

**Committee on Educational Policy
November 11, 2020**

In attendance: Faculty: Sandra Burkett; Nicola Courtright; Edward Melillo, chair; Krupa Shandilya; Adam Sitze. Provost and Dean of the Faculty: Catherine Epstein, *ex officio*. Students: Cole Graber-Mitchell '22; Robert Parker '21; Jalen Woodard '23. Recorder: Nancy Ratner, Director of Academic Projects.

Edward Melillo, chair of the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP), called the meeting to order at 11:00 a.m. via Zoom. The committee approved the minutes of November 4, 2020.

Spring Calendar

Catherine noted that the college may need to begin instruction in a remote mode in the spring, to allow time for COVID testing to be completed before bringing faculty and students together for in-person classes. Nicola raised concerns about add/drop because access to the Zoom link for remote classes has prevented students from visiting those classes at the beginning of the semester. This is making the shopping period impossible for some students. Catherine said the registrar and IT are aware of the problem and are working on it.

Edward returned to the proposed spring calendar that had been discussed at a previous meeting and asked the committee to approve the version which would move advising week forward by one week and provide for two breaks over extended weekends. Sandi asked why the last day of add/drop is a Thursday in this calendar. Was this based on the number of days allowed for add/drop or the days required by the registrar to process the changes? If not, she wondered if it could be extended through Friday. Catherine suggested asking the registrar for the reason. Adam asked if positioning the leaves over a Friday served the desired purpose. Is this because fewer classes occur on Fridays? Nicola said she worried that scheduling the breaks over extended weekends might result in upper-class students leaving campus with their cars. Krupa asked the students their opinion. Cole thought a Thursday-Friday break would be helpful. With the possible modification of extending add/drop by one day, the committee approved the spring calendar.

Ad Hoc Committee on Student Learning

Edward turned next to the letter from the Ad Hoc Committee on Student Learning, which recommended adding a new section to the course proposal form. This section would ask all faculty members to state the intellectual skills, modes of learning, and assessment methods that students would be likely to experience in the course, adding the following three sentences to each course when a student calls it up in the Course Scheduler:

The following indicates the intellectual skills, modes of learning, and assessment that you will likely encounter in this course. Students who enroll in this course will be expected to be engaged in _____. Students with documented disabilities who will require accommodations in this course should be in consultation with Accessibility Services and reach out to the faculty member as soon as possible to ensure that accommodations can be made in a timely manner.

The expectation is that faculty will select, as applicable: significant amounts of written work, significant amounts of readings, independent research, oral presentations, group work, in-class quizzes or exams,

artistic work, field work or trips, quantitative work, lab work, instruction in languages other than English, visual analysis, aural analysis, or state other work that might be central to the course.

Cole, noting that surrounding the information with the two same sentences for every course might be unnecessary, asked where this information would appear. Would it appear in the course description in the Course Catalog? Nancy said it would not be included in the catalog description; instead, students would find the information on the page that opens when students click on courses in the course scheduler tool. Edward said the ad hoc committee had discussed this proposal with last year's CEP. At that time, some CEP members were concerned that it might promote avoidance behavior and would not result in more exploration of the curriculum. Adam said that is still a possibility but he had no objections to this proposal. Students who want to avoid work will still do so. This will move that avoidance behavior forward from the drop/add period to pre-registration. The committee recommended that the new section move forward as proposed.

Grade Inflation

Edward next asked the committee to turn to the graphs supplied by Jesse Barba showing significant grade inflation over the last decade and a half. Cole asked about the purpose of a grade at Amherst. If not intended as a way to rank students, is its purpose to compare students to an idealized good? Is it meant to be a marker of how well a student does? Something else? Edward said he uses grades to track students' trajectory—their efforts, their improvement over time, transitions over the semester. Nicola said she does not use grades to rank students within the course. She only grades on the basis of the work students turn in, never on the basis of their efforts. She thought individual students deserve individualized attention, so she always allows students to rewrite papers, and this inevitably leads to some grade inflation. Her grading approach is problematic if faculty worry about grade inflation.

Adam also thought that grades were a source of significant miscommunication. He said the committee needs a general sense of how faculty members use grades and a better sense of the meaning that students attach to those grades. Perhaps the CEP should solicit feedback from the faculty at a faculty meeting to get a sense of this.

Rob said some students are focused on jobs and careers—in business or consulting or professional graduate school programs that prioritize grades—and this leads to a focus on grades. Other students view grades as a way to see how their progress is developing over the semester.

Edward acknowledged that this topic may require a conversation with the larger faculty. He asked if there were others whom the committee would like to consult or other data, including admissions data, that the committee might wish to receive. Adam thought it would be worthwhile having an initial faculty discussion on this issue. He noted that grades have both an internal dimension—reflecting faculty members' experience with their students—and also an outside world dimension. When there is grade inflation, grades become less meaningful to those outside parties, who might seek more comparative information. One idea that appealed to him would be to reveal on the transcript both the students' grades and also the mean grades for the class. This would highlight the rarity of an exceptional student's work. Krupa said she was theoretically opposed to grades as a measure of a student's work, given the different levels of preparation and background experiences that students bring to the college. Grades do not encapsulate the student's entire work in the classroom.

Cole questioned the way grades are assigned and how students should interpret those grades. He thought it was a problem if instructors do not assign lower grades because they fear how a student will interpret the grade. Adam said he used to give out lower grades but can no longer do so. The lower grades were not functioning as a signal, and the result felt too cruel to him. Krupa said there is also

institutional pressure to raise grades. She was made aware of this pressure when she was coming up for tenure. Adam said there are other relevant concerns, including students' lopsided preparation. Also, students in the humanities may shy away from courses in other divisions, knowing that their grades will drop if they take courses in the social sciences and STEM areas.

Edward said grading in areas that are subjective may differ from grading in more objective fields, where correct answers involve fewer arbitrary judgments. Sandi said that in STEM courses, faculty assign a numerical score to an exam, based on the accuracy of students' responses, but the assignment of a letter grade to that numerical score may still be based on an arbitrary decision. Catherine thought Amherst was known to have somewhat higher grade inflation than some other schools; she attributed this to the open curriculum, in that students are not required to take courses outside of their comfort zones. Nicola said she thought all institutions are facing this issue. Princeton tried to ratchet grades down a few years ago. Edward suggested inviting Jesse to a meeting. Cole asked whether the committee should be concerned about how graduate schools view Amherst grades.

Adam asked again about changing the transcript so it would show both the student's actual GPA and the average GPA, calculated for each class. This would be a realistic and straightforward way of facing the problem. He also noted that he is not worried about how graduate schools view grade inflation because when writing letters of recommendation, he talks about the student's resilience and often addresses relative grades. Sandi mentioned that the letter the college sends to medical schools for each applicant routinely reports both the student's letter grade and also the mean grade for the class (for required classes). Nicola agreed with Adam that the letter to graduate schools is more important than the grades. Graduate programs want to know about flexible thinking, curiosity, fortitude, creativity, character, intellectual stance. Krupa added that, in her experience, businesses do not care about a student's GPA; they are more likely to ask about other things.

Adam thought that, if the transcript is in fact meaningless, that is a problem. If the college includes the average letter grade on transcripts for medical schools, he asked what the counterarguments were for not providing that same information on all students' transcripts.

Cole thought it would be pedagogically helpful to have a written evaluation of students at the end of each semester and asked why this could not be done. Nicola said some faculty do this for students in their first-year seminars, describing their strengths, ways to improve, etc., but it would be difficult to provide such feedback for a large class.

Edward asked what the committee wanted to emerge from this conversation. Suggestions included inviting Jesse Barba to a future meeting and having a conversation about grading at a faculty meeting. Catherine did not think it would be appropriate to use a faculty meeting in this way and suggested the committee find a way to hold a focus group instead. She thought the committee also needed to think about honors. Adam pointed out that, given the uniformly higher grades in humanities, this conversation inevitably affects honors levels. There is clearly a related problem.

Latin Honors

Edward suggested the committee segue to the discussion of Latin honors at this point. The committee had received CEP minutes and faculty meeting minutes from previous discussions of honors as background to the conversation. Rob said he was currently writing a thesis but had given no thought to the cutoff for honors and did not think concern about the relationship between GPA and honors comes up very frequently for students. Cole, on the other hand, said he read the College Catalog section on honors before enrolling, and he cares about grades because he does not want to sabotage his chance of Latin honors.

Adam pointed to the interest in maintaining scarcity for Latin honors. When departments recommend a student for a *summa*, they have to write a letter justifying the designation. The college could require departments to make the quantitative argument about the distribution of honors within the department and why this thesis is truly exceptional, based on the numbers of *cum laude*, *magna cum laude*, and *summa cum laude* recommendations the department is recommending. The Committee of Six would then review those arguments and consider inflation in *summa* recommendations for a department when evaluating a thesis. He said he was disturbed to hear that Rob has not thought about this since these are inflexible cutoffs, and they are inflexibly distributed across departments. He thought departments should be asked to convince the Committee of Six that the work for a *summa* is truly exceptional. Edward said he puts a huge amount into *summa* letters, justifying them, and thought this was already common and not in need of greater rigor. He suggested instead asking Jesse for the number of *summa* recommendations, disaggregated by divisions.

Nancy noted that the ad hoc curriculum committee had considered a proposal that would require students graduating with a *summa* to have taken courses across all three divisions but had abandoned that idea after hearing opposition from a portion of the faculty. Sandi said she thought the evidence shows that science students are the most likely students to distribute their courses across the curriculum; as a consequence, they may be hit by that cutoff more than some other students. This creates challenging situations in which the students with the best science thesis graduate with a *magna* as a result of how they sampled their courses. Awarding of honors creates awkward outcomes.

Catherine said some departments argue that Latin honors should not be based on GPA. Instead of asking students to compete with each other, she suggested creating a grade minimum for honors. Krupa recommended basing Latin honors on the grades in courses in the major rather than on the basis of a curriculum-wide GPA. Nicola asked how much the reading of theses by the Committee of Six affected the awarding of *summa* degrees. Catherine said the Committee of Six members conventionally accept the department's recommendation. That step could perhaps be taken out of the process.

Cole asked why a student getting a lower grade should be disqualified from a thesis or from Latin honors. Krupa said Latin honors is an indication of the quality of the student's work. Cole then asked about an initial poor grade. Is the *summa* intended to reflect the student's entire career? If a student writes a *summa*-quality thesis, why should the student not receive a *summa*? Catherine explained that Latin honors is not based entirely on the thesis; it is based on the sum total of a student's work at the college. Nicola said Phi Beta Kappa already honors excellence in grades. Why not just relate Latin honors to the major? Adam said the difficulty is that it is college honors, so just basing this on the department's evaluation is problematic. Sandi said that, at the end of the day, Latin honors should be tied to the student's college work as a whole. Faculty can acknowledge truly excellent research work on a thesis with a grade, and in some departments this can count as three grades.

Edward asked how other institutions award Latin honors. Nicola said Swarthmore uses outside examiners to evaluate each student's work. Adam said he liked this approach and asked how Swarthmore persuaded faculty from other institutions to do this. Nicola said they are paid to do it. Adam said this should be as public as athletic events and music events. Nicola pointed out that it is enormously expensive since Swarthmore hires renowned scholars to do this (and at Swarthmore only a third of its students write theses).

Catherine said that, in her opinion, writing a thesis is the most important academic activity that a student can do at the college. She would be worried that this would limit the number of students who would have the opportunity and that it would create new barriers. She is concerned about the drop in the number of students choosing to write theses. Edward said he is also concerned by that drop and regularly talks about the thesis when advising students. Overseeing an honors thesis is one of the most

exciting things he does with students, and on occasion has resulted in joint visits to archives. Nicola said this encouragement has to happen early in a student's college career. She thought it would behoove the college to change its culture. Adam noted that such intensity cannot be scaled up to include more students. He wanted to return to Krupa's proposal to base Latin honors at the department level and ask departments to account for the number of their recommendations for honors but wondered how the college would deal with the idiosyncrasies of departments.

Cole suggested the Committee of Six review the *summa* letters and just pick the most exceptional theses. Adam did not think the Committee of Six could complete such an evaluation in the short time that is required and also noted that the faculty on the committee would not have the expertise for such an exercise. On the other hand, the Committee of Six or the CEP could track honors recommendations by departments over time. Catherine thought this would be the Committee of Six's responsibility, not the CEP's. The Committee of Six could think about standardization. If it were entirely based on work within a department, however, she would worry about students shopping for particular departments for honors. Krupa, returning to the idea of looking at grades across departments, thought it would be extremely difficult to standardize grades across departments or even within departments, but a department could decide whether a student's thesis work is really *summa* quality.

Adam suggested doubling down on divisional rubrics, requiring students graduating with honors to demonstrate their excellence by taking courses across divisions. Edward said he would invite Jesse to a future meeting to discuss honors and grade inflation. Cole asked for data on how Latin honors have been distributed across departments.

Course Cap Reduction

Edward then informed the committee that it had received a request to reduce the enrollment cap for a course that will be taught online to a combined class of students from the college and students in the jail. The cap was reduced from 18 to 15 students in late October, and the instructor has now asked to cap the course at 12 students from the college and 12 from the jail, in response to negotiations with the jail, which will allow no more than 12 of its inmates to participate. Thirteen students have pre-registered for the course, and the instructor says she believes she will be unable to enroll 15 students in the course. Noting that the course cannot be taught at the higher number, the committee agreed that this change should be permitted, even though the request was made after pre-registration.

Other business

Edward said the committee will discuss a proposal for cluster hiring next week. He is still waiting for department letters supporting the Film and Media Studies proposal to become a department. He will not meet with the proposers until he has received those letters. The committee should send him any additional questions that he should convey to FAMS.

Krupa asked about future CEP meetings this semester. Edward said he would let the committee know the planned schedule for the semester.

The meeting adjourned at 12:25 p.m.