before sending it to the FEC.

### **Policy Proposal for Classes with Fewer than Five Students**

Epstein asked whether the committee wanted to think about setting a policy for the minimum number of students necessary to run a course. She noted that she would recommend requiring a minimum of five students for a course to be offered, with an exception for upper-level language courses because she felt committed to offering four years of language instruction, even though several language departments do not have enough students to fill their classes with higher enrollments. The first time a faculty member has a low enrollment, she thought the provost should have a conversation with the instructor, but if there is a second time the class should be canceled, with the expectation that the instructor would make up the course in the following two semesters. She thought the current arrangement was inequitable, could lead to morale issues among faculty, and creates a poor learning environment for students. Currently, if no students enroll in a course, she meets with the instructor, and she contacts the chair if there are repeated problems.

Sanborn noted that small enrollments affect students’ course evaluations, inhibiting critical comments. At many places, the enrollment requirement is closer to 8 or 15 students, depending on the size of the institution. Epstein said Amherst is very unusual in that it does not cancel classes with very low enrollments. Sanborn said, for the health of departments, he thought the provost, and perhaps the CEP, should monitor these low enrollments.

Epstein said this is particularly a problem with 300- and 400-level courses. Infante said this would have a major impact on some departments. Epstein said it would cause disruption initially but there would also be fewer such courses in the future. Barba said about 10% of the courses (40 or 50 courses each semester) have five or fewer students enrolled, mostly in the humanities.

Hanneke suggested faculty not be credited with meeting their teaching expectations if they are only teaching five or fewer students. Kingston thought it should be seen as a less serious problem if the instructor is teaching a very large class at the same time. That allows the students in departments that have many high-enrollment classes to experience a different sort of educational experience.

Barba said one option might be to remove a course from the catalog after a low enrollment and not approve it again without some evidence that it will attract more students. He could build a two-year average enrollment for faculty. Responding to Kingston’s comment, he reminded the committee of the Honig Index that showed the different ways that students experience their education, depending on the subject they are studying.

Infante said the new schedule, if it passes, would allow the next provost to hold departments responsible for making sure their courses are scheduled in a way that students can take them. Gomes agreed and added that departments may need to offer certain upper-level classes, but they should also work to observe enrollment trends and offer enough 100-level courses to ensure that their upper-level courses will be filled. Otherwise faculty will be competing for the same small group of majors.

Hanneke asked who would enforce this. The committee thought it should be the provost, although the CEP could also request to see the list of low enrollment classes. That information could inform subsequent FTE requests. Sanborn thought this topic needed more discussion and recommended that it be continued next year. The committee asked that it be added to next year's agenda.

### **Proposal for a New Course Schedule and Scheduling Guidelines**

Kingston then turned to the final item on the agenda for this academic year: the new course schedule proposed by the Committee on Student Learning. The committee enthusiastically agreed that this schedule exceeded all expectations. Members also were attracted to the recommendation that the schedule accommodate a 15-minute break between classes to allow for the greater distances across campus.

Hanneke said that, while he liked the schedule, he worried that the four introductory STEM courses, which rotate according to a negotiated agreement, would continue to occupy the morning blocks, and, with the later start, would push all science labs to 2:30 p.m. Barba said this schedule assumed that advanced labs would move to the morning slots, and introductory labs would be scheduled in the afternoon slots. Kingston said he was unsure how the evening blocks would work for 50- or 80-minute classes. Barba said the hope was to provide a bit more flexibility for extended seminars or labs. Kingston thought that while there would be a period of adjustment, course schedules were likely to evolve to make use of the extra available blocks.

The committee thought the guidelines were helpful and that the schedule would create the possibility of a better distribution of courses across the week. If that does not work, hard rules may become necessary. In the meantime, Sanborn noted that the schedule also adds norms that faculty will talk to each other about their schedules before submitting their course proposals. Hanneke said he would still like to see a heat map with the athletic enrollments. He thought it might be revealing. Gomes also thought it possible that this schedule will have an impact on the number of students in very small classes, thereby reducing some of the concerns discussed earlier. Kingston said this schedule should make more classrooms available and allow faculty to teach in better classrooms. He recommended sending this to the FEC with the CEP's endorsement. The committee agreed.

The committee then thanked Kingston for his outstanding leadership of the CEP, Epstein for her contributions as provost, and Ratner for her work supporting the committee and adjourned at 3:45 p.m. for the year.