

Committee on Educational Policy
April 3, 2019

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

Tariq Jaffer, acting 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 March 27, 2019.

Question about half courses

Catherine S. pointed out that students are quickly accumulating more than five courses each semester if they register for two lab courses and two other classes. She asked whether the committee thought the policy requiring signatures for five or more courses should be revised. Tariq said students will need to have more forms signed to proceed. Catherine S. said her concern is that many of these are first-year students; she is unsure how to advise students whose grades suggest they may not thrive with such a big program. She finds this disconcerting. Tekla said she would like to find a way to exempt a student who is taking two lab courses and two other courses from the requirement to obtain permission. Catherine S. said she would ask the class deans and the registrar how they would like to proceed with this issue.

Military Activation Policy

Tekla suggested substituting a slightly revised paragraph in the military activation policy:

If at the time of military service leave the student had declared a major, and, if upon re-enrollment that major is no longer offered by the College, the class dean, student's academic advisor, and appropriate department chair(s) will consult to apply courses completed in the original major either toward a major in a closely aligned field or toward an interdisciplinary major.

The committee supported her revised language. Tekla then turned to the issue of Five College certificates. She did not believe that certificates have the same status as a major. Since the Catalog is mute on the subject of a certificate, she wondered if the college is really obligated to restore students to their previous status on this issue. Edward added that there is very little standardization to the processing of certificates, and suggested the committee may need to revisit the language of all of the certificates at some point to clarify what is now a rather nebulous status. Nancy consulted with Justin Smith after the meeting, and he agreed that this reference to certificates could be dropped from the policy, with the understanding that the college would need to be consistent about how it dealt with this issue, if it were to occur.

FGO

Lawrence asked to return to the FGO motions to clarify the committee's intentions. He and the committee agreed that the first motion would allow second semester seniors who have not exhausted their FGOs to declare one course pass/fail before the end of add/drop:

MOTION 1:

Components of the proposed system: Student declares FGO during add-drop and has five days after receiving the grade to decide whether to accept it or convert to a pass. Second semester seniors cannot participate in this. Instructors are not informed as to which, if any, students are taking a course under the FGO option. Unrecorded FGO grades are kept by the Registrar. This enables recovery of previously unrecorded grades via petition to a student's class dean and the registrar, should this become necessary as a consequence of changing majors or changing post-graduate plans.

CATALOG LANGUAGE:
FLEXIBLE GRADE ~~PASS-FAIL~~ OPTION (FGO)

THE PURPOSE OF THE FLEXIBLE GRADE OPTION (FGO) IS TO ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO EXPLORE THE BREADTH OF AMHERST'S OPEN CURRICULUM AS THEY SEEK TO MEET THE COLLEGE'S STATED LEARNING GOALS. Amherst College students WHO ENTER AS FIRST-YEARS may choose, with the permission of the instructor, a pass/fail arrangement in two ELECT TO TAKE UP TO FOUR of the 32-TOTAL NUMBER OF courses required for the degree UNDER THE FGO; TRANSFER STUDENTS WHO ENTER AS SOPHOMORES MAY ELECT TO TAKE UP TO THREE COURSES REQUIRED FOR THE DEGREE UNDER THE FGO; AND TRANSFER STUDENTS WHO ENTER AS JUNIORS MAY ELECT TO TAKE UP TO TWO COURSES REQUIRED FOR THE DEGREE UNDER THE FGO, but STUDENTS MAY not take more than one SUCH course in any one semester. COURSES TAKEN IN THE SECOND SEMESTER OF THE SENIOR YEAR ARE NOT ELIGIBLE FOR THE FGO. TO ELECT A COURSE AS FGO, STUDENTS MUST FILE THE FGO FORM, SIGNED BY THEIR ADVISOR(S), WITH THE OFFICE OF THE REGISTRAR BY THE END OF THE ADD-DROP PERIOD. INSTRUCTOR PERMISSION IS NOT REQUIRED ON THE FGO FORM, AND INSTRUCTORS ARE NOT INFORMED IF STUDENTS HAVE ELECTED THE FGO OPTION FOR THEIR COURSE.

STUDENTS WILL HAVE FIVE DAYS AFTER THE DATE GRADES ARE DUE TO EITHER ACCEPT THE GRADE ASSIGNED BY THE INSTRUCTOR, OR IN THE CASE OF PASSING GRADES ("D" OR BETTER), ELECT TO HAVE A PASS ("P") DISPLAYED ON THEIR TRANSCRIPT FOR THE COURSE. (NO GRADE POINT EQUIVALENT WILL BE ASSIGNED TO A "PASS.") IF THE LETTER GRADE ASSIGNED BY THE INSTRUCTOR IS AN "F," AN "F" WILL BE RECORDED. IF THE STUDENT TAKES NO ACTION, THE ASSIGNED GRADE WILL REMAIN ON THE TRANSCRIPT. The choice of a pass/fail alternative must be made by the last day of add/drop at the beginning of the semester and must have the approval of the student's instructor and all major advisors. No grade point equivalent will be assigned to a "Pass," but courses taken on this basis will receive either a "P" or an "F" from the instructor, although in the regular evaluation of work done during the semester the instructor may choose to assign the usual grades for work submitted by students exercising this option. SECOND SEMESTER SENIORS WHO HAVE NOT EXHAUSTED THEIR FGO OPTIONS MAY SELECT ONE COURSE TO BE TAKEN PASS/FAIL. TO DO THIS, SENIORS SUBMIT A PASS/FAIL FORM, SIGNED BY THEIR ADVISOR(S) AND THE COURSE INSTRUCTOR, TO THE REGISTRAR BY THE END OF THE ADD-DROP PERIOD. (NO GRADE POINT EQUIVALENT WILL BE ASSIGNED TO A "PASS.")

The committee then discussed whether Motion 2 should allow students who encounter exceptional circumstances to convert a course to pass/fail after add/drop only if they have not already exhausted their FGOs. Several members argued for imposing no limits, noting that the class dean and instructor would have to sign off on the conversion. Others thought this too accommodating and said students' use of FGO/pass/fail should not exceed four courses. The committee decided to propose both options in Motion 2, allowing the faculty to decide.

Motion 2A would limit the number of courses that could be declared FGO (or, in the case of second semester seniors, pass/fail), with no exception for students who encounter special circumstances after using their four FGOs:

IN EXCEPTIONAL CIRCUMSTANCES, A STUDENT WHO HAS NOT PREVIOUSLY EXHAUSTED FGO OPTIONS AND HAS NOT ELECTED AN FGO IN THAT SEMESTER MAY, WITH THE PERMISSION OF THE STUDENT'S INSTRUCTOR, ACADEMIC ADVISOR, AND CLASS DEAN, CONVERT A COURSE TO PASS/FAIL AFTER THE END OF ADD/DROP.

Motion 2B, would allow students to convert a course to pass/fail after add/drop if they encounter special circumstances, even if the students have already exhausted their four FGOs:

IN EXCEPTIONAL CIRCUMSTANCES, A STUDENT MAY, WITH THE PERMISSION OF THE STUDENT'S INSTRUCTOR, ACADEMIC ADVISOR, AND CLASS DEAN, CONVERT A COURSE TO PASS/FAIL AFTER THE END OF ADD/DROP.

The committee agreed to think about these two options and discuss again at its next meeting.

Course Proposals

Tariq next asked the committee to review course proposals. Committee members asked about raising the caps for several low enrollment courses and also inquired about the space limitations for archival work, since there seemed to be some variation in these numbers. After the meeting, Nancy checked with Rachel Jirka, who reported that group sessions need to be capped at 20 due to space limitations and the precautions necessary when working with rare and unique material in the reading room space. If students are working individually with archival materials, the library prefers to cap the class at 16.

Board Meeting

The committee turned next to its anticipated meeting with the board on Friday. Lawrence was interested in expressing idiosyncratic views about the open curriculum. He wanted, in particular, to discuss the number of boutique courses and the relative dearth of courses that serve general education. Tekla pointed out that the committee sees only a narrow slice of the curriculum; it does not see the more general education courses because those courses do not change from year to year. While the committee has reviewed 176 new courses and an additional 55 courses with major revisions, the curriculum actually includes close to 800 courses (770 courses for 2019-20, not including special topics and senior honors courses). Catherine E. added that some of the courses that are submitted as "new" to the CEP are courses taught by visitors—including 15 of the new courses submitted this year.

Tekla said it might be interesting to the board to hear how the CEP examines the curriculum for redundancies and overlaps, oversees the public face of the curriculum by scrutinizing the course descriptions for clarity, and works to ensure access by monitoring course enrollment caps. She and Catherine E. suggested focusing on the most interesting conversations the CEP has had this year—for example, the recommendation that the college hire fewer visiting faculty. This year, 82 courses are being taught by visiting faculty—down from a high of 110 a year ago and 88 of two years ago—and returning the number of visitors to that of a few years ago. Tekla thought the committee should also mention the suite of measures the CEP has discussed that seek to create flexibility and multiple paths to help students succeed.

The committee agreed to start its meeting at 8:30 a.m. on April 17th and then adjourned at 9:45 a.m.