

Committee on Educational Policy
April 28, 2021

In attendance: Faculty: Sandra Burkett; Nicola Courtright; Edward Melillo, chair; 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 21, 2021.

A+ grades

Edward asked if the committee agreed that the college should move away from the 14-point scale. All, except Cole, agreed with that position. Edward said there also appeared to be consensus on the committee that the faculty should have a structured discussion to debate the question of the future of the A+, particularly as to whether the A+ should become honorific or whether it should contribute to the GPA. Committee members said they agreed that this was the right direction. Edward said he would write a memo to the Committee of Six making this recommendation.

Unexcused absences and extensions policy

Moving next to the college policy on unexcused absences and extensions, Edward said Nicola had drafted a statement that would propose changes to the policy in the Faculty Handbook. He also mentioned that two members of the Anti-Racism Committee (Amrita Basu and Khary Polk) will join the CEP's next meeting to discuss their curricular proposals.

Nicola noted that she had consulted with several faculty members (Khary Polk, Marc Edwards, Aneeka Henderson, and Rhonda Cobham-Sander) while drafting these recommendations. She also thought the committee should meet with members of the Black Student Union (BSU) to share what the committee is proposing and suggested the CEP could include members of the Anti-Racism Committee in that conversation.

Catherine said she thought there would be time for the Committee of Six to address these recommendations before the end of the year and bring the recommendations to the final faculty meeting on June 8, 2021. Edward suggested waiting to invite the BSU until the following meeting when the recommendations might be further developed.

Adam expressed surprise that the CEP would be making recommendations for a policy change. He had thought the CEP was just drafting a statement. He was particularly concerned about the thinking that had led to including the word "duress" which is an infamously vague but important concept in criminal law. Nicola suggested substituting "stress" instead. She explained that the language in the Faculty Handbook did not seem to deal sufficiently with these issues. It restricted excused absences to those resulting from illness or family emergencies. Students miss classes for many reasons, including stress, in current practice, and she thought the Faculty Handbook should reflect this.

Adam then turned to the language in the Faculty Handbook, which gives faculty discretion to excuse absences. He asked, does this new language allow students to override faculty discretion? He thought the CEP should get class deans to weigh in on whether the language Nicola was suggesting would be workable. He said he was unsure if there was anyone who was not stressed at the moment. How would the class deans determine what level of stress should constitute an excused absence? The class deans would not know how to interpret this language. Duress, on the other hand, involves threats or coercion. Nicola maintained that students should be able to signal that they are under stress.

Sandi said there is a wide range of flexibility in the current policy. In that spirit, the CEP could include a statement that recognizes the toll of psychological stress that students are experiencing and encourage faculty to take this stress into consideration when enforcing their class policy. In the second paragraph that Nicola had drafted, she noted that students would need to go to the Office of Student Affairs (OAS) if they missed just one class. She thought a conversation with the class deans might be sensible for an extended absence, but not for a single missed class.

Adam noted that faculty can have very liberal attendance policies, and that in these cases the policy likely would not apply. In his view, the revised policy would function to override very strict attendance policies, and that was question the committee should be considering. The central problem for him was how broad this policy should be. He suggested looking at attendance policies at other institutions. After an informal review, he had found nothing similar to the proposed policy. He did not think that it was necessarily in the students' educational long term interest to have a rigid policy that would allow students to miss class, and was concerned that there were no good options between the concepts of stress, which he found too broad, and duress, which he found too narrow.

Cole mentioned that the CEP would also have to update the language in the Course Catalog, since this is the language that students see. He wondered whether the OAS should be involved in minor requests. The CEP is proposing to address the concept of faculty discretion for occasional missed classes. He agreed that there is likely to be a correlation between attending class and academic success, and Amherst students attend class for this reason. It is the culture of the institution. But he thought students should be able to miss a few classes in the most extreme situations without having their grades automatically deducted for missing more than two classes, a policy followed by some faculty.

Sandi thought the revised paragraph was intended to override current policies that are excessively rigid, but she did not think it would be read as intended. Adam agreed and said there needs to be clarity about how this would work in practice. What if instructors feel strongly that education in their field requires regular attendance? Could the CEP be confident that such rigidity is not actually required by the discipline? Why override it in that case? The policy is unlikely to be based on a whim or caprice on the part of the instructor. The CEP needs to consider the faculty's expertise in designating what is really necessary to gain competence in the field. He thought Nicola's proposed draft would put untenured faculty in a very difficult position if students felt the instructor had not taken "reasonable" steps to accommodate their needs and could end up undermining pre-tenure faculty when they stood for tenure.

Nicola said she had discussed this at length with pre-tenure faculty. In the sciences, missing a lab can be much more problematic and places students in an impossible bind. She did not deny that academic success correlates with attending class. But she thought that being under stress is also problematic. This is the reason for including the line about communicating with the instructor about how to achieve the learning objectives. This policy would not provide a guarantee that students who had missed class would

do well in the subject; it is just intended to help them make it through as well as possible. She urged the committee to update the language.

Adam said her second paragraph needed greater clarity. Would this constitute an excused absence? Students already have the capacity to tell the instructor that they will miss class. This is an attempt to carve out an excused absence. Nicola said this was not necessarily to guarantee an “excused” absence. That aspect has to be negotiated with the instructor. Adam then asked what would be the point if this was not to provide for an excused absence. The policy already allows for communication. He opposed adding language to the Faculty Handbook at this point in time. He recalled that the college already has added many more flexible policies in recent years, including withdrawal from class without penalty, extensions, the ability to make up courses, a more flexible pass-fail policy. Some of these—especially the flexible grading option (FGO)—have produced real administrative tangles, removing faculty from responsibility for addressing student anguish and pain, focusing faculty attention instead on bureaucratic considerations, and ultimately causing considerable confusion for the class deans. He thought that the great enigma of pedagogy was how to repeatedly reinvent and rediscover relations between ever-new generations of students and enduring, longstanding bodies of knowledge. He suggested that the present historical reality requires the faculty’s renewed attention to this question. He argued against trying to write a permanent policy to accommodate these difficult times and warned that Nicola’s proposal would not accomplish what she intended and would be a mistake.

Cole disagreed and urged the CEP to assert that no professor should be allowed automatically to reduce a student’s grade after the student had missed more than a certain number of classes. Adam asked, on what basis would the CEP make such a statement? What is the authority that allows the CEP to say this? Cole said the faculty ought to value students’ agency and their mental health and avoid such rigid policies. Adam said he was not questioning that it would ever be appropriate, but he said he did not know all academic disciplines well enough to think it might never be appropriate to miss that much class. He added that the committee had still not defined what mental health issues were so compelling that they required a remedy. Nicola suggested extreme psychological stress. Adam countered that many—including faculty, staff, and students—feel they are under extreme psychological stress much of the time. Many have lost family members in the past year. What would be the limiting factor? How would the class deans know where to draw the line?

Edward agreed with Adam’s concerns that this might be similar to what the CEP tried to do with the FGO, codifying a policy that will inevitably be complicated by exceptional and extraordinary cases. Catherine said the concern seemed to be about rigid attendance policies. The language does not address those; she said she was not sure how to define an excessively rigid attendance policy.

Sandi suggested the committee step back and, instead of proposing changes to the Faculty Handbook or attempting to legislate compassion, simply issue a statement encouraging the faculty to show compassion. Some faculty may have rigid attendance policies, and, ultimately, an attendance policy needs to be at the discretion of the faculty. Adam said he agreed with Sandi. It was important to assume that everyone was acting in good faith. The committee should not create more bureaucracy, as it did with the FGO, and should not add bureaucratic layers between the faculty and students. Instead, the CEP should ask students to email faculty when they are feeling anguish, loss, and grief and hope that the faculty will respond with compassion. The goal for the committee is to speak directly to the pain that students are experiencing and bring faculty and students closer together, without adding layers of bureaucracy.

Cole still wanted the CEP to tell faculty that they could not drop grades automatically for absences. He continued to maintain that such rigid policies ought not to exist. Students do not feel they can reach out to some faculty; not all faculty are accessible.

Adam asked Cole to consider why a faculty member might have a rigid attendance policy. Is an attendance policy necessarily arbitrary or capricious? Is there a good reason why a faculty member might sincerely believe attendance should be mandatory? Cole asked why attendance should affect a student's grade, especially if attendance is unrelated to the quality of the student's work.

Noting that the CEP was not yet in harmony on how to proceed, Edward said the committee would continue this conversation at its next meeting.

Latin honors

Edward then returned to the conversation about Latin honors and asked the committee if it wished to propose changes to the Committee of Six. Did the committee want to recommend that departments use external examiners? Should there be different avenues for awarding Latin honors? Should the CEP recommend the draft policy that would remove the 40% cutoff for *magna* while maintaining the 25% cutoff for *summa*? Alternatively, should the CEP recommend that all honors be at the sole discretion of departments, without regard to grades?

Sandi noted that Latin honors is closely intertwined with the A+ grade discussion. She worried that the CEP might be trying to do too much at once. First, the faculty should discuss A+ grades. This would allow the faculty to discuss how grades—including the A+ grade—currently influence Latin honors. That discussion would give the CEP the opportunity to mention that Latin honors is also under review and to note that a decision about one could influence how the CEP would proceed with the other. She thought that of the two, the A+ grade was the more urgent issue and urged the committee not to rush the Latin honors changes. She said she was not opposed to grades being a factor in Latin honors, but she would prefer that they not be based on a comparison with the grades of other students. Instead, the college could require a particular grade profile for a *summa*. She thought there was insufficient time to do both of these things this semester.

Adam agreed that the two were intertwined, but he thought the A+ discussion would be easier if Latin honors had been resolved first. He leaned towards removing class rank from Latin honors but worried this might lead to Latin honors inflation. Edward noted that the college will have two more faculty meetings this year. He thought it was too late to address changes to Latin honors before changes to the A+. He then asked for more thoughts on eliminating class rank from honors. Nicola said she thought honors should be disaggregated from grades and strongly favored the proposal that left Latin honors entirely to the department.

Catherine said she might be the lone holdout on requiring that the student's GPA fall in the top 25% for a *summa*. She noted that the system works for the *summa*. Very few students recommended for a *summa* fail to qualify for that honor. She said she believed that a student's class work over four years should be important. She did, however, favor ending the 40% cutoff for *magna*, which has been more controversial. She favored ending the Committee of Six review of *summa* theses. She then asked why the department's assessment of the thesis should be the sole determinant of Latin honors. Nicola said

departments could also consider the student's GPA in their assessment. Catherine asked why, in that case, the GPA should not be included in the *summa*.

Cole said the policy that Adam had drafted did not preclude the use of grades by a department in its recommendation. It just removed the college-wide aspect from Latin honors. Sandi said she was uncomfortable leaving Latin honors totally up to departments and allowing them to set their own guidelines. She thought there needed to be more clarity about whether grades should be included in Latin honors. Faculty give as many as three grades for an outstanding thesis, and these grades affect Phi Beta Kappa. The recommendation for a *summa*, *magna*, or *cum* should include more than grades on the thesis. If the committee removes the college-wide grades from the recommendation, it should clearly state how grades should factor into a recommendation.

Adam agreed with Catherine. The problem is with the *magna*, not the *summa*. Faculty will hit the *summa* mark most of the time, even without the 25% cutoff. The second option removes the college-wide achievement from Latin honors. Highest honors would mean depth in a discipline, as determined by experts in the field, but would not address breadth or depth outside the field. Catherine noted that the college recognizes breadth as well as depth in its learning goals. She thought breadth should also be reflected in Latin honors. She agreed with Sandi that GPA should play a role, perhaps by determining a minimum GPA for a *summa*, and make this the minimum for a set period. Cole opposed a minimum GPA, seeing no justification for making grades a factor that could not be mitigated for *summa* honors. He added that maintaining grades for purposes of honors contributes to grade inflation.

Edward called for a vote, and four voted in favor of removing GPA and rank from all Latin honors, leaving the recommendation entirely to departments; two voted against that option; one member abstained. Edward said he will draft language for the committee to consider.

The meeting adjourned at noon.