

**Committee on Educational Policy  
October 31, 2018**

**In attendance: Faculty: Catherine Sanderson, chair; Lawrence Douglas; Tekla Harms; 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. The committee approved the minutes of October 24, 2018.

**Flexible grade option (FGO)**

Catherine S. welcomed Jesse Barba, director of institutional research and registrar services, to the meeting for a continuation of the previous week's discussion of a flexible grade option (FGO). Jesse said the flexible grading policy that was being discussed—students could take four courses over their four years, no more than one per semester, and would need to declare the course FGO during add-drop and decide whether to retain the assigned grade or substitute a pass (P) if the grade is a D or higher during a specified period after receiving their grade—would provide some psychic comfort to students. He then turned to a few practical concerns, noting, in particular, the difficulty of enforcing the deadline for recording either a grade or a pass. He agreed with the committee that the process of determining honors would not permit seniors to use the FGO during their final semester. But, currently, over 80% of students use pass-fail during their senior year, and over half of them do so during their final semester, often while finishing a thesis. Class deans also, on occasion, encourage a senior to take a fifth course pass-fail if the student has a credit deficiency. This proposal would remove these options from the deans and from seniors.

Tekla suggested that one alternative might be to allow seniors to use the traditional pass-fail during that final semester. Lawrence pointed out that the faculty could, alternatively, require students to declare a minimum grade as part of the FGO during add-drop as a way to address these concerns. Tekla wondered if students could be allowed to declare a minimum grade at any point during the semester. Committee members suggested the policy automatically default to the grade, or to a pass, if students took no action by the deadline.

Jesse supported the idea of having a default grade with a firm deadline. He said students worry excessively about GPA and honors and did not want to open another avenue for obsession. Catherine E. thought that the vast majority of students would decide to retain the grade, rather than opting for the pass. She suggested the policy make the assigned grade the default if students took no action. Jesse also pointed out that, if the intent of the FGO is to encourage students to explore, making it harder for students to use the FGO during the second semester of their senior year might actually result in more students using the FGO for its intended purpose. Tekla said she liked this option better before she thought about struggling thesis students. Catherine S. thanked Jesse and he departed at 9:15 a.m.

Returning to the policy, the committee agreed that the approval of students' advisors, who could help the students strategize, should be required. Although some thought it might be preferable for instructors not to be aware that a course is being taken FGO, in most cases the advisor would be unlikely to be the instructor. The committee also agreed that the FGO should default to the assigned grade if the student takes no action before the deadline. Committee members assumed that advisors would be able to track the number of courses taken FGO in AC data and urged that a way to do so be developed, if this

is approved. Grades would also need to be preserved electronically, in case a student decided subsequently to major in the field.

Thinking about the faculty vote, Catherine S. next asked whether the faculty should have two options—one option that would require students to declare the minimum grade for the FGO during add-drop and an alternative option that would allow students to wait until after the grade was known before they had to decide whether to retain the grade or replace the grade with a pass (P). The committee was inclined to offer both options to the faculty.

The committee then turned to the question of whether the instructor should be made aware that a course is being taken under the FGO. The committee thought it should be possible for an instructor to state whether a course would be eligible to be taken FGO. Some were concerned that an instructor might view a student differently if the instructor knew the course was an FGO, but others noted that the FGO provides students with an incentive to work hard, making it different from pass-fail. They thought the committee should trust its colleagues to discuss with their students whether they should take the course FGO and veto the option at times. In the end, the committee decided once again that the faculty should be offered both options—in one case, the instructor gives permission for the course to be taken FGO; in the other, the instructor has no role in the FGO.

The committee then returned to the issue of timing. Some wondered if the faculty should be offered three options: one in which the student would declare the minimum grade during add-drop; one in which the student would declare the minimum grade midway through the semester; or one in which the student would decide whether to retain the assigned grade at the end of the semester. Student members pointed out that students know the minimum grade they will accept early on, so two options would suffice: one option in which students would declare a minimum grade during add-drop and one in which students would decide whether to retain the assigned grade at the end of the semester.

The committee also asked that the policy clearly indicate that the FGO is designed to encourage more risk-taking and exploration of the full breadth of the curriculum. Tariq said he would write a line to add to the policy. Catherine S. asked Nancy to provide the committee with two alternative motions before the next meeting.

### **Liberal Arts Consortium for Online Learning (LACOL)**

Catherine S. next asked the committee to consider a course proposed through the Liberal Arts Consortium for Online Learning (LACOL) that will be offered at Vassar College on Bayesian Statistics. If Amherst students wanted to participate, they would take it as a Special Topics course; the course would not appear in the Amherst Course Catalog. Online courses are not normally permitted, and the registrar regularly denies students the ability to take an online course offered within the Five College system, even if there might be a professor with whom the student could interact occasionally. The only online courses allowed are those taken by a student who needs to make up a deficiency and does not live in an area where college courses are available. Special Topics courses are not normally visible to the registrar.

Last spring the CEP asked that any courses being offered for credit through LACOL pass through the committee. Tekla said the committee had indicated to the Math and Statistics department at that time that it would want the department to clarify how a LACOL course would be different from other online courses. The CEP was concerned about a possible slippery slope and had hoped that the department would do more thinking about this option before moving forward. The committee noted that it normally trusts colleagues to recognize what Special Topics courses require and does not interfere with or

oversee those decisions. However, this policy means the CEP cannot vet topics that might otherwise cause concern. After further conversation, the committee decided to send word to the department that the course, constructed as a Special Topics course, would not normally come through the CEP. If the LACOL committee wishes to have the course listed in the Course Catalog and to offer the course regularly, the course does need to go through CEP. The committee said it would want to know if LACOL courses are being offered annually and asked that it be so informed. Catherine E. said she would speak with the LACOL director to request an annual report on LACOL courses. Catherine S. said she would inform Math and Statistics that the committee appreciated being alerted to this course and that it will take no further action.

The meeting adjourned at 10:00 a.m.