

**Committee on Educational Policy**  
**April 14, 2021**

**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: Nicolas 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 March 31, 2021, and April 7, 2021.

**Courses**

The committee next approved eight new courses.

**A+ grades**

Edward next directed the committee's attention to new data on A+ grades, provided by Jesse Barba in response to questions from the Committee of Six. Edward reported that he had informed the Committee of Six that the CEP supported shifting the college away from the 14-point GPA scale but that the CEP supported divorcing the conversation about A+ grades from the conversation about changing the GPA scale. He thought the committee should now continue its discussion about the A+ grade, armed with the additional data on its use. Catherine informed the committee that the Committee of Six believes the use of A+ grades may lead to grading inequities.

Edward said he believes the faculty should engage in a structured discussion about whether the A+ grade should become solely honorific (under a 4.0 grading scale), or be awarded extra points and factored into a 4.33 grading scale. Catherine said it would be cleaner to go from the 14-point scale to a 4.33 scale, which already has equivalences defined.

Nicola suggested this be approached in two stages since the committees disagree. Catherine thought the faculty might not be unanimous on this topic either. Edward said the question is how to frame this discussion. The committee, except for Krupa, seemed generally to support retaining the A+ grade. Adam agreed that, with the committees deadlocked, the faculty should engage now in a respectful debate on the question. Sandi framed the question slightly differently, noting that there are three options. The college could adopt a 4.33 scale, which would assign an A+ equivalence; alternatively, the college could move to a 4.0 scale, with a solely honorific A+ grade; or the college could move to a 4.0 scale with no allowance for an A+ grade. Some asymmetries across campus, such as honors designations, depend on the use of the A+. Adam said that while he had never used the grade, he conceded that there might be truly exceptional students deserving of such recognition. He did not think it appropriate to rule out the use of the A+ for the minority of faculty who want to recognize truly extraordinary work.

Cole thought most students viewed the A as the highest possible grade on the current 14-point scale, with the A+ grade largely invisible. A 4.33 scale would substantially change this for students. Krupa thought the 4.33 GPA scale might confuse an external audience, especially if the A+ grade is not used consistently across fields. Sandi, wrestling with this, said she would prefer a weighted grading system that would honor grades above the A without changing the overall scale from 4.0, similar to the approach taken by high schools for honors and AP courses. Cole thought that would resemble the

current 14-point scale which is treated externally as a 4.0 scale under the conversion guidelines from the registrar.

Edward said he has sometimes used the A+ to recognize truly extraordinary work. Losing that tool would mean he could not signal to the student and the outside world a student's truly exceptional work. Nicola agreed. She saves the grade for truly original work. She suggested, however, that it could be made honorific, rewarding original work without skewing other grades. Cole then wondered whether this would deny such students the extra points towards internal honors like Phi Beta Kappa. Nicola said those students will qualify for those awards even without the extra partial points. Adam said he was not convinced that this is a fairness issue but thought the A+ might have an impact on honors designations since its use varies across departments. Math, for example, awards A+ grades to 8% of its students, while Chemistry awards it to just 1%. Edward said he saw no need for an additional letter to the Committee of Six unless the committee's thinking remains unchanged by the data. Krupa thought it might be helpful to talk directly to the Committee of Six since the two committees now have diametrically opposed views. Catherine suggested inviting a few Committee of Six members to a CEP meeting. Edward said he would invite the Committee of Six to the next CEP meeting.

### **Latin honors**

Edward then segued to two alternatives for changing Latin honors that were put forward by Adam. Adam's first proposal would remove the GPA from all but the *summa* designations. His alternative proposal would remove GPA from the determination of level entirely, with honors based solely on a department's recommendation.

Cole strongly favored the simpler approach, removing the student's GPA from the designation. He noted that a lot of students have their honors level reduced based on the 25% and 40% cutoffs. He urged the CEP to retain the Committee of Six review for *summa* theses, even if it is just pro forma. Nicola also supported the simpler approach but disagreed that the Committee of Six should have a continued role. That committee's actions have no influence on department recommendations and reading the theses unnecessarily burdens the committee. She thought Latin honors should be a thing unto itself and should be disaggregated from GPA. She was not worried about honors inflation.

Sandi admitted to some discomfort with the open-ended approach. She worried that individual departments might decide to ramp up requirements, for example, by adding a grade requirement for honors work, and said she was wrestling with how and where grades should enter into this. She was disinclined to have class rank influence honors, since Phi Beta Kappa separately recognizes class rank. She thought she could be persuaded if students were required to obtain a particular percentage of A grades, or a minimum GPA requirement. Krupa thought perhaps the average grades in the major should meet a particular level. Cole thought any connection with grades would introduce a degree of arbitrariness that is undesirable.

Catherine asked what check there would be on departments inflating their *summa* designations, since there are already departments that are inclined to offer honors at the higher levels rather than the lower ones. Students become quite inflamed about not getting the honors designation that they think they deserve, and this proposal provides no measures that will limit more generous honors designations. This would ultimately devalue the *summa*, which will be inequitably distributed across campus, and she thought this would be an undesirable outcome for the institution.

Nicola suggested the way around that would be to have departments hire outside thesis readers. Catherine was skeptical. Outside readers would not be independent—something she experiences frequently with external reviewers. Nicola said that in her experience, external reviewers had their own reputations to concern them and would be helpful. Adam was intrigued by that option, which he thought could provide a check on honors inflation. The CEP could also review the numbers and publish rates by each department on a website. He then considered the larger question of what should constitute college-wide honors, noting that Latin honors is a college-wide designation. If the department has sole responsibility, Latin honors ceases to be a college-wide recognition. He agreed with Nicola that the Committee of Six was overworked and should not be burdened with oversight. He then confessed to some nervousness about getting rid of the GPA. This would be a big step that should be taken only with foresight, caution, and sobriety.

Nicola thought it would still be college honors since any work done on the thesis would be enhanced by the 30 other courses taken and would represent the culmination of the liberal arts experience. She maintained that an outside review would be a bureaucratic headache but was worth considering. Sandi was not convinced of the viability of doing an outside review in her department. Science theses do not necessarily result in publishable work. Nicola then suggested adding an oral defense or a conversation. Sandi said that her department, like many others in the sciences, already has an oral defense. She knows the arc of research in her group; the intellectual contribution may be harder for an outside reader to assess. She admitted to concerns about *summa* inflation and thought the proposal still needed some thought.

Adam wondered whether it would change the way students are advised if the thesis advisor knew the work would be peer-reviewed. He felt that it might add gravitas and purpose to his thesis advising if one goal was for the thesis to be intelligible to an outside specialist. Departments could invite external readers to participate in the defense, he thought, while retaining control over the actual honors designations. Nicola said theses must already be intelligible to outside readers. When the college library made theses available online to the outside community it created an obligation to make sure they were comprehensible to outsiders. Catherine estimated outside readers would cost about \$37,760.

Edward asked the students about their thoughts. Rob thought an outside reader might have influenced his writing process and his interactions with his advisor, resulting in a work that was more readable. Jalen said he was not sure he understood the process sufficiently to comment.

Adam said he was still worried about Sandi's concerns. Otherwise, he thought that outside readers would be expensive but worth it since students would be joining an intellectual community, fundamentally changing the student's experience and providing a new obligation that faculty read up on the student's topic beforehand. Edward agreed that engaging with outsiders from specialized fields would heighten the experience for students. Krupa agreed.

Cole found the idea of an external reader exhilarating but he too was sensitive to Sandi's concerns. Math theses are not aiming for publishable results. They take a different approach. Sandi asked what problem outside readers would solve. In her department some defenses are difficult experiences even just with two familiar faculty members present. Would outside readers just be required for *summa* theses? The asymmetry of having outside readers for just some theses would also be quite awkward.

Cole conceded that bringing in external reviewers would not change much and returned to his recommendation to involve the Committee of Six, but Catherine rejected that idea saying she would

prefer to bring in external reviewers. Nicola suggested they lower the stakes by allowing students to have brief conversations with the external readers about what they intend to do earlier in the process, which would work in the humanities and social sciences.

Adam expressed second thoughts about his initial position, noting that external reviewers might not prevent *summa* inflation or solve the college honors issue. The college could recommend making honors inflation a part of the external review of departments. He would support more public presentations of thesis work. With external reviewers, faculty would have to prepare thesis students, adding seriousness and integrity to the process. Edward said environmental studies has an oral defense and a final event in which students present their work to everyone in a public forum. It is a high stakes process but good for students.

Sandi saw value in an oral defense but not in a process involving outside reviewers. In the sciences students can have little or no experimental success, even after extremely hard work. While they may gain value from their thesis work and earn honors, they may have little to show in the end in a public presentation. She did not see value in bringing in outsiders but did not know how widespread this feeling might be in other science departments.

Edward suggested the committee consider whether a viable extraction from this idea could lead to a formal proposal. He asked Nancy to research before the next meeting whether there are schools other than Swarthmore that bring in external reviewers. He suggested continuing this conversation next week, including the question of whether the committee favored leaving honors designations entirely up to departments.

Catherine said she still favored the first proposal. She thought it attractive to have a cutoff for *summa* that reflects all the work a student has done over four years, not just work on one project completed in the senior year, and she thought there needed to be a check on arbitrary inflation of senior honors. Cole argued that the GPA does not serve as a check or provide cohesion across the college. Adam said that for the *magna*, the GPA serves as a big check. He too worried about honors inflation and noted that historically it has been a concern for some members of the CEP and the Committee of Six. The CEP or the Committee of Six would need to monitor this. Edward said the committee would return to this next week when it will also return to its discussion of the A+ grade. He will invite members of the Committee of Six to that discussion.

The meeting adjourned at 12:15 p.m.