

Committee on Educational Policy

April 20, 2023

In attendance: Faculty: Robert Benedetto, Chair; David Hanneke; Mekhola Gomes; Chris Kingston; Geoffrey Sanborn. Students: Gent Malushaga '25. Provost and Dean of the Faculty: Catherine Epstein, ex officio. Recorder: Nancy Ratner, Director of Academic Projects.

Rob Benedetto, chair, called the meeting to order at 2:30 p.m. in Porter Lounge, and the committee approved the minutes from the previous meeting.

Course credit policy

Rob welcomed Jesse Barba, director of institutional research and registrar services, to the meeting. Jesse noted that when the faculty voted to allow half-credits for lab courses, the use of half credits changed significantly, resulting in many more students opting to use half credits to reduce their course load and considerable confusion about the rules governing this use of half credits. Simply stated, students need 32 courses to graduate, and once a year, after the first year, students can reduce their four-course load obligation by taking 3.5 credits. The matching provision (requiring students to take a semester of 4.5 courses before taking a semester of 3.5 credits) applies after the first year, but both students and faculty find this matching policy confusing, and in some cases, nonsensical. It is confusing, for example, that taking an overload of five courses does not allow students to take fewer courses the next semester.

Jesse said he had discussed the problem with class deans, science faculty, music faculty, and also with David Hall, the chair of the ad hoc committee on student learning, and now wanted to simplify the policy by defining the rules in terms of the minimum number of full courses required: students need 32 courses to graduate, and at least 30 of these must be full courses; students who have the extra credits can use those credits to register for a semester of only 3.5 credits, as long as they do not drop below 7.5 credits for the year or below 3.5 credits in a single semester. (If students have withdrawn from a course under the course withdrawal rules, they would need a minimum of 31 courses to graduate, and if this occurred during the pandemic, they are allowed to graduate with 30 credits).

Rob noted that federal financial aid requires students to be enrolled in a minimum of three classes; he supported maintaining a minimum of 3.5 courses (fewer if the student has an accommodation) but would want to make sure advisors know to discourage that minimum, since students would risk repayment of loans if their course loads drop further. He asked if the student's advisor could refuse to approve a reduction. Jesse said the advisor could, and it would be an honor code violation if the student willfully signed up for three courses if the advisor had not approved the reduced load. If students are not minimally enrolled and have no plan for a fourth course, Amherst will unenroll the student. Students have a basic obligation to enroll in four courses each semester.

The committee asked about how full courses are defined, and how these rules are applied to transfer credits. Jesse said the rules for transfer students can become quite confusing. Members also asked about various combinations—four full courses and two half courses, three full courses and two half courses, etc.—and Jesse said these all contribute to the confusion. By starting with the norm—the expectation that students take 30 whole courses, and 32 courses overall—students will have greater flexibility, and if they abuse this, the penalty will be that they will not graduate with their class. Jesse

said the registrar's office is enthusiastic about this proposed change, and the class deans have also supported it. The number of students who have accumulated half courses has greatly expanded, and students do not understand why their fifth course does not qualify for a reduced load.

Comprehensive and capstone policy

Rob asked the committee next to return to its discussion of the College Catalog's expectation that students "complete the requirements for a major in a department or a group of departments, including satisfactory performance in the comprehensive evaluation." All majors used to have a comprehensive evaluation, but it appears that departments have watered down those policies all over time.

Geoff said he did not like the four-year trajectory ending with random courses, but he acknowledged the difficulty of finding something that was not just perfunctory or not overly onerous. His own department concluded that timed exams did not always end up measuring something meaningful. English tried requiring a conference-style symposium for seniors in which the students made presentations and responded to questions, but it was difficult to administer and students complained about it; the department ceased those a year ago. He thought it would be helpful to see good models.

Rob asked whether a capstone or comprehensive evaluation is required for reaccreditation, noting that the expectation is mentioned in the reaccreditation report. Jesse said that an open curriculum school needs to be able to point to how the curriculum is structured. Amherst requires that students attend a first-year seminar and complete a major. He thought it was helpful for each major to engage in a summative evaluation that has some rigor and evidence of coherence. Losing comprehensives would complicate how Amherst represents its open curriculum to peer reviewers.

Chris said he thought it could be possible to do things that were perfunctory but not completely meaningless. Students in Economics attend a seminar or read a research article, and then write a brief response paper. In the past, the department asked students to take a multiple-choice external exam that was offered through ETS and expected them to score above the national average on the exam. The department would pass everyone in the end. He thought there should be at least some minimal capstone experience.

Rob said he would support a minimal requirement if it is needed for accreditation, but if not required, he would prefer to drop the requirement because it often puts pressure on the most vulnerable students. He asked whether departments would deny someone a degree in their department if the student failed the requirement. If necessary, he would opt for a meaningless requirement over a cruel one, but he felt that having no requirement would be better than a meaningless requirement. Jesse said the accreditors do not require a capstone experience, but a requirement does ensure some rigor and structure. Without something to guarantee the rigor of the major, Amherst could receive greater scrutiny from accreditors.

Geoff said that if no one can fail the requirement, it is natural for students and faculty to think of it as something you do for show. Jesse said he knew of cases in which students have had to drop a major if they failed the comprehensive exam. Usually the students had a second viable major, but not always. Rob's concern was that the students who have come closest to failing the math comprehensive, and those few that did fail some years ago, were disproportionately first-generation and low-income students, who may have less time available to devote extra effort to academic work outside of their full course load. Geoff said he opposed a perfunctory requirement. Rob said he thought the vast majority of students find the process useful, but he worried about the few who fail because they don't take the

process seriously or, more likely, have other factors in their lives that make the process especially onerous.

Catherine said she did not like basing the requirement on an accreditation argument, but she also objected to basing policy on the few who did not take the requirement seriously. She thought a capstone was educationally valuable, helping students realize what they have learned. She did not think developing a meaningful comprehensive exam was so difficult.

David preferred the idea of a capstone, rather than an exam. Faced with a trade-off between what is valuable and what is possible, his department decided to require attendance at the department seminars, and he thought there was pedagogical value in asking students to attend the seminars. He added that departments all have learning goals, and the capstone can be a way for the department to think about those goals and whether the department is achieving those goals.

Rob said, if the college keeps a comprehensive requirement, it would be meaningless unless it consists of something more than just taking required courses. Jesse said many schools have a summative evaluation to see if learning goals have been met. He thought it would be more difficult to defend that Amherst is a rigorous college in the absence of any capstone experience or final assessment of what students have learned.

Geoff acknowledged that many faculty lack the time to do anything more, but he thought it was worth considering the possibility of creating a meaningful requirement. He recalled a capstone idea from Adam Sitze that students be required to submit an essay reflecting on their college experience. Geoff thought many students would take such an expectation seriously. Chris found attractive the idea of asking students to think retrospectively about how their courses fit together. Rob asked what departments would do if students plagiarized or used ChatGPT for the essay, or simply failed to submit it at all. Chris thought the penalty would be no different than what would occur for other requirements. Rob disagreed. This would be outside the regular curriculum, and a larger than usual number of students would cheat or miss deadlines. Jesse said students who fail to meet standards would not graduate. Rob said that it happens annually in his department, that a few students, often for reasons outside their control, cannot or do not put in enough time to adequately prepare for the comprehensives, and that these students, who are otherwise in good standing, come very close to losing their major or failing to graduate as a result. He felt that was evidence that an amplified comprehensive requirement would result in a noticeable increase in students failing that requirement across the college.

Noting the lack of agreement, Catherine suggested leaving the policy as is. Chris liked asking students to write a retrospective essay on the curriculum. He thought students would take pride in the process. Jesse added that departments could grade the essays with a high pass or low pass to show how well students had integrated their knowledge. Gent said the comprehensive has taken on an outsized rhetorical weight because the College collects no other evidence of their education. Geoff asked if the committee thought it acceptable for departments to just ask students to complete course work. Gent said there are 13 majors in 12 departments that just require coursework, some requiring a senior seminar, but many not even requiring that. If the CEP does not intervene now, he wondered when it would.

Rob said he saw the argument for demonstrating rigor, but not for demonstrating coherence, given the range of how majors function across campus. Chris argued that completing a major provides coherence, even if there was no coherence across majors, as Rob maintained. David suggested putting this on a

future agenda or, alternatively, writing to the departments that have dropped their requirements. Chris said he thought comprehensive requirements can have value; he hoped departments would find ways to create valuable experiences for the capstone.

The meeting adjourned at 3:50 p.m.