

Committee on Educational Policy
April 17, 2019

In attendance: Faculty: Catherine Sanderson, chair; Tekla Harms; Tariq Jaffer; Edward Melillo. Catherine Epstein, dean, *ex officio*. Students: Gabriel Echarte '22; Brooke Harrington '22; Julia Ralph '21. Recorder: Nancy Ratner, Director of Academic Projects.

Catherine Sanderson, chair of the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP), called the meeting to order at 8:30 a.m. in the Mullins Room and welcomed the members of the ad hoc committee on a common course evaluation form: Sarah Bunnell, Chris Kingston, Riley Caldwell-O'Keefe, Amelie Hastie, and Joe Trapani.

Ad Hoc Committee on a Common Course Evaluation Form

Catherine S. thanked the committee for providing materials prior to the meeting explaining the background and their recommendations for a common course evaluation form for pre-tenured faculty. She noted the hard work that clearly had gone into this and then invited questions and comments from CEP members. Tekla said that the Geology department has always used the same form for both pre-tenure and tenured faculty. She urged the ad hoc committee to be mindful that ideally questions would be sufficiently universal to allow both sets of faculty to adopt the same form. She then asked whether the committee thought any of the questions were designed to be specifically for faculty prior to tenure. The ad hoc committee said none of the questions is designed exclusively for faculty prior to tenure. It is the committee's hope that this form will eventually be adopted by all faculty.

Catherine S. agreed that, in an ideal world, all faculty would use the same form, in part, because it gives senior faculty insight into how to interpret the evaluations of their junior colleagues. She asked whether the committee had considered how and when this form would be administered—whether it would be online or hand written, on the final day of class or after class ended. She said she thought the physical distribution matters and asked whether the ad hoc committee had thoughts about the delivery. Amelie said the committee anticipates that it will be distributed during the last week of class, in class. Chris added that the committee would like the possibility of hand-written responses, once software is available to convert the responses easily to digital format. The committee also hopes to have students create a brief (two or three minute) video setting the stage for course evaluations. The important considerations are that the delivery be consistent across all courses. The committee intends to provide advice on best practices.

Tekla said that Geology typically includes a substantive final project, and she thought this was also the case in many other courses. Completion of final projects should occur before students are asked to evaluate a course. She worried that requiring students to complete their evaluations at an earlier moment might lead some of the younger faculty members to drop the final project, losing what should be the crowning moment of the course. Chris explained that the committee would just make recommendations based on best practices, but would not be recommending inflexible rules and requirements about the distribution of the forms. Riley added that distributing the forms in class is recommended because it increases participation, and the faculty member should step out of the room to allow students to complete form. Forms should be started in class but could then be completed independently at a later time (perhaps after completion of a final project). Sarah also said students should receive as much feedback about their work as possible beforehand. Tekla said she would not want faculty to design courses based on the timing of the evaluation, an unintended consequence that could result in less learning.

Catherine S. asked whether the ad hoc committee has unanimously endorsed these questions. The committee said they had. Chris mentioned that the committee may still tinker a little with the questions, based on a brief survey of pre-tenure faculty members, as well as from feedback from a student focus group and meetings with faculty. He thought there would never be a perfect question set, but the committee feels satisfied with these questions. Catherine S. asked how long this form would require for completion. Riley thought it should take about 15-20 minutes.

Edward asked where evaluations would be and who would have access to them. Could they be archived, and if so, could faculty have access to that archive? He said he returns to students' evaluations before teaching a course to tweak readings and other aspects, based in part on student feedback. Chris thought they might be currently saved in My Amherst. Joe said his department keeps a Dropbox with evaluations that senior faculty can access, and pre-tenure faculty members can access the evaluations from a different file, which stores the forms without any identifying names. Tekla thought it likely that forms would either be discoverable, or wiped clean after tenure. Riley said that at the moment they are maintained by IT on My Amherst. Whatever happens next will involve IT and the ADCs. The infrastructure will be tackled later.

Catherine S. then turned to the question of whether course evaluations should be totally anonymous, or whether they should include names that are only seen by senior faculty, the Committee of Six, the dean, and the president. Joe noted that some members of the ad hoc committee have changed their opinions about this question, based on the literature, and most now lean now towards anonymity. Most other institutions use anonymous forms. Edward asked why. Riley explained that if evaluations are anonymous, students feel more comfortable giving honest, though more negative, feedback. However, many senior faculty members believe it is easier to protect junior colleagues with more marginalized identities if the forms are not anonymous. This is because students tend to provide harsher evaluations when giving feedback anonymously. She added that it may be more honest feedback. Tekla said that may not be the case—that being free to be harsh may not be the same as being free to be honest.

Amelie said the ad hoc committee had tried to create a set of questions that would encourage neither trashing nor pure praise but rather focus students on assessing their learning. The ad hoc committee hopes this will circumvent the sort of overly negative evaluation that could happen with anonymous evaluations. In this sense, the committee is trying to create a balanced perspective in all courses across the campus. Tekla asked whether it might cut both ways. All sorts of students will be comfortable answering questions. Sarah said the literature suggests that it is students who feel less empowered who tend to shift their responses when the responses are not anonymous. This could affect decisions about tenure and promotion. Amelie noted that the committee will be recommending a separate vote on the anonymity issue. The goal of this project is to create a common form, used by all untenured faculty, and preferably by all faculty. The CEP supported the idea of separating the two issues when voting.

Catherine E. said a major issue of concern involves students who have engaged in misconduct. If the responses are anonymous, there is no way to know if a negative response has been colored by such an experience. Amelie asked why this would affect a course evaluation. Was this common practice? Catherine E. said it was and monitoring that issue remains a major concern when trying to protect pre-tenured colleagues in those cases. Tekla said she was interested in the ad hoc committee's information and thought it important. At the same time, wanted to protect untenured faculty who try to challenge students to work outside their comfort zone and to think about problems that are truly vexing. She has seen how the results of such evaluations can affect a tenure decision.

Riley said she hoped that faculty would look for themes and patterns across a course and that a single outlier would not affect a tenure decision. Tekla said that has not been her experience on the Committee of Six. There will be times when the Committee of Six will read a small number of letters from students who say something negative—for example, that the students felt physically uncomfortable in an instructor's office—and they must decide how to interpret the remarks. Amelie suggested those were extreme examples. Tekla said they are not extreme. Riley said she thought IR could give students identifying numbers that would be anonymous to readers, while allowing IR to identify the students, if necessary. She thought it would be possible to construct systems to deal with special situations. Joe pointed out that access to student misconduct information is privileged information. If important, he thought every senior faculty member should be alerted, and the student's evaluations should be flagged with an identifier, although he admitted that it might be slightly bizarre to do this. Amelie mentioned that the committee believes that there also is a need to have a conversation with faculty about how to read evaluations.

Chris asked the students for their thoughts about the issue. Gabe said he would be less comfortable writing about some things if the evaluations were not anonymous. He also said he thought it might be unfair to flag evaluations because that would lead readers to not trust the evaluation; those students also have a right to evaluate a professor. Brooke said she too would prefer anonymous evaluations. She noted that there are other avenues for reporting if a student has a legitimate concern about a faculty member. She said she would be uncomfortable if a senior faculty member read an unfavorable review she had written about one of their colleagues if she subsequently decided to do a senior thesis or interact in other ways with the department. She also thought it important to give students time outside the classroom to complete these forms. She said she had benefited from reflecting about her courses during finals and reading period.

Edward said he agreed with Tekla. Having been through a few tenure cases, he has found the narrative needs to contextualize the responses from outliers. Tekla explained that 90% of the evaluations will not be very substantive. It is the outliers that tends to carry more weight. Riley said the driving reason behind such high positive responses is that students feel like they cannot be honest if their names are attached.

Catherine S. cautioned the ad hoc committee that the feedback from senior colleagues on the CEP suggests that it will be hard to convince the faculty that evaluations should be anonymous. She suggested the committee devote a lot of their time in the meeting with the faculty to the reasons for anonymity and be cautious about using the additional negativity as the motivator for anonymous evaluations. Amelie said she hopes there can be a two-part conversation—first about the form itself, then about anonymity.

Catherine S. said the faculty will need a broader education. This is not a faculty that has embraced evaluation of any sort. The senior faculty voted down evaluations of their own courses—evaluations that would have been seen by no one other themselves—more than once. Tekla thanked the ad hoc committee for its herculean job and said she thought the committee had succeeded in creating what could become a uniform form. This will be a very good thing. The studies that the ad hoc committee discussed have caused her to think about her position on anonymity. She recommended that the committee share their studies and the data when presenting this to the faculty. The ad hoc committee departed at 9:10 am.

Catherine S. then asked the committee for its thoughts. The committee members said they supported the form but had questions about whether the process should become anonymous. The committee will share these thoughts with the Committee of Six.

Half courses

Catherine S. next asked the committee to return to a policy, voted recently by the faculty, which governs credits for half courses. According to Nick Horton, there is now some confusion about the state of these rules. He has recommended striking the language that allows the offering departments to determine when two half courses can be combined to be equivalent to credit for a full course. Tekla opposed any changes, saying this would be a substantive change to what the faculty had only recently voted.

Catherine S. said that vote occurred during a number of late night meetings in May. She questioned whether the faculty had really thought about this. Catherine E. said it is interesting how departments have changed their position since that vote; many will now offer half courses and let students match the halves across departments. She thought faculty had not thought about the matching issue as much as they could have when voting. Tekla reported that the Chemistry department has stated on its web site that it will accept any match. She thought this was sufficient and questioned whether this required a new faculty vote.

Catherine E. said she thought the department should be able to decide what counts towards its major but should not be able to decide what counts towards graduation. Tekla countered that the college already had the rule at the time of that vote that two half courses only summed to a whole if the courses constituted a match. Someone has to decide the rules. This would be a substantive change, and she did not support it. Tariq harbored the same concerns as Tekla; someone needs to oversee the matching of credits.

Tekla pointed out that until recently most students needed 32 courses to graduate—31 if they dropped a course during their first year. More may graduate with 31 courses now that the deadline for dropping a course has been relaxed. With half courses, that requirement drops to 29. This is a slippery slope, requiring some control over how the remaining credits will be constituted. Many students used to take music courses, orchestra, and chorus as extracurricular activities, not for credit. Changes to financial aid rules require students to take the instrument and voice courses for credit if financial aid is paying for the courses, so many students now take the courses for half credit. So students can now do what had previously been interpreted as extra-curricular and receive credits for them. Catherine S. said she has mixed feelings about striking this language. Tekla thought the faculty is losing patience with policies that are brought to it repeatedly. She urged caution. Catherine E. said she thought the faculty meeting clarified issues and that this too might deserve a faculty conversation.

Course proposals

The committee approved two new courses.

Advising Recommendations

Returning to the Curriculum Committee's advising recommendations, the committee again revisited the recommendation that advisors meet more frequently with their advisees. The committee thought that while this might be necessary for some students, it would not be necessary for all. Members were willing to support a recommendation that advisors have more frequent meetings initially with new advisees without necessarily supporting a requirement that they meet a particular number of times. Advisors will adjust meetings in accordance with students' needs. Turning next to the recommendation

for more robust training, most thought this was a good idea. The committee had mixed opinions about a broader implementation of intensive advising, given the time required.

Catherine S. then asked the committee how it felt about a recommended pilot program of team-advising (composed of a mix of faculty and students). Catherine E. said it can be helpful to students to talk with other students about course choices. Brooke said there is a Senate initiative to match upper class students with new students. If the college instituted something, she thought it would be well-received. Women in STEM match with older students, and there are also other interest-based groups that already do this. Tekla pointed out that this could provide a balance to what is already happening with athletic teams. Julia agreed that it might be good to have faculty members countering what athletes are saying to each other. If this were structured, as part of a program, it could be better information. Catherine S. said she used to have group meetings at the beginning of orientation but changes to orientation mean that she can no longer do this. The committee agreed that it was in favor of the pilot.

Catherine E. said the next recommendation—setting up a Committee on Student Learning which would work with IR and COFHE to provide formative assessment feedback on advising to the faculty—is now being formed. Its purpose will be to look at what is working and provide feedback on best practices. It will not involve evaluating faculty on their advising.

In December, the committee had briefly discussed the recommendation that responsibility for overseeing advising rest within the dean of the faculty's office, vested in a new position at the Assistant or Associate Dean level. Catherine E. said she is not interested in adding another dean to her staff but wondered whether it might be helpful to appoint a faculty member who would have some responsibility for overseeing advising. Catherine S. said the college is bad at advising, and this is a problem for a school with an open curriculum. If no one is in charge, it suggests no one cares about this issue. Advising is a critical part of teaching and learning. Edward said he did not think this should be another unpaid faculty responsibility. Catherine E. said a faculty member could receive compensation or a course release without being a dean.

Tekla said advisors spend most of their time with advisees on non-academic matters. Class deans become caught up in the non-academic personal issues. She did not believe it would be possible to disentangle these. Catherine E. said the role would not involve dealing with individual cases. Rather, it would be concerned with how to make advising more effective and structures to support better advising. Such a role could include assigning advisees and setting up workshops on best advising practices. Tekla did not think it would be possible to stay clear of the class dean roles. Catherine S. thought those responsibilities could be divided. Catherine E. asked Nancy to investigate the practices of peer institutions.

The meeting adjourned at 9:45 a.m.