

**Committee on Educational Policy  
December 12, 2018**

**In attendance: Faculty: Catherine Sanderson, chair; Lawrence Douglas; Tekla Harms; Tariq Jaffer; Edward Melillo. Students: Brooke Harrington '22. Catherine Epstein, Dean, *ex officio*. Recorder: Nancy Ratner, Director of Academic Projects.**

Catherine Sanderson, chair of the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP), called the meeting to order at 8:45 a.m. in the Mullins Room. The committee approved the minutes of November 28, 2018.

**New business**

Catherine E. said the fellows in the Center for Human Inquiry (CHI) are currently classified as staff. Since the fellows teach one course during their two years at the college, she would like to reclassify them as faculty, specifically as visiting lecturers. Since faculty need to be attached to departments, she proposed that, before the final selection of fellows, the CHI would invite relevant departments to decide whether they would like a particular fellow to become a visiting lecturer in their departments. The fellows, who are supported by restricted money from the Copeland fund, would have no other responsibilities to the department apart from the single course they would teach. The committee supported this reclassification.

**Pilot course registration process**

Catherine S. then welcomed Jesse Barba to the meeting for a discussion of the pilot course registration process. Prior to the meeting Jesse had provided data on the pattern of course drops—courses dropped both by faculty and by students—comparing changes to students' schedules before the pilot with changes during the pilot. He explicitly removed changes made to labs and discussion sections, administrative drops, and drops for students who withdrew for the semester. He noted that previously there had been spikes every year in dropped courses, with nearly 18% of students dropped over the last two days of the add-drop period (and 9% on the final day of add-drop). These late drops effectively prevented other students from registering for the empty seats. In anticipation of this occurrence each semester, the registrar encouraged faculty under the old system to accept a few extra students. Catherine S. noted that this remains a good idea. Jesse agreed but added that a large percentage of capped courses ended up short of the cap under the old system. In the pilot, with three rounds, most drops now occur during roster-management week. During the final two days of add-drop, the percentage of drops has fallen from 18% to 11%, and from 9% to 4% on the final day. He concluded from this that the pilot has had the desired effect. While 38% of students continue to drop courses as a normal part of shopping, fewer students are being dropped by the faculty after the semester begins: just 3% were dropped at the end of the first week of classes this year, and no one was dropped from all four courses this year.

Tekla thought these figures showing fewer students being dropped by faculty after the beginning of the semester provided the best evidence that the pilot has been successful and that it was managing the registration process better than the old system. She added that student-initiated drops during the add/drop period simply show that "shopping" continues to be a part of the course selection process. Lawrence noted that the only faculty-initiated drops during add-drop should be in the case of students not attending the first class or students lacking the necessary pre-requisites. Jesse agreed and said that the number of students dropped by the faculty during add/drop has fallen from 10% to 3%.

Lawrence then said that the one remaining problem in his experience is that students think a class is closed because there is no easy way for them to learn that other students who had registered for the class have changed their minds. This can lead to under-enrollment. He wondered if this has been a common issue in this new regime. Jesse said courses close if the cap is reached or if the room is filled (and the faculty member asks the registrar to close the course). Tekla said it is important to drop students on the first day if students don't attend the class. Lawrence said it is particularly a problem for seminars that only meet once a week. Catherine S. recommended admitting two extra students and keeping a waitlist. Jesse noted two problems with the system software: it is not set up to maintain a waitlist, and the course numbers that students see may be incorrect, due to slow refreshing of the numbers. He will prioritize fixing these issues when new software is adopted.

Edward asked how faculty manage enrollment of five-college students in capped courses, since the five-college students operate under different deadlines. Jesse explained that the system requires the faculty member's signature to admit five-college students, regardless of the actual cap on the course. Once the faculty member gives permission, the student's enrollment shows up in the enrollment numbers. While syncing Amherst's system with other institutions remains problematic, the pilot system provides five-college students with a longer window for registering for courses at Amherst while leaving the basic dynamics unchanged. He noted that students tend to enroll across institutions for specific reasons. Tekla said she thought remaining course registration issues were only truly problematic when students fail to get into a required course for the major, and that problem should be managed by the department, otherwise students should be persuaded that there are many good courses at the College to explore if they are dropped from their selections.

Catherine E. mentioned that the accessibility consultants who recently visited the college thought Amherst had an unusual system in that faculty can select the students who are in over-enrolled courses; the committee may require a separate conversation about accessibility at some point. Catherine S. said this year she emailed students she was going to drop, and they all dropped themselves and signed up for other courses. Tekla added that providing information about priorities prior to pre-registration is also helpful in creating transparency. Jesse said students continue to game the system. Uncapped courses can end pre-registration with no students, even though the courses will fill up during add/drop. He thought that in the new system these changes occur before the semester begins, allowing students to be securely registered in four courses.

Tekla returned then to the accessibility question that Catherine E. had raised. She pointed out that how faculty members cull a course determines who will be in the class. She said that we trust faculty to make choices that are best for the students themselves and the conduct of the class, particularly around the achievement of diversity. She pointed out that a first-come, first served process, in which the faculty have no role, tends to privilege the privileged. She asked how students viewed the system. Brooke said students are wary of courses that require instructor permission. If the instructor selects the students, most first-year students assume they will not get into those courses. Tekla said the college needs to do a better job of communicating how choices are made.

Tariq then asked about petitions. Faculty check their courses in Moodle and see long lists of students, most of whom have not registered for the course. Jesse said this unfortunate use of language is confusing. Petitions allow students access to course materials on a Moodle site while deciding which classes to take. It also allows students who are waiting for their official registration to be processed—usually for reasons of financial aid and other registration issues—to complete the work until their registration status has been resolved. The problem is that students sometimes think that by petitioning

they have registered for their courses. They are surprised when they get purged at the end of add/drop. He said he would like to get rid of this option.

Catherine S. thanked Jesse and he departed. She then asked the committee whether the members believed the pilot process for registration should be made permanent. The committee was satisfied that the new system is an improvement and supported recommending to the Committee of Six that the faculty approve making this system permanent. Catherine S. said she would inform the Committee of Six.

### **Digital theses**

Catherine S. next asked the committee to discuss whether the college should cease its collection of theses in hard copy and keep only digitized versions, as recommended by the library administration and the registrar. Mr. Geffert and Ms. Nowicki said in their letter to the committee that moving to digital-only collection of theses would make the process of completing the thesis simpler for students in the final steps. They also thought they had adequate systems in place to continue digital archives of theses. Mr. Geffert said his team could always print out theses if one were needed for a summa review, and the team would work to facilitate a digital copyright signature form.

Tekla expressed surprise that the library favored this move. As long as the college will provide the resources for maintaining these digital copies in readable formats, she was comfortable with changing to digital-only collection of theses. However, theses would need to be updated to a new platform—including their tables, images, music, etc.—on a regular basis, and she wondered who would manage that process. While some departments preserve paper copies of all theses, not all do; they depend on the archives to retain the archival copy. Unlike digital software, paper maintains its readability. The committee asked Nancy to contact the library about this question. Lawrence also noted that the process of digitization should be done in a way that will allow access. If the library feels comfortable that digital copies will be updated in currently used formats on a regular basis, the committee was inclined to support this, but if not, the committee did not favor moving in this direction.

### **Criteria for reviewing FTE requests**

Nancy informed the committee that ten departments had submitted, or had received an extension to submit, one or more FTE requests. Catherine S. said the committee will begin its review on January 30<sup>h</sup>, its first meeting of the spring semester. Before then, Nancy will provide historical information on previous FTE requests and will randomly generate the order in which the committee will review the requests, scheduling approximately four requests per meeting. Committee members whose departments have submitted requests may respond to factual questions during the review but may not advocate for their position or vote. The final ranking of FTE requests will be based on a weighted average or by consensus.

### **Ad Hoc Curriculum Committee's advising recommendations**

Catherine S. next asked the committee to consider the Curriculum Committee's recommended changes to advising and asked how the committee wanted to proceed. The committee supported sending these recommendations to the faculty for further conversation but some noted their reservations. Lawrence said he did not intend to support at least one aspect of the proposal, namely the recommendation to expand the administration with a new dean of advising. He also was concerned that the increased number of required meetings with advisees would not result in pedagogically useful conversations.

Catherine E. said these recommendations draw upon Amherst's experience with intensive advising, which has proved successful. Students in the program meet more frequently with their advisors and are performing better academically. No student in intensive advising ended up on academic warning last year, a departure from previous years for this population of students. She thought the program had made a difference.

Tekla said the motivation for these recommendations acknowledges the importance of good advising in an open curriculum. Intensive advising has a different focus; it targets high risk students and helps them succeed. She said she participates in the intensive advising program and spends much of her time with these students, who have different needs. Tariq and Edward both said they too participated in intensive advising. They agreed with Tekla that it is a huge time commitment and not a practice that could easily be expanded to all of their advisees. Lawrence too concluded that these recommendations applied interventions needed by specific students to the larger student body, who might not require them.

Catherine S. then suggested the committee consider each of the recommendations individually. She began by asking about the recommendation to make the advising load more equitable. The committee supported the recommendation.

She then asked about the recommendation that no faculty members be asked to advise more than 18 students unless they chose to do so. The committee supported that recommendation, too.

She then returned to the recommendation that advisors meet more frequently with their advisees. The committee thought this might be necessary for some students, but not necessary for all. Members were willing to support a recommendation that advisors have more frequent meetings initially with new advisees but did not support a requirement that they meet a particular number of times.

Catherine S. next asked about the recommendation that faculty receive more robust training to become an advisor. The committee supported this but only if it would not require additional administrative positions. Some expressed mixed views about the nature of what would be most helpful in that training.

Catherine S. asked about the recommendation to expand advisor-related programming during orientation. The committee thought this acceptable if the dean of new students supported it.

Turning then to a broader implementation of intensive advising—for example, to all first-generation college students, or all low-income students—the committee expressed mixed opinions. Catherine E. said it had worked well at Bowdoin but would require incentivizing the faculty. Some thought this would be a huge time sink and wondered whether there might be a cost in doing this intensive advising for some students and not for others. Brooke said students already experience a disparity in advising. She thought advising practices should be consistent for all students. Tariq expressed concern that the leader of the intensive advising program seems to have different ideas about what that advising should include, and he thought some of those ideas were inappropriate. For example, Tariq thought faculty should not treat advising as a counseling relationship, a role for which faculty are not trained. He thought it was inappropriate and possibly dangerous for faculty to be asking students about their home life. Catherine E. said the program will be assessed this year and urged colleagues to provide feedback about this concern.

Catherine S. then suggested the committee continue this discussion in January. Tekla also urged the committee to take up the issue of half credits early in the second semester. Lawrence raised a different

question: faculty teaching first-year seminars (FYS) are expected to evaluate their students' writing and advise them to take an intensive writing course if their writing remained problematic. He was concerned that this was not happening and thought there needed to be formal oversight of this issue. If a student is recommended for intensive writing, there needs to be direct follow-up with the dean's office and the student's advisor. He asked that this be added to a future agenda. The meeting adjourned at 10:00 a.m.