

**Committee on Educational Policy**  
**April 21, 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 April 14, 2021.

**A+ grades**

Edward welcomed Professors Kingston, Manion, and Trapani, representatives from the Committee of the Six, to the meeting to discuss how to handle the A+ grade as the college considers moving to a 4.0 or 4.33 grading system. Edward said he thought both committees were in agreement about moving away from the 14-point GPA to either a 4.0 or a 4.33 GPA. The question is how to deal with the A+. The CEP generally favors keeping the A+ as a meaningful grade but is still considering whether it should contribute additional points to the GPA, for a 4.33 GPA, or whether the A+ should remain an honorific grade in a 4.0 scale. He then invited the Committee of Six representatives to share the thinking of that committee.

Joe said his concern is that if departments take different approaches to the awarding of A+ grades, the students in those fields would not be able to earn the highest GPA in a 4.33 grading system. This could in turn distort how graduate schools would interpret students' GPAs because a GPA of 3.8 on a 4.3 scale might not be viewed as positively as a 3.8 on a 4.0 scale. He was less concerned about the relationship between the differential use of A+ grades and Latin honors.

Chris noted that the data from Jesse suggests that A+ grades bear little relationship to Latin honors, despite the differential approach by departments to A+ grades. He pointed out that this is just one of many inequities in grading across the college. In some fields, few or no A+ grades are given, and in others, grades of A+ constitute as many as 12% of the grades awarded. He recommended adopting the 4.0 GPA and making the A, not the A+, the maximum grade-point. He nevertheless favored retaining the A+ as an honorific grade, just not awarding additional points to the GPA for the A+.

Jen said the Committee of Six widely supported converting the 14-point GPA to a 4-point system. The sticking point was how to make use of the A+. The data on its differential use raised red flags for many, though she agreed with the CEP that this was not the central point up for debate. She supported disaggregating the question of the A+ grade from the change from the 14-point GPA, as recommended by the CEP. The faculty can then consider these two questions separately.

Edward said he thought converting the A+ from a meaningful grade to a solely honorific grade would constitute a big step and should be brought to the full faculty for a structured discussion. Adam also favored disaggregating the decision about the A+ from the decision about the 14-point GPA and asked what problem the committees were trying to solve. He saw two competing forces at work. Grades on the transcript affect how external groups, like graduate schools, will interpret grades. The points awarded for the GPA affect internal programs, like the awarding of Latin honors and Phi Beta Kappa.

Joe said the cutoff for *summa* has at times come down to the impact of a single grade. He worried that individual faculty could manipulate this outcome by awarding higher grades to an honors thesis. Krupa said if there is an A+, it should be built into the GPA calculation for purposes of clarity. Sandi noted that the A+ grade is already used in a meaningful way, since it is awarded 14 points. The reason it has not been an issue is that no one understands that scale. The registrar's recommended conversion for students needing a 4.0 GPA for applications to graduate programs retains it as an honorific because all students are told to count A+ grades as 4.0 when calculating GPA for external purposes, but internally it contributes a meaningful result in the awarding of Latin honors. She too favored disaggregating the questions for the faculty discussion. She thought there was value in being able to award exceptional work in a meaningful way. She thought the faculty needed to consider both how grades affect students externally and how grades influence internal awards.

Chris said he agreed that the faculty should debate this question separately. They should be shown the differences between how departments use the A+ (perhaps with the data anonymized). He also noted that he liked the idea of getting rid of cutoffs for the *summa*, which struck him as making an arbitrary distinction at times.

Adam said he saw two sticking points. First, discrepancies in grades would still persist even if the college abandoned the A+. Japanese is the only department that gives no A+ grades; Physics gives A+ to less than 1% of its students; the rest award A+ grades to between 1% and 12% of the grades given. Second, he wondered if these ranges also reflected grading differences beyond the A+ and questioned whether fairness is the only or best way to understand departmental grading differences. For example, he asked, do the A+ grades from the Math department suggest the faculty in that department inflate their grades in some unfair way? Or do those grades just reflect the extremely hard work of the Math department, which is known to offer a great number of office hours to ensure that students understand the material? If the latter, why shouldn't the rates of A+ grades in Math be considered a sign of success, and a model to be emulated by other departments? He noted further that there appears to be no correlation between departments that give higher rates of A+ grades and departments that award higher rates of *summa* or *magna* degrees. He did not want to deprive faculty of the A+ as a meaningful tool in the grading kit and said he did not know enough about how grading takes place in other academic disciplines to conclude that colleagues should never, under any circumstances, award an A+ that counts toward GPA.

Jalen asked how graduate schools interpret GPA. He said he had looked at law schools and discovered that many have their own conversion system. He wondered whether the college needed to worry about how to interpret the discrepancies. Cole suggested it might be better not to strive for consistency. Professors do not use grades in the same way even within a department. The problem of inconsistent grading would not necessarily end if the college got rid of the A+. Grading discrepancies go far beyond the A+. He liked the aesthetics of using the 4.0 GPA for outward-facing grades.

Sandi asked whether the college could convert from a 4.0 GPA to 4.33, or vice versa, if it subsequently chose to do so. Catherine said it could be changed in the future, but it would be more complicated and expensive. Doing so now while converting to Workday was the most efficient way to handle this. Chris said the Committee of Six had not discussed abolishing the A+. He occasionally gives out an A+ and likes the ability to do so. He thought it would be beneficial for it to appear on the transcript, so the only question is whether to factor it into the GPA. He also agreed with others that the A+ represents a small part of a bigger problem of inequity across the institution.

Jen said she supported bringing the question forward in two parts: whether the college should abandon the 14-point scale and whether the A+ should carry a GPA weight or be retained as a solely honorific grade. Edward said the CEP agreed with that disaggregation. Sandi said she agreed with Cole that it all depends on how it would be used internally since the registrar's office already has a system for converting the Amherst GPA for external purposes.

Joe said it is the outward-facing impact that concerned him. Of 28 schools that the Committee of Six examined, 12 do not issue A+ grades. Only 7 of the remaining 16 use a 4.33 scale to recognize the A+, so only a quarter of the 28 schools use meaningful A+ grades. He agreed that two motions would be best. Rob noted that the scale does not necessarily need to be 4.33. The college could retain external-facing metrics using a 4.0 scale while awarding the extra points for the rare students whose grades exceed the 4.0. Edward thanked the Committee of Six members who departed at 11:30 a.m.

### **Extensions and Class Absences**

Edward next asked the committee to consider a request from the Black Student Union that the college modify its institutional policies on extensions and class absences. Currently, faculty members have jurisdiction over the evaluation of student work, including extensions and class absences. The question for the committee was whether, in these extraordinary times, an interim measure might be needed to provide relief to Amherst students. Specifically, the Black Student Union has asked for flexibility and lenience on extensions and absences from class, taking into account the impact not only of the Covid-19 pandemic but also recent racist violence, and the disproportionate effects of both on communities of color. Many students are struggling with the mental health challenges of multiple sources of anxiety, anger, and fatigue.

Adam said it was unclear to him whether this is requested for all students or just for Black students. Edward thought the question was whether to approve an interim measure for all students facing this national trauma. Catherine said the administration believes the BSU demand for greater leniency is a faculty issue to decide. Edward wondered whether this was intended to cover a particular period of time or an indefinite period, since these problems are unlikely to end.

Krupa said she teaches about race and finds this demand highly problematic. The point of going to a class is to face these issues in class. To excuse students from class means they do not get to talk about and learn from others about these things. She urged colleagues to be careful how they define and respond to state violence. She further asked how this would affect faculty who teach about this issue and who take the issue very seriously. She was seriously troubled by the demands, while fully sympathetic to the students' concerns.

Nicola urged the committee to ignore the advice of Lady Macbeth and instead share the milk of human kindness in responding to the moment. She said she heard Krupa's concerns and supported faculty who are engaging with students on these issues, but she also wanted faculty to show mercy to students who require more leeway in meeting their college obligations. The college cannot legislate excused absences. Teaching is part of the mission. But individual circumstances might not lend themselves to students' presence at all times. She thought the committee should allow for differentiated decisions by faculty.

Cole said this is not about skipping classes that address these kinds of subjects. Rather this is envisioned as a coping mechanism for students who need to take time for their mental health after a particular event.

Krupa said faculty also have a need to talk about these difficult subjects, even when it is extremely difficult to do so. It is an integral part of an education to come to class even when things are most difficult. Students should not sequester themselves from things that are disturbing.

Adam expressed his agreement with Krupa. He added that, in the wake of an event that damages students' sense of hope and purpose, he thought that it might be less mentally healthy for students to be alone in a dorm room by themselves rather than in a classroom with others who may be feeling similarly. Those classes, he suggested, are likely part of the solution, and shouldn't be viewed as a problem. He noted that some Black students seem to be feeling exhausted, and suggested Faculty should confront that fact directly, forthrightly, and empathetically. It would be a mistake, he believed, to formulate a policy that excused students from the classroom, which he understands as a real educational good. No legislation could cover all situations, he added, and not all upsetting events are the result of state violence. Some are the result of private or individual violence, and some, such as significant court rulings or elections or congressional votes, are not violent at all. He thought the committee should encourage faculty to meet students where they are, encourage them to participate in this human good, and, in response to difficult situations change the way they teach and talk about the hard issues.

Jalen said he agreed in part. Some classes can provide spaces for talking about these issues. But in many other classes there is no space to discuss these issues. Work at Amherst can be mentally exhausting. When that is compounded by the emotions of continued state violence, it can be really challenging. Nicola agreed with Jalen. Not all colleagues will feel comfortable addressing issues that are on students' minds at this moment. Faculty need to be more flexible for some situations.

Edward asked how the committee wanted to proceed. Should it make recommendations to the administration? What is the CEP role here? Should it recommend a policy change? He worried that the CEP might not be in the best position to signal recommendations to the faculty.

Cole said he agreed with Nicola and Jalen. Students do not want to skip class and hang out in their room. He found that the healing that happened on the quad was highly valuable. Many classes do not give space to talk about these things, however.

Catherine said the role of the CEP is to weigh in on policy. There needs to be a body to make a statement. The faculty needs to be careful about abdicating its responsibility. She suggested the committee think about how the CEP should respond and how it should represent the faculty on these kinds of issues.

Adam pointed to the grim historical reality of the present —the record number of guns sold last year, the increase in crime in every major city, and the continued spate of mass killings, mostly in Black and brown communities. He noted that the category of state violence would not include mourning and loss connected with this kind of violence. But if state violence could not serve as a limiting principle of the kind of traumatic event the college formally recognizes and excuses, what could be the limiting principle? He noted that students' feelings of loss may well extend beyond violence. Race-conscious admissions could be overruled by the Supreme Court in the coming years. Important policing legislation could fail to pass Congress. Policing brutality and other emotionally-saturating events, he suggested, likely will continue and will have profoundly exhausting effects. Some faculty are having trouble managing students' demands for extensions to complete work. He urged his colleagues not to undermine the work of those faculty members with a general resolution. Some departments have to

have deadlines to manage the work. He predicted that there would be no end to this anytime soon. Jalen suggested the limiting principle would merely be an act of good faith in students. Amherst students are here to learn. When they miss class, it is because they are mentally exhausted. The faculty need to have faith in the students.

Sandi thought the committee needed to respond in some way, even if it might not be recommending a policy change. Conversations about race do not mesh with the curriculum in some courses. For some students, it might be reassuring to come in and talk about something else, but other students need to talk or take time off. She thought faculty should honor the students who need to come to class. For some faculty, attendance is a very rigid non-negotiable policy. Students do not have the space to say they cannot handle it that day. Faculty find it challenging to accommodate so many different requests. There needs to be a balance between these challenges and deadlines.

Krupa said college is a transitional time for students as they move into adulthood. Students should be able to take time off but they must also be willing to face the consequences when they do. Part of being an adult is coping with fragility and not having a choice about some things. Cole asked whether that was a world that Amherst wanted to be. Part of the system that defines what it means to be an adult is to be a human. This is a chance to change that rigidity. Krupa said she wanted to be compassionate, but life is hard. Students must learn to cope. It might be setting the wrong precedent in trying to be kind to students.

Adam said some situations will be unrelenting as adults, and it is not in the faculty's power to change that. He agreed with Krupa but thought faculty could reaffirm that some students are exhausted. He cherished the pedagogical relationship, supporting students, and thought there needed to be a resolution that, in addition to acknowledging the loss and mourning that some students are experiencing, would also support faculty whose fields impose a particular structure upon them—the attainment of a certain body of information—and acknowledge that the attainment of that knowledge may not always allow for exceptions and late work. Edward said the committee will need to say something. He and Nicola will draft a statement but not a policy recommendation that would alter a fundamental policy.

### **Latin Honors**

Edward next asked the committee to return to its discussion of Latin honors. He said he had looked at data that Nancy assembled on peer institutions and favors the recommendation to leave honors recommendations to departments. Nicola noted that some other schools leave it up to the department whether to use an outside reviewer. Such a policy would not reduce the number of *summas* awarded but would deal with Sandi's concern that outside readers might not be appropriate in all departments. She still believes that honors should be linked to work in the department but saw that is rarely the case in other institutions.

Edward asked about the outside reviewer question. Krupa said she liked it. Sandi said she could see requiring an oral defense but would want to leave it up to the department whether the defense is public or involves an external reviewer. Adam favored using an outside reviewer with an opt-out policy for departments. The institutional norm would be to use outside reviewers. He still worried about grade inflation and suggested making the CEP responsible for reviewing data every year on whether there are discrepancies between departments for Latin honors or inflation.

The meeting adjourned at 12:15 p.m.