

Committee on Educational Policy
April 24, 2019

In attendance: Faculty: Catherine Sanderson, chair; Lawrence Douglas; 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 8:45 a.m. in the Mullins Room. The committee approved the minutes from the meeting of April 24, 2019.

Course proposals

The committee approved additional course proposals.

Half course matching

Catherine S. asked whether the committee wanted to send any recommendation to the Committee of Six on whether to modify the policy on matching half courses for full course credits. The committee was in unanimous agreement that the language in the policy could not be changed without a vote of the faculty. Members remained mixed in their opinions as to whether that vote should occur and about the intentionality of the vote that was taken a year ago. Some members said they would not vote to revise the policy if it were brought back to the faculty.

Sophomore seminar proposal

Catherine S. next asked the committee to discuss the proposal from the Ad Hoc Curriculum Committee to create a required sophomore seminar. The dean had asked the First-Year Seminar (FYS) Committee to flesh out some of the details of this proposal, and that committee has now written to the CEP with a proposal for a pilot program which would bring about 75 sophomores together for a common intellectual experience in the form of a seminar focused on difficult questions and also on research skills. The addition of research skills adds an element that the Ad Hoc Curriculum Committee had proposed in an earlier draft. Catherine S. suggested the committee begin by discussing the Curriculum Committee's proposal on its merits. She assumed that the FYS committee had proposed a pilot on the assumption that the original proposal would not be approved by the faculty.

Lawrence thought it would be fine for faculty to experiment by offering a pilot rollout of the FYS proposed sophomore seminar. Recommendations based on the pilot could then come to the faculty after a two- or three-year trial. Catherine E. was hesitant to delay discussion of the Ad Hoc Curriculum Committee's proposal for another three or four years.

Catherine S. thought there was universal agreement that the students' experience during the sophomore year has been suboptimal and that it would be useful to bring this recommendation to the faculty for a discussion. Tekla agreed that the idea of a required sophomore seminar should be discussed, but she was less enthusiastic about the proposed FYS pilot. Those courses, as proposed, would focus on preparing students for research and the discussion of vexing issues. This would leave whole portions of the curriculum off the table. There are, for example, no vexing issues in geology, and geologic research does not involve the sort of skills that would be taught in such a seminar. Geology is not alone in these respects. Adopting this proposal would, in effect, preclude participation in an important new program for a large and growing part of the faculty. She preferred the proposal from the Curriculum Committee, which would include all students in a common intellectual experience.

Catherine E. said she was surprised by the emphasis on research in the FYS committee's proposal. She would prefer a program in which students learned to look at problems from many different angles. Edward said he agreed with Tekla. Research needs to be taught within a discipline. Tekla thought it likely that many complexities of this sort would come to light in a committee of the whole conversation. Real issues will need to be resolved, and the proposal deserves to be aired and discussed by the full faculty.

Lawrence asked how this might bear on the FYS committee's proposal for a pilot sophomore year seminar. The pilot might not require a debate on the floor of the faculty and could perhaps proceed as an experiment, with the approval of the dean. Catherine E. said she thought the Curriculum Committee's proposal still needed to come through the CEP, and both proposals would benefit from discussion by the faculty. To bypass debate on a major issue without a discussion would not be appropriate. She would nevertheless be happy to fund the pilot and thought it could run parallel to the discussion of a required sophomore seminar. She thought the pilot would be ready to start in 2020-21.

Catherine S. said she thought faculty will need more specific information about how this would work before discussing it on the faculty floor. It would help if the Committee of Six were to clarify the non-negotiable aspects: whether the seminar could count towards the major; the number of students who would need to be accommodated in each seminar; the theme, if there's to be one; the students' role in course selection; whether a day and time would be set aside for these courses so they could be populated with a diverse set of students without conflicting with other courses, etc. She also noted that, as students opt for half course matching, the number of courses that students take will drop slightly, and this may affect course enrollments. Catherine E. thought some details were less important, but she agreed that the Committee of Six would need to resolve some of the bigger issues.

Edward worried that this will take faculty away from teaching core courses for the major. Catherine E. thought there were very few big classes of that sort. It is more likely to reduce the number of boutique senior seminars that will be taught. Catherine S. did not think this would be the case. Most of her colleagues would far prefer to teach a boutique class to a small group of majors than a course at the introductory level.

Tekla said she would like to hear the ends that are meant to be accomplished by instituting a sophomore seminar. She could imagine ways to participate—for example, helping a team of students work together on a geology problem—but she could not conceive of a course in her discipline that would satisfy these restrictions (an introduction to research or discussion of vexing problems). Catherine S. said it might be useful to hear from departments their thoughts about participating. What would departments have to stop doing if they were to participate? When considering the proposal to institute minors, the CEP asked departments to think about how such a program would impact their major and whether they would want to participate in such a program. The committee received a range of feedback from departments which the committee then discussed before sending its recommendations to the Committee of Six. She thought many faculty members would prefer to teach in the area in which they have been trained, rather than big meta-topics, and she wondered how many faculty members would be needed for the program. Catherine E. said this would require 32 faculty members every year.

Lawrence asked if the Curriculum Committee had provided enough details to bring its College Seminars proposal to the faculty for debate. He thought it a very under-elaborated proposal. Catherine S. thought the faculty could have a more fruitful discussion if more details were fleshed out beforehand. Would there be clusters of seminars, for example? Would all of the seminars have to meet at the same time?

Catherine E. suggested writing to the Committee of Six with a summary of the issues requiring more concrete details. The Committee of Six includes some people from the Curriculum Committee, and they could perhaps add some specifics. Edward thought the Committee of Six should think about whether adopting a sophomore seminar would affect the availability of faculty to teach in the FYS program. With a sophomore year seminar, faculty might want to teach their FYS less often. Most would be unlikely to teach two required seminars in one year. Tekla said a discussion in the committee of the whole would be unproductive without more details. Catherine S. asked if others thought it would be useful to get information from departments. Tekla thought it would be useful, but not until there are more specifics.

Advising Recommendations

Catherine S. next asked the committee to return to the advising recommendations from the Curriculum Committee's final report. Turning to the suggestion that programs and departments appoint rotating pre-major advisors to coordinate efforts to guide students during their first two years, members thought this could take some of the pressure off the chair in large departments and might be most relevant in departments with hierarchical course structures. The committee did not have strong feelings about this suggestion and thought it should be an option, not a requirement, to be adopted as departments thought appropriate.

Lawrence asked to return to the suggestion that there be someone in charge of advising. He was particularly nervous about the idea that this person might include cultural sensitivity training as part of an annual training of advisors, as mentioned in the report. While he supported the idea of annual training, he did not want the training to address areas such as cultural sensitivity.

Catherine S. asked where the responsibility for overseeing advising should rest. She thought this important. Lawrence asked what the responsibility entailed. Catherine S. listed, among the possibilities, providing training on best practices in advising, providing opportunities for mentoring, and workshops for incoming faculty. Austin Sarat oversees some of these now, and Rick López oversees some of the training for orientation advising, though with a greater emphasis on the mechanics and requirements for particular fields than other aspects of advising. Lawrence said he did not think the college should create another administrative position. Catherine E. said she did not think an additional administrative position was necessary, but she thought it might be good to have a point person for advising. She could, for example, appoint a faculty member who would receive a course release to allow time to oversee a broad view of what advising entails. The responsibilities of associate deans already require more than a half-time position should, so she was reluctant to charge one of her associate deans with this, unless some duties of the associate deans were taken up by others.

Catherine S. asked whether Austin's charge might already include responsibility for advising. Catherine E. said Austin is charged with overseeing the intensive advising program and new faculty orientation. He also pairs new advisors with experienced advisors in a mentoring relationship, but this is different from organizing workshops on good advising. Catherine S. asked whether committee members believe it's important to have someone in charge of advising. She said it should not just be the registrar, and it might be useful to appoint a faculty member. Tekla said that, based on information from COFHE schools on their advising programs, there is no perfect solution. She also was not sure that there's much more that she could be taught about advising. But she did think that young faculty members need to be acculturated to the college and to how to advise students appropriately. These responsibilities, however, align with what Austin is already doing.

Gabe then recounted his own experience of having three different advisors within his first semester—moving from his orientation advisor, who already had 18 advisees, to an advisor with fewer advisees, to a third advisor when his second advisor took a sabbatic leave. He thought someone needed to make sure that students are not assigned to advisors who have too many advisees, aren't about to go on sabbatic leave, etc. Catherine E. acknowledged that about 5% of first-year students lose their advisors after the first month, but she said the numbers used to be much higher. Catherine S. said students should not be moving through three advisors in one year. Tekla asked about the source of problem—was it the system, or the number of faculty available? Catherine S. said there could be more thought to the assignment of advisors. Tekla agreed. For example, Jesse Barba should have a list of faculty who are going on sabbatic leave in the spring and should not use them in the fall.

Catherine E. said Austin is in charge of new faculty orientation. Catherine S. said there is perhaps no need for a dean of advising. What is needed is a dean of new faculty orientation who can prepare new faculty for how to advise, how AC data works, etc. This is an appropriate task for an associate dean. Catherine E. cautioned that she cannot assume that another associate dean will be willing to devote so much time to the job.

Tekla said it is important to acclimatize faculty to these tasks. She thought another associate dean is needed. Current associate deans are spending full-time, not half-time, on their administrative roles. Catherine E. thought the role could be structured differently. Tekla said it must be structured in a sustained way. Catherine E. thought advising should be a quarter-time position but said it was unrealistic to pile everything on an associate dean. Catherine S. noted that the orientation program for new faculty has greatly improved. This has brought a real culture change.

Students' writing

Lawrence said he thought there needed to be better communication between FYS instructors and the Writing Center. He proposed a requirement that FYS instructors complete a form indicating which of their students need serious attention to their writing, and this form needed to be shared with the student's advisor and the person in the Writing Center who is in charge of the intensive writing program. Catherine E. suggested that he send a letter to the Committee of Six with this recommendation.

The meeting adjourned at 9:45 a.m.