

Committee on Educational Policy
November 7, 2018

In attendance: Faculty: Catherine Sanderson, chair; Lawrence Douglas; Tariq Jaffer; Edward Melillo. Students: Brooke Harrington '22; Hunter Lampson '21; Julia Ralph '21. 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.

New business

Catherine S. reported that a relatively new faculty member has asked whether he can add an enrollment cap of 25 students to his new 200-level course. This class already has 21 students pre-registered, and the first round of pre-registration continues for three more days. The committee decided it would be unwilling to cap the course mid-registration but would be willing to close the class to further registrations after the first round of pre-registration ends if the enrollment meets or exceeds 25 and impose a cap of 25 for the second round if it does not. Catherine S. said she would inform him of the committee's decision.

The committee next turned to a request from the Psychology department which has asked to be allowed to reopen an FTE search, which failed several years ago. The department indicated that it might wish to search now for a psychologist who specializes in cultural psychology, rather than in the area of diversity. The committee asked that the department submit a formal letter with this request, focusing, in particular, on the reasons for changing the field and the need for that particular area. Nancy will inform the department.

Interdisciplinary majors

The committee next discussed a request from the Committee on Academic Standing(CAS) for a change in the Catalog language governing interdisciplinary majors. The CAS co-chair explained in his letter that current policy permits students to submit a proposal for an interdisciplinary major through the eighth week of their second semester of their junior year. Last year, the committee evaluated two proposals that came in at or after this deadline. The timing creates a potential problem for students who have no alternative path to graduation if the proposal is not approved. To avoid this problem, the CAS has asked the CEP to move the deadline for declaring an interdisciplinary major from the eighth week of the second semester of the junior year to the seventh week of the first semester of junior year. This would allow the student more time to complete a regular, pre-existing major, should the proposal be rejected.

CEP members noted that students sometimes try to cobble together an interdisciplinary major as a way to avoid the more rigorous courses in a major. Students may also think they need to propose an interdisciplinary major when devising a thesis topic, though many can be persuaded by their advisor that this step is unnecessary. Most committee members felt that the interdisciplinary major should be reserved as a rare option for someone who is doing something very unusual. One student asked how this might affect students who are studying abroad. The committee decided to ask the CAS how they would deal with students studying abroad during their first semester of the junior year and whether the CAS has ever rejected a student's proposal if it meant that the student could not complete a regular major. With that additional information, members thought they would be in a better position to make a recommendation.

Flexible grade option (FGO)

Catherine S. next asked the committee to return to the proposed motions on the Flexible Grade Option (FGO). One revision recommended by Tekla would permit instructors to designate their courses as ineligible for the FGO. Committee members were concerned that faculty might opt for this as a way to avoid students who might be less than fully committed to the course. Lawrence said part of the role of the professor is to teach students with different skills and different levels of commitment; instructors should not be able to selectively shift the burden of the less committed student to other faculty. He also noted that the rationale behind the FGO is to encourage experimentation, keeping students engaged for as long as possible; designating courses as ineligible for that experimentation did not seem to honor this intention. Hunter thought his peers would make a real effort to succeed in their FGO courses. The committee concluded that it might be helpful to signal to faculty that there could be an alternative—allowing instructors to opt out—if there appeared to be opposition to this aspect of the motion but decided not to include that option, at least initially, in the motion itself.

The committee next considered whether instructors should know that students had chosen to elect the FGO for their course. After a brief discussion, members could think of no reason for the instructor to know.

Nancy asked if there should be a limit on the number of FGO courses that would be available to transfer students. If there is no limit, transfer students entering as juniors could take as many as a quarter of their courses without grades, and this might not be wise. The committee recommended that transfer students entering as sophomores be allowed three FGO options, and transfers entering as juniors be limited to two FGO options.

The committee then recommended that the Committee of Six send the following two motions to the faculty for a vote.

MOTION 1:

Components of the proposed system: Student declares FGO during add-drop and has five days after receiving the grade to decide whether to accept it or convert to a pass. Second semester seniors cannot participate in this. Instructors are not informed as to which, if any, students are taking a course under the FGO option. Unrecorded FGO grades are kept by the Registrar until the start of the second semester of a student's senior year. This enables recovery of previously unrecorded grades via petition to a student's class dean and the registrar should this become necessary as a consequence of changing majors or changing post-graduate plans.

CATALOG LANGUAGE:

FLEXIBLE GRADE ~~PASS-FAIL~~-OPTION (FGO)

THE PURPOSE OF THE FLEXIBLE GRADE OPTION (FGO) IS TO ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO EXPLORE THE BREADTH OF AMHERST'S OPEN CURRICULUM AS THEY SEEK TO MEET THE COLLEGE'S STATED LEARNING GOALS. Amherst College students WHO ENTER AS FIRST-YEARS may choose, with the permission of the instructor, a pass/fail arrangement in two ELECT TO TAKE UP TO FOUR of the 32-TOTAL NUMBER OF courses required for the degree UNDER THE FGO; TRANSFER STUDENTS WHO ENTER AS SOPHOMORES MAY ELECT TO TAKE UP TO THREE COURSES REQUIRED FOR THE DEGREE UNDER THE FGO; AND TRANSFER STUDENTS WHO ENTER AS

JUNIORS MAY ELECT TO TAKE UP TO TWO COURSES REQUIRED FOR THE DEGREE UNDER THE FGO, ~~but~~ STUDENTS MAY not take more than one SUCH course in any one semester. COURSES TAKEN IN THE SECOND SEMESTER OF THE SENIOR YEAR ARE NOT ELIGIBLE FOR THE FGO.

TO ELECT A COURSE AS FGO, STUDENTS MUST FILE THE FGO FORM, SIGNED BY THEIR ADVISOR(S), WITH THE OFFICE OF THE REGISTRAR BY THE END OF THE ADD-DROP PERIOD. INSTRUCTOR PERMISSION IS NOT REQUIRED ON THE FGO FORM, AND INSTRUCTORS ARE NOT INFORMED IF STUDENTS HAVE ELECTED THE FGO OPTION FOR THEIR COURSE.

STUDENTS WILL HAVE FIVE DAYS FROM THE DATE GRADES ARE DUE TO EITHER ACCEPT THE GRADE ASSIGNED BY THE INSTRUCTOR, OR IN THE CASE OF PASSING GRADES ("D" OR BETTER), ELECT TO HAVE A PASS ("P") DISPLAYED ON THEIR TRANSCRIPT FOR THE COURSE. (NO GRADE POINT EQUIVALENT WILL BE ASSIGNED TO A "PASS.") IF THE LETTER GRADE ASSIGNED BY THE INSTRUCTOR IS AN "F," AN "F" WILL BE RECORDED. IF THE STUDENT TAKES NO ACTION, THE ASSIGNED GRADE WILL REMAIN ON THE TRANSCRIPT. ~~The choice of a pass/fail alternative must be made by the last day of add/drop at the beginning of the semester and must have the approval of the student's instructor and all major advisors. No grade point equivalent will be assigned to a "Pass," but courses taken on this basis will receive either a "P" or an "F" from the instructor, although in the regular evaluation of work done during the semester the instructor may choose to assign the usual grades for work submitted by students exercising this option.~~

SECOND SEMESTER SENIORS WHO HAVE NOT EXHAUSTED THEIR FGO OPTIONS MAY SELECT ONE COURSE TO BE TAKEN PASS/FAIL. TO DO THIS, SENIORS SUBMIT A PASS/FAIL FORM, SIGNED BY THEIR ADVISOR(S) AND THE COURSE INSTRUCTOR, TO THE REGISTRAR BY THE END OF THE ADD-DROP PERIOD. (NO GRADE POINT EQUIVALENT WILL BE ASSIGNED TO A "PASS.")

MOTION 2:

Components of the proposed system: Student declares a minimum grade during add-drop. Second semester seniors can use this option. All other components of the FGO system remain unchanged.

FLEXIBLE GRADE ~~PASS-FAIL~~ OPTION (FGO)

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TO ELECT A COURSE AS FGO, STUDENTS MUST FILE THE FGO FORM SIGNED BY THEIR ADVISOR(S), WITH THE OFFICE OF THE REGISTRAR BY THE END OF THE ADD-DROP PERIOD AND MUST DECLARE TO THE REGISTRAR THE MINIMUM GRADE THEY WILL ACCEPT WHEN THEY FILE THE FORM. INSTRUCTOR PERMISSION IS NOT REQUIRED, AND INSTRUCTORS WILL NOT KNOW IF

A STUDENT HAS ELECTED THE FGO OPTION OR THE MINIMUM GRADE DECLARED BY ANY STUDENT EXERCISING THAT OPTION IN THEIR COURSE.

IF THE GRADE ASSIGNED BY THE INSTRUCTOR IS LOWER THAN THE MINIMUM GRADE, THE REGISTRAR WILL RECORD A PASS ("P") IN THE CASE OF PASSING GRADES ("D" OR BETTER) ON THE STUDENT'S TRANSCRIPT. IF THE LETTER GRADE ASSIGNED BY THE INSTRUCTOR IS AN "F," AN "F" WILL BE RECORDED. (NO GRADE POINT EQUIVALENT WILL BE ASSIGNED TO A "PASS.")

~~The choice of a pass/fail alternative must be made by the last day of add/drop at the beginning of the semester and must have the approval of the student's instructor and all major advisors. No grade point equivalent will be assigned to a "Pass," but courses taken on this basis will receive either a "P" or an "F" from the instructor, although in the regular evaluation of work done during the semester the instructor may choose to assign the usual grades for work submitted by students exercising this option.~~

Learning goals

Catherine S. next asked the committee to return to the brief conversation it had begun at a previous meeting on the learning goals proposed in the final report from the Curriculum Committee. She suggested the committee first discuss whether these are appropriate learning goals for the college and then consider whether to recommend stylistic changes. She was unsure whether the committee should begin proposing more substantive changes. Catherine E. said she thought it would be helpful if the CEP would consider whether it agreed with these goals in principle. She agreed with Catherine S. that some wordsmithing might also be acceptable. Tariq suggested the CEP indicate to the Committee of Six where the committee's recommendations differ from the Curriculum Committee's document.

The committee then turned to the learning goals from the Curriculum Committee. Tariq thought the fourth goal—that students should develop a sense of the common good—should not include any particular fields of study since the purpose of this statement is not to establish distribution requirements. Lawrence agreed. He also thought that the second learning goal—that students should learn to communicate effectively—should emphasize writing as a free-standing goal; including other ways of communicating in the same sentence diluted the singular importance of clear and effective writing.

Hunter wondered if the fourth goal—developing a sense of the common good—deserved to be placed first. Catherine E. thought the most foundational goals should be listed first, followed by ways to achieve these goals. She suggested instead placing the fourth goal last. Tariq thought the fifth and sixth goals—pursuing intellectual and creative interests in depth and broadening their intellectual and creative horizons—were goals that reflected the general interests of most students; they could perhaps be placed at the top of the list.

Catherine S. asked whether the committee thought these were the right six goals to include. Lawrence was concerned that some of the goals were over-inclusive, and others were under-inclusive. The fifth—pursuing intellectual and creative interests in depth, for example—addressed the need for a major. He was not convinced it was necessary to reiterate that goal here. He also noted the comparative absence of language about the value of understanding science, technology, and math. He and others then discussed whether the learning goals might be improved by including only the first sentence under each goal. Catherine S. wondered if anyone would pay attention to the information beyond the first sentence. Edward noted that, as an advisor, he needed no more than the first sentence.

Summarizing the conversation, Catherine S. then asked if these covered the important goals. The committee concluded that the six goals were comprehensive, leaving no obvious gaps. She then asked about the best way to order the goals. Committee members favored moving the fourth goal to the end, leaving the others where they were.

Committee members said they would think about fine tuning the actual language before the next meeting.

Lecturer policy

Taking up the final agenda item, Catherine S. asked the dean to talk about the college lecturer and visitor policy. The college currently employs 26 full-time lecturers, 2 full-time senior resident artists, and 4 additional positions (lab coordinators and academic managers) that include teaching responsibilities. The college also currently employs 54 full-time visitors and 18 single course visitors.

Catherine E. said the principle question is whether the college should expand its use of lecturers. Hunter asked about the difference between a lecturer and a professor. Catherine E. explained that lecturers generally do not pursue an active research agenda, so there are not opportunities for students to work with them on thesis projects. They are employed by the college primarily to teach, generally teaching six courses each year instead of the four-course load that professors have. Some are notable in their skills as teachers, even though they may not be working at the cutting edge of their field. They do not participate in college-wide service, but do provide service to their departments.

The issue is that this creates a two-tiered system and raises several questions. One question is whether hiring more lecturers could reduce the number of visitors. Visitors are by nature temporary, so they may not be available to write letters for students. They may at times be focused more on getting another position than on working with students. Catherine E. said she has reduced the number of five college faculty to close to zero. Five-College faculty have found those positions problematic.

Lawrence asked if there has been expansion in the lecturer or visitor numbers over time. Catherine E. said there has been; some of the expansion has been enrollment driven, some subject driven, and some of the expansion has been necessary as a way to cover people on leave. She said she has inherited some of these numbers but has also succeeded in filling more FTEs, bringing the FTE numbers close to the trustee-imposed FTE cap. Lawrence wondered whether the college was relying more heavily on visitors and lecturers than previously. He expressed interest in seeing how these numbers—both for lecturers and visiting professors—have changed over time. Hunter expressed interest in having professors teach intro-level courses. The committee decided to continue the conversation at its next meeting.

The meeting adjourned at 10:00 a.m.