

Committee on Educational Policy
November 6, 2019

In attendance: Faculty: Tekla Harms; Edward Melillo, chair; Christian Rogowski; Krupa Shandilya; Adam Sitze. Students: Gabriel Echarte '22; Sterling Kee '23. Recorder: Nancy Ratner, Director of Academic Projects.

Edward Melillo, chair of the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP), called the meeting to order at 8:45 a.m. in Clark House 100. The committee approved the minutes of October 30, 2019.

Policy clarifications

Edward welcomed Rick López to the meeting for a discussion of revisions to recently voted policies.

Exceptional circumstances:

Rick explained that the class deans want greater clarity about what constitutes “exceptional circumstances” that would permit conversion of a course to the FGO or Pass/Fail after the end of the add/drop period. The committee shared its recommended language with him, and Rick thought this would be very helpful. He also asked that the committee clarify that a student cannot convert a course to a Pass/Fail in a semester in which the student is taking a course as an FGO. Edward said he would draft some language to cover this.

Transfer back policy:

Turning to the transfer back policy, Rick said the class deans do not hold strong opinions on whether or not to permit students to return after withdrawing from the college to study elsewhere, but they do believe that students wishing to return to Amherst should be required to submit a letter stating that they were in good standing at the other institution they attended. He said that if the committee prefers to treat the time at the other college or university as a voluntary leave, with no option to receive credit for courses taken, the class deans would support such a policy. He explained that many students who transfer away have mistaken ideas about the experience they will have at another institution. They are often surprised to find that the experience at Amherst was preferable and are dismayed to learn that they cannot return because of their changed status as “transfer students,” for whom different admissions criteria apply from the ones they fulfilled when they were initially accepted at Amherst. The class deans have allowed one student to return but did not allow the student to transfer credits earned at the other institution. Instead, they treated the leave as a voluntary leave. This approach—treating every such leave as voluntary, without the ability to transfer credits from courses taken while at another institution—would seem to be the preferred approach.

Rick recommended eliminating the option to transfer back with credits from another institution. The class deans are concerned that students want to transfer to a less expensive institution for two years and then transfer back to Amherst for their senior year. Their families do not understand why students who were admitted once would not be readmitted.

Asked whether there should be rules for returning, Rick said the class deans would like to have a letter of good conduct if the students have attended another institution. If students take a medical leave—generally for issues of mental health, or occasionally due to a physical health issue such as a concussion—the students are required to provide a letter from their counselor, as evidence that they have received the care that they need. He thought the college could require similar evidence that a student is ready to return; the type of evidence could be left to the discretion of the class dean, who

could place stipulations for a return (similar to those for students on medical leave) before the students withdraw.

Tekla suggested the class deans consider all students who transfer to another institution to be on a voluntary leave and require a letter attesting to their good conduct before allowing them to return. Rick noted that students who are on financial aid are only eligible for federal aid for a certain number of semesters. Allowing all students to return could prove expensive for the college if the students use their aid while away.

Adam wondered whether systemizing a voluntary withdrawal might incentivize a shopping mentality at the college, with students trying out Amherst, and then other institutions. Rick thought it would depend on the language in the Catalog. The original language eliminating the right to transfer back was a response to Stanford, which did not want Amherst students to enroll for a year or two and then transfer back to Amherst.

Tekla noted that Amherst demographics have changed since that policy was enacted. She wondered whether students who transfer were those who were less familiar with what college would be. Rick said that was not the case; students across the economic ranges and backgrounds leave. In fact, students on full financial aid are the least likely to leave because the aid provided by Amherst exceeds that of most other institutions. International students never transfer. The most common group of students to leave are athletes who are troubled by the student-athlete divide. Some athletes feel trapped by their teams and think transferring will provide their only escape. He noted, however, that Amherst has a 97% retention rate, so the numbers of students who transfer are quite low. Nancy said she would get the numbers by class year from the registrar's office. Rick thought the director of community standards, Corey Michalos, might also know the numbers.

The committee thought the policy should treat the students' leave as voluntary and allow them to return, but students should receive no credits for courses taken elsewhere and should be required to include a letter stating that they have conducted themselves in ways that are consistent with Amherst policies. Rick noted that the college will know if a student has enrolled as a degree-seeking student at another institution. He suggested all returning students also be asked to sign the honor code upon return. Krupa offered to write a policy statement.

Three academic dismissals policy

Adam suggested a slight revision to the language that the committee recommended at the previous meeting:

THE COLLEGE DOES NOT PERMIT READMISSION FOLLOWING A THIRD ACADEMIC DISMISSAL.

Rick thought this language would be well received by the class deans.

Issue of studying away during the final semester

Rick explained that students sometimes find themselves in academic difficulty while away. Allowing students to study away during their final semester could lead to major problems. Tekla acknowledged that this might be a good reason for ~~now~~ not allowing study away during the final semester, but she preferred the more principled argument that the experience gained during study abroad is meant to be integrated into students' study at Amherst College, and that opportunity is lost if students study away during their final semester. Adam said he was compelled by her reasoning.

Rick said he would like to see exceptions allowed for medical reasons. These exceptions would not generally involve study away; the more likely scenario would be a student requiring specialized care close to home. Tekla noted that the provost had wanted to consider students with compelling academic reasons for studying away, but she was disinclined to consider those reasons. This policy addresses the way students learn as part of a community and how that community works together. The committee agreed with Tekla that students should not study away during their final semester. They were inclined to allow occasional exceptions if students' medical needs require study elsewhere.

Withdrawals or Failures in First, Second or Third Year:

Rick said all students who have withdrawn or failed a course during any semester except their final two (final year) are allowed to graduate with 31 courses instead of 32 courses, provided that they have met the residency requirement. Some students have an approved accessibility accommodation to carry a "Reduced Course Load" of three courses. If they enroll in three courses during their senior year and have not previously withdrawn from or failed a course, would they have to make up this deficiency or can they graduate with 31 courses? The practice to date has been that seniors must make up the course. Should this be reconsidered? Rick noted that this is the only situation in which students who fall behind are not allowed to graduate with 31 credits. This may be legally unacceptable even though it would violate the current policy that states that seniors are not allowed to drop a course. He wondered whether there should be an exception that would allow students to exercise their reduced course accommodation during their senior year and graduate with 31 credits. Tekla thought accommodations would need to be treated differently than dropped courses. She said she would examine the language in the policy and recommend some new language.

Ted thanked Rick and said he would send him new language in response to the questions the class deans had raised. Rick departed.

Liberal Arts Consortium for Online Learning (LACOL) summer data science course

Edward shared with the committee a proposal from Nick Horton to permit Amherst students to participate in a summer Liberal Arts Consortium for Online Learning (LACOL) course on data science. If permitted, Amherst students would not be awarded credit for the course, and students would have no record of the course on their transcripts. He nonetheless would like to allow Amherst students to participate. If approved, the course would require a faculty liaison who would coordinate distribution of information and local outreach, and an IT liaison who could advise and coordinate on technology (this would require one or two Zoom meetings and some modest time helping students confirm their setup). The committee members saw no harm in allowing this and were inclined to allow participation in the course to be noted on the student's transcript. Edward said he would contact IT to see if they had time to participate and would then write to Nick Horton. Tekla also suggested students should be officially registered for the course.

The meeting adjourned at 9:40.