

**Committee on Educational Policy  
December 2, 2020**

**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: Cole 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 November 18, 2020.

**Spring calendar**

Catherine asked the committee to consider a revised calendar which would delay the start of the spring term to the latest date possible as a way to minimize the amount of indoor class time for students, faculty, and staff. Under this plan, the semester would begin on February 23, 2020, and students would graduate on June 6, 2020, just prior to the starting date for many internships and other summer opportunities. Catherine noted that many peer institutions are adopting similar calendars for the spring semester. This later start would also have the advantage of providing a longer break for faculty who are teaching in both January and the spring semester.

Some committee members expressed concern that this would shorten the summer break, the period when faculty tend to be most productive with their research. While it would only delay graduation by one week and would replace the three weeks that would be lost in May with three additional weeks in February, some members of the committee thought faculty would find the February time too fragmented for concentrated work. Some thought that these concerns, however valid, did not ultimately outweigh the considerations that supported a later start to the semester.

Both faculty and student members were concerned that this would have a financial impact on students' ability to find jobs and internships for the summer. By June, there will likely be fewer jobs available, and fewer weeks in which to earn needed money. Cole noted that the year that he worked Commencement, he found it much harder to find summer internships.

Sandi questioned the reason for starting the semester on a Tuesday rather than a Monday. Catherine explained that this was an attempt to use the latest possible start date. Since there were no other inherent advantages to that date, the committee thought the week should begin on the Monday.

Nicola asked how this would affect athletics and expressed disappointment that so many athletes have opted to leave campus during the fall semester, giving the appearance that many athletes may care more about playing their sport than being part of the larger community as a whole. She said she was eager to get back to her abandoned work and then made a big pitch for the value of teaching in person and meeting with students on campus. She supported the later start because she thought it would allow more faculty to teach on campus and meet in person with students. Saying that this is proving to be psychologically important to the students, she encouraged the administration to start a campaign to bring faculty back to campus. Catherine noted that about half the faculty are coming to campus to teach, conduct office hours, and/or meet with students.

Cole expressed great disappointment in the late start. While he thought it made sense to have more time on campus during the warmer weather, he said he and his friends are all eager to return to campus to see each other. He also wondered how many classes would be taught in person, since so many classes will require a hybrid format to accommodate sophomores, who are not being invited to return. Nicola

pointed out that she believed there was value in the students physically on campus being in a classroom together, even if the professor and some other students were remote.

Some committee members noted that students could perhaps be allowed to come to campus somewhat earlier, before the start of classes, but some thought the students would be disappointed by the restrictions when they arrive. Jalen, who has been on campus this semester and will be returning, agreed. He said his experience of campus life has been much more isolating than he had expected before he arrived. As a first-generation, low-income student, he said he needs a job over the summer and thought the extra three summer weeks would prove critical in finding a job and earning needed money. Rob said he will begin a job a few weeks after the semester ends, so he favored the later start and the break that it would give him between January courses and the spring semester. While some students might want a longer rest before starting an internship, he thought the period of warmer weather for classes would be good for everyone.

Catherine noted that the college was imagining a totally remote start, while testing occurred. If students were allowed to return on February 15 or 16, the college could get testing underway before starting classes, and there might not need to be a totally remote start, so she was not opposed to bringing students back one week earlier. She was unwilling, however, to contemplate any earlier start.

Sandi offered some minor suggestions: assuming a Monday start, which would maximize the number of full weeks, the calendar could include the same two breaks and add one more day of reading period at the end of the semester. Alternatively, she said the committee could opt for two two-day breaks, with the semester ending on a Thursday, with the shorter reading period. The committee supported the Monday start because it would maximize the number of full weeks, and Catherine agreed to the Monday start.

The committee then discussed a proposal to begin the semester one week earlier, on February 15. Catherine pointed out that this would add one additional week of cold weather indoors, which she thought was not as valuable as starting one week later. Sandi asked whether that week was planned to be remote anyway due to the transition period with testing. Catherine said that had not been decided yet.

Edward called for a vote on the start date, and five members voted to start the semester on February 15, 2021, and three members voted to begin on February 22, 2021. He then asked about the option of a one-day and a two-day break with a longer reading period versus two two-day breaks with a shorter reading period. Six members preferred the longer reading period with one one-day and one two-day break, and two voted in favor of the shorter reading period with two two-day breaks. Asked about when the breaks should occur, committee members said they had no strong opinions about the rhythm of the semester and preferred to send those options to Catherine for further consideration by the Committee of Six.

### **Cluster hires**

Krupa asked about the possibility of including scholars who identify as cross-gender in the types of diversity hires that could be proposed for a cluster hire. Catherine said she believes there will be several cluster hires, and the clusters will need to involve multiple departments, not just a single department, and could theoretically include people who are also cross-gender. The initiative, however, is intended to focus on race rather than other types of diversity. Krupa asked that cross-gender scholars be mentioned in the letter to departments, given their relative isolation. Edward said he would think about how to address this in his letter if others supported the idea.

## Course solicitation letter

The committee returned to a draft of a letter soliciting new courses and revisions to ongoing courses and approved the draft.

## Latin honors

Edward next asked the committee to return to its discussion of Latin honors. He noted that the committee had received additional information on departments' recommendations and awards from Jesse and will eventually need to recommend either a new policy or a continuation of the current policy.

Cole said he had given this some thought. He had worked under three assumptions; First, Latin honors are college honors, not departmental and should strive for standardization across various departments and divisions. Second, Latin honors should not be artificially scarce. Exceptional students should earn Latin honors, but in a year with many exceptional students, the strength of the cohort should not diminish the strength of any individual's work. Third, students can be exceptional in a variety of ways, and rules that institute high bars in any given area will most likely weed out some of Amherst's most deserving students.

Noting that the summa review by the Committee of Six has become pro forma, Cole then proposed that the faculty vote to create a Faculty Committee on Honors which would review all recommendations for a *summa* degree, guided by a set of principles that would also allow for some contextualization, such as initial lower grades during the transition to college. Departments recommending a *summa* would need to ensure that students had completed an exceptional thesis; done exceptional coursework in their field of study; and explored the open curriculum and demonstrated curiosity and effort while doing so. Departments would then write a letter to the Faculty Committee on Honors, with their recommendation and include supporting materials. He thought this would make this a college-wide process that would ensure some scarcity while also ensuring that exceptional work is awarded fairly across departments.

Several members liked his idea, and most agreed that students should not be prevented from receiving a *summa* after receiving a poor grade during their transition to college. Some noted the dearth of students of color graduating with a *summa* degree in some years. Nicola said the Faculty Committee on Student Fellowships would be in a good position to take this task on since it already looks at a range of issues when it determines who will receive nominations for major awards.

Sandi also liked his suggestion and said she had found it helpful looking at what other schools do. Amherst swapped the awarding of Latin honors and distinction some years ago, and while she liked the connection between thesis work and honors, other schools appear to take a different approach. She noted that some institutions only count the number of A grades. She wondered about requiring a particular GPA rather than linking awards to a particular percentage of the class.

Adam also favored tying honors to the thesis. He was struck by the way some other institutions distinguish between department honors and college honors, and wondered if this might be a possibility at Amherst. At Amherst, the honors designations have to be made after the submission of a thesis and before graduation. He thought it would be very complicated to discuss this many thesis designations logistically in such a brief time period. Adam also said he would like to see some distributional criteria across divisions; this would not weed out many students, but it would state an institutional value. Stating his agreement with a letter written to the committee by Professor Reyes, he said that he believed the college's current system rests on distinctions that are increasingly becoming meaningless.

Maybe instead of asking departments to send letters for every student recommended for honors, departments would only need to write on behalf of students whose initial challenges were particularly difficult. Cole said he had in mind only having the committee discuss *summa* recommendations. Adam wondered how a denial would work. Because committee members would have no expertise to look at a thesis and determine its value or determine a divisional distribution, and would have very little time at the end of the semester in which to make determinations, Adam said that he believed this proposed process would also become pro forma.

Sandi said she was bothered by the percentage cutoff. The Latin honors should value excellence. Class ranking adds a complicated factor to this, especially given the differences between how divisions and departments distribute grades. She favored removing this comparative statement. Edward thought it would be helpful to find a way to ignore the initial transitional period that advantages some students over others. He noted that at Swarthmore students only receive pass/fail grades during the first year.

Cole said he shared some of Adam's concerns and had in mind the process that the CEP uses for FTE requests, in which the committee engages in nuanced deep discussions about each department's letter as it thinks about how to distribute scarce resources. These are meaningful discussions, and he hoped to recreate the same type of thoughtfulness.

Edward asked Cole to draft a proposal for the next week's discussion. Edward will draft a memo on cluster hiring, and the committee will look at both before the next meeting.

The meeting adjourned at 12:20 p.m.