

Committee on Educational Policy

December 1, 2022

In attendance: Faculty: Robert Benedetto, Chair; Sandra Burkett; Mekhola Gomes; Chris Kingston; Geoffrey Sanborn. Students: Zane Khiry '25. Recorder: Nancy Ratner, Director of Academic Projects.

Rob Benedetto, chair, called the meeting to order at 8:30 a.m. The committee approved the minutes from the previous meeting.

Pass/Fail Policy

The committee then returned to the pass/fail policy and approved the following proposed policy revisions to be submitted to the FEC:

PASS/FAIL

The aim of the pass/fail (P/F) option is to encourage students to take intellectual risks, to explore the breadth of Amherst's open curriculum, and to reward students for engaging fully in all their courses. Under this option, students may elect to ~~declare~~ **TAKE AT MOST** one course per semester, ~~and no more than four courses over four years,~~ pass-fail. **TO DECLARE A COURSE PASS/FAIL, STUDENTS MUST OBTAIN WRITTEN SIGNATURES FROM THEIR ADVISOR(S) AND FROM THE COURSE INSTRUCTOR AND SUBMIT THE A-COMPLETED** ~~declaration of pass-fail~~ **FORM TO THE REGISTRAR'S OFFICE** ~~requires the permission of the student's advisor(s) and must be made before the first day of the exam period.~~ **THE INSTRUCTOR, CLASS DEAN, AND ADVISOR(S) WILL BE NOTIFIED AFTER A PASS/FAIL DECLARATION HAS BEEN FILED.**

If a student designates a course pass/fail, the student's transcript will have a "P" recorded in the case of passing grades ("D" or higher). No grade-point equivalent will be assigned to a "P." If the letter grade assigned by the instructor is an "F," an "F" will be recorded on the student's transcript and will count toward the student's GPA and class rank. Once students have declared a course pass/fail, they cannot later opt for the grade. Students admitted as first-year students may elect the pass/fail option four times during their Amherst College career. Transfer students admitted as sophomores shall have three pass/fail options, and those admitted as juniors shall have two.

Students may not take a first-year seminar pass/fail. Departments and programs may decide not to accept courses taken on a pass/fail basis in fulfillment of major requirements. Each department's and program's policy on accepting pass/fail grades toward major requirements must be included in the Amherst College Catalog and in other departmental and program materials.

Course Caps and Levels, and the 2023-24 Course Proposal Letter

Rob asked the committee next to return to its discussion of course caps and levels and noted that the committee needs to explain its policy about caps and levels in the letter soliciting new courses for the

next academic year. He also mentioned that Geoff will be speaking about these concerns at the December Chairs' meeting.

Geoff said he plans to point to the 10% drop in the percentage of students choosing to major in the humanities between when they enroll at Amherst and when they graduate. He said it is his impression that this movement from humanities fields to social sciences and STEM fields has resulted in part from changing student interests, but this may also reflect insufficient opportunities to experience introductory courses in the humanities. To stem this change, he hoped to use the upcoming Chairs' meeting to encourage humanities departments to reconfigure their ratio of introductory courses to higher-level courses, and to urge them to offer those introductory courses with higher caps. Chris added that the timing of those course offerings is also critical; students will only be able to take the introductory courses if the courses are scheduled during less congested time slots that are not in competition with other required courses. Zane agreed; the lower level humanities courses that he found intriguing were all offered during the Tuesday/Thursday 10 a.m. slot, so he registered instead for a computer science course. Rob noted that the caps are also a problem; his advisees often find humanities courses already full when they try to register for them.

The committee agreed that one of its goals is to achieve equity across departments, such that small classes are available to students in every department and division. Members also agreed that team-taught courses should generally have more generous caps, appropriate for a course taught by more than one faculty member.

Geoff observed that upper-level humanities courses rarely fill to their cap, generally attracting lower enrollments than 400-level STEM courses. Sandi said this is the result of the relative scarcity of those upper-level STEM courses. Most STEM departments can offer only a small number of upper-level seminars, using their scarce resources to staff courses at the 100- and 200-level; this contrasts with an apparent proliferation of under-enrolled, low-capped, upper-level courses in the humanities. She thought there might be a mismatch between faculty priorities and students' needs. Course offerings should not be driven just by what faculty want to teach, but by what courses students need to be able to access. Chris said Amherst faculty, particularly junior faculty, should be able to teach at least some courses that are driven by their research interests since this is a research college.

Nancy recalled Jesse Barba's observation that students who take an introductory level course in their first year are far more likely to major in that field. Rob said this means that the pipeline for majors requires easy access to those introductory courses, maximizing the opportunities available to students at the 100- and 200-level, which departments can achieve by reducing their 400-level course offerings.

Geoff said that in English, new faculty are often encouraged to teach a course related to their expertise so they can build enrollments. He thought there needed to be a place for both kinds of courses. He wondered whether the College has lost STEM faculty because they have not been able to teach in their specialty. Rob said they leave for other reasons—primarily the teaching load, often compounded by crushing office hours—and Chris observed that some are simply poached by other institutions, particularly if they have been successful in research. Rob said everyone in Math teaches a service-level course and another course each semester, teaching a 400-level course approximately every six semesters, a rotation that provides a sense of equity. But no one in his department teaches in their area of expertise because those courses would be far too advanced for undergraduates.

Mekhola said faculty in the History department are expected to offer courses at each level. Sandi said the Chemistry department prioritizes hiring new faculty who are able and willing to teach courses at the introductory level. Geoff noted that in English faculty coming from more elite graduate schools are often

unfamiliar with teaching at the introductory level, unlike their peers coming from the larger state universities.

The committee made some revisions to its letter to clarify these concerns and priorities, and Rob asked members to review the final letter before the next meeting.

Faculty Meeting Time Slot Responses

Rob also reported that the CEP, responding to the FEC's request to gather information about a daytime faculty meeting, has now received responses from some departments. The committee will continue to receive responses about how Friday afternoon faculty meetings would mesh with the academic day for a few more days, but committee members can begin to read the initial responses. Mekhola suggested finding a way to present the responses visually. Everyone acknowledged that while Friday afternoon meetings will be disruptive for some, the goal is to find the time that is least disruptive.

Future conversations

New class schedule

The committee noted that the FEC faculty meeting charge also proposed recommending possible changes to the course schedule. While the time frame provided by the FEC is not viable for developing a new schedule for classes, several committee members expressed interest in tackling this topic in the spring. Geoff asked for previous versions of class schedules to be assembled in a folder and expressed enthusiasm about using time during the spring semester to identify a better course schedule.

Comprehensive Exams Policy

The committee also expressed interest in discussing the comprehensive exams policy during the spring semester.

The meeting adjourned at 9:50 a.m.