

## **Committee on Educational Policy (CEP)**

**April 8, 2016**

**In attendance: Faculty: David S. Hall, chair; Alexander George; Klára Móricz; Sean Redding; Catherine Sanderson. Students: Samuel Keaser '16, Rashid (Chico) Kosber '17, by phone; Steven Ryu '16.**

**Recorder: Nancy Ratner, Associate Dean of Admission and Researcher for Academic Projects**

David Hall, Chair of the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP), called to order the CEP meeting at 8:30 a.m. in the Kennick Room in Cooper House. The committee approved the minutes of the meeting of March 25, 2016, and approved a change to one course.

David reported that departments have now received their FTE decisions.

### **Course credit hours**

David then welcomed Janet Tobin and Jesse Barba for a discussion of the need to make revisions to the Catalog language on page 71, 2., under *Requirements*, which describes Amherst's system of awarding credit for courses. Janet provided some background about how NEASC (Amherst's accrediting agency) has interpreted federal guidelines on credit-hour policies. She began by sharing her experience as a part of a reaccreditation team for another institution. That school, which had a credit-hour system that closely resembled Amherst's, was found to be out of compliance with federal requirements. The institution was required to submit a special out-of-cycle report to NEASC to offer clarity about how it would meet the requirement. Five years after the team visit, the school changed to a variable credit system in which credit is based on the number of contact hours for each course. Janet mentioned that, when providing training to those who will serve on accreditation teams, NEASC instructs them to pay close attention to compliance with federal credit-hour guidelines. NEASC frequently warns that, if higher education does not regulate itself in regard to the credit hour, the government is likely to intervene. For now, the policy is fairly flexible. The growth of online and competency-based education programs has prompted increased scrutiny of the integrity of the credit hour from both accrediting agencies and the Department of Education.

Continuing, Janet said that, in the fall of 2013, the CEP took the first steps to address this issue by adding revised Catalog language to its letter soliciting course proposals. She believes that this step was prompted in part by the experience of the peer school described above, which raised awareness about the possibility of being out of compliance with the credit-hour standard under the Amherst system. At the same time, the CEP began monitoring courses to ensure that all meet for a minimum of 2.5 hours per week. Janet said it is now time to revise the Catalog language to bring further clarity about course expectations.

Jesse then explained that federal regulations define a credit hour as one course credit hour should equal one hour of classroom or direct faculty instruction and a minimum of two hours of out-of-class student work (or the equivalent in lab work, internships, studio work, etc.) for approximately fifteen weeks for one semester of credit, or the equivalent of two hours of work over a different amount of time. The review usually includes a reasonable determination (using sampling methods) of whether the

institution's assignment of credit hours conforms to commonly accepted practice in higher education. The college will probably need to ask each department to submit a sample of representative syllabi to demonstrate the ways in which Amherst courses align with its policy, and these would be shared with the review team.

Janet said it now seems propitious to revise the Catalog language, codifying current practice in regard to academic engaged time for Amherst courses. If the CEP approves this change this spring, the credit-hour language can be revised in the 2016-2017 Catalog. Since the CEP includes the Catalog language in its course solicitation letter each year, there will be a clear record that the faculty has been informed of college policy. She added that, if faculty would also agree to include workload expectations in their syllabi, it would provide additional evidence that the expectations are being communicated to students. Jesse explained that the NEASC team would review a representative and robust sample of syllabi to evaluate whether that the college is in compliance with federal guidelines. Senior officials at NEASC have indicated that this approach would be sufficient to show that the college is in compliance with federal requirements. The new Catalog wording would simply be a reflection of practice.

Jesse explained that, while there is some flexibility to the rule of one class hour and two hours outside of class for each credit hour—or 12 hours for a 4-credit course—the college would need to be able to demonstrate that, for courses that meet for fewer than 4 hours each week, students are academically engaged for approximately 9 additional hours outside of class. One option is to change to a variable credit hour system, though that is probably not the route that Amherst would choose. Another approach is to show compliance, for example by conducting an audit of course meeting times and student workload. According to the 2015-16 Catalog, approximately three-quarters (77%) of Amherst College classes meet for fewer than the requisite 4 hours (for 4 credits) per week, and an analysis of students' fall 2015 engagement shows that about 58% of Amherst students are in class for fewer than 16 hours a week. The goal of this Catalog change is to make sure that apparent current practice—rigorous expectations that require most students to work extensively outside of class—is represented accurately in the Catalog language.

Sean asked about the expectation that a faculty member note course expectations on syllabi. Janet said doing so would provide more transparency to students and would provide evidence to accreditors. If faculty members are willing to include that information on syllabi, the NEASC faculty steering committee could be asked to assemble a set of sample syllabi from across disciplines. She encouraged the committee to take that approach.

Turning to the Catalog change, Janet said that a relatively simple revision would be acceptable to NEASC: “Standard full courses are equal to four semester credits each. Half courses are equal to two semester credits. Our course system considers all standard full courses to have equal weight toward completing the degree requirements. Courses typically meet for at least three hours a week, with the expectation that ~~AN additional time may be spent~~ **NINE HOURS OF ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT BE SPENT IN CLASS**, lab, discussion, studio, film viewing, and/or preparatory work.” Alex suggested adding “office hours” to the list of engaged activities.

Alex then wondered why other institutions hadn't simply taken this approach, if this would satisfy the authorities. Jesse said the problematic schools are those that give credit for less-than-rigorous academic experiences, for example for life experiences. These schools would probably be expected to show more evidence that academic engagement is occurring. The authorities are also concerned with Pell Grant fraud. Alex thought there seemed to be an escape clause in the federal language. Sean said she thought Amherst could provide evidence of rigorous exams at the end of courses, and evidence that students have met established learning outcomes.

Janet finished by saying that the college was setting the stage this year for the NEASC review in spring 2018. The college has been advised to focus on particular things—evaluating the office of the provost as a mechanism for providing greater capacity for planning across campus; addressing the issue of faculty workload, working conditions, and compensation; addressing the goal of increasing faculty diversity and creating a supportive environment for faculty from a range of backgrounds; implementing college-wide assessment and reporting and augmenting the staff support for the office of institutional research; and implementing the strategic planning project. David thanked them, and Janet and Jesse left the meeting at 9:25 a.m.

### **Mellon grants**

David said Catherine E. had asked if members of the committee would be willing to participate in reviewing Mellon grant applications for the new Mellon program. Catherine S. and Sean volunteered.

### **Course credit hours**

Several committee members said they would be willing to add information to their syllabi. David said the committee will return to this conversation to approve the change in Catalog language at another meeting.

### **College calendar**

David said he will send everyone's comments on the proposed changes to the spring calendar for 2017, as conveyed in emails this week, to the College Council. Klára thought the comments should also be sent to the Committee of Six. David said that he would communicate the sense of the CEP, which first required achieving consensus. Sean asked whether the College Council was planning to bring both plans to the faculty, or propose just one. Catherine S. said she thought the College Council was planning to bring both and wanted to make room for a robust discussion by the faculty. Alex said it was clear that the Council was fully supportive of the first proposal (A) and wondered why they would bring both proposals forward. Sean agreed, saying it is unusual to go forward with two proposals. Klára noted that the Council had included the 13 ½ week proposal but had proposed it in a way that made it unpalatable, undermining the compromise as an alternative proposal.

Sean wondered if the committee might need some strategy as to how to represent its views to the faculty, given that the CEP as a committee has no consensus decision on the calendar. Klára said the CEP was being pushed to make extremely important decisions under very short timelines. The committee

generally agreed that being pressured to weigh in on such conversations by email was not conducive to healthy discussion of issues. Sean observed that the College Council has been frustrated by the response to its proposals, hence the pressure. Klára said that avoiding frustration is not a good reason to approve something that does not sound right.

The committee then turned to the students to hear their opinions. Sam said he supported the proposal for 13 weeks because it would provide a clear syllabus to students, and he thought the majority of students also preferred the shorter semester. Most students are exhausted by the end of the semester. Steven said he now supported 13 weeks. He thought it would not be good to have some classes finish earlier than others. Chico said he was now on the fence and also worried that having some courses finish later and others earlier would be a problem. He also had concerns about the programming that the 13-week proposal envisions for the 14<sup>th</sup> week. Sean said she thought the programming part of the proposal was unlikely to achieve broad participation during that final week since students would have other priorities. Klára said she wanted to raise the performing arts issue. The 13-week proposal completely changes the calendar, helping the sciences at the beginning of the semester and ignoring the needs of the performing arts at the other end. Having sufficient time is crucial for thesis work in the arts. She said the idea of a performance week would not work. Noting that many other colleges have a 13-week semester, Alex asked how they manage their performance schedule. Klára said other places might be able to work within the shorter semester but it is very difficult because many students leave campus after instruction ends. This would create an unhealthy imbalance that would affect hundreds of students. These performances are often at the center of the lives of many students.

David asked Catherine S. about the Princeton model, noting that individual faculty members can continue to offer their courses during the reading period. Catherine S. explained that Princeton has 21 days of reading period and exams; Amherst College has a more compressed period. She said she preferred the 13-week semester because she sees frantic students at the end of the semester, trying to finish papers, synthesize the material, etc. She viewed teaching as broadly construed—office hours, writing appointments, etc.—and did not think students would leave campus since doing so would have costs. She thought the committee should be mindful of the fact that students preferred this model. Klára predicted that once the college moves to a 13-week term, it will never return to 14 weeks. David said that, as a matter of practice, he was uncomfortable conveying individual comments to the Committee of Six on behalf of the CEP, and that committee members should instead feel free to send their own comments to that committee so the messages would then be broadly disseminated. Others agreed.

The meeting adjourned at 9:55 a.m.