

**Committee on Educational Policy
December 4, 2019**

In attendance: Faculty: Tekla Harms, acting chair; Edward Melillo; Christian Rogowski; Krupa Shandilya; Adam Sitze. Students: Gabriel Echarte '22; Sterling Kee '23; Julia Ralph '21. Recorder: Nancy Ratner, Director of Academic Projects.

Tekla Harms, acting chair of the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP), called the meeting to order at 8:45 a.m. in Clark House 100.

Intensive-writing instruction

Tekla welcomed Jyl Gentzler, Professor of Philosophy and Faculty Director of the Writing Center and the Center for Teaching and Learning, to the meeting to discuss the intensive-writing program. Jyl recounted the history of the program, which began as an experiment in 2005 preceding a report of the Working Group on Writing Instruction, one of several working groups that grew out of the recommendations from the Special Committee on an Amherst Education.

The working group surveyed students and faculty and found that students were very dissatisfied with writing instruction and that faculty also felt that many students—possibly as high as 10% of the student body—were unprepared to do college level writing. The working group recommended that all students be required to take at least one writing-attentive course. The faculty did not support this recommendation. At that time, First-Year Seminars (FYS) were not taught as writing-attentive courses, but this changed in 2008, following a recommendation from the FYS Committee. FYS are now all writing-attentive.

In the interim, Jyl, Chick Chickering, Ben Lieber, and Michele Barale decided to experiment with a writing-intensive course and asked FYS instructors to identify students who needed serious help with their writing. Jyl, Chick, Ben, and Michele then offered those students a course, which was both discipline-based and which also focused intensively on writing and reading skills. They quickly discovered that students needed help both in academic writing skills and in argumentation skills. They also discovered that the highest predictors for a writing-intensive course recommendation were reader ratings of 5 or lower. Following the experimental course, they recommended that writing-intensive courses become part of the regular offerings, particularly for students recommended for extra help.

Jyl noted that students have registered for the courses primarily as the result of an FYS instructor's recommendation or as the result of an experience in the Summer Humanities and Social Sciences and the Summer Sciences bridge programs. The availability of faculty to teach these courses, however, has regularly fallen short of the number of students who need the instruction.

Jyl thought the barriers to regular faculty participation were twofold: writing-intensive courses are taught in a way that will not usually satisfy requirements for the major, and they generally involve instruction that falls outside the faculty member's area of scholarship. For these reasons, the four faculty in the original group had recommended that the CEP prioritize FTEs for departments that were willing to commit to participate in this program, a recommendation that the Committee on Academic Priorities (CAP) subsequently adopted as part of its program to meet a series of campus-wide needs. Since then, three FTEs have been granted—one each to Classics, Music, and Philosophy—in exchange for a commitment from the department to staff one writing-intensive course each year. Despite these commitments, Jyl said that Ben and Michele carried most of the weight in teaching these courses, prior

to their retirement last May. Jyl has also offered a transitional course for transfer students, who often have similar needs, but she will be on leave next year, and no one else in her department is planning to teach an intensive-writing course next year. Neither Classics nor Music is offering a writing-intensive course this year.

Jyl said there remain multiple challenges. The pipeline channeling students into the courses has proved problematic, with insufficient numbers of students receiving recommendations, but even if this were working as it should, there would be insufficient courses to meet the need. Teaching sophisticated argumentation skills—skills involved in presenting a position, backing it up, and engaging in a discussion (both orally and in writing)—requires that courses be taught within a discipline. Faculty are trained to think in these ways but are not trained to teach these skills.

Concerned about the problem, the Writing Center offered a special workshop last spring to train additional faculty to teach these courses. Six faculty in the humanities and social sciences participated. They participated with the understanding that they would teach these courses at least twice. One taught a course during the fall semester, but registration problems left the course very under-enrolled; another course was taught in Spanish and was therefore inappropriate for some students; a third course, to be offered in the spring, is fully enrolled and has a waitlist.

Adam asked about the current needs. How many students would benefit from such a course? How many sections would this require? What can the CEP do to hold departments accountable? Are there other models? Jyl said she did not know the number of students needing the course. She said the identification of students who would benefit from such a course is imperfect at best. The summer bridging programs are now restricted to first-generation and/or low income students, and only a fraction of those eligible for the program actually attend. Other students needing help depend on the willingness of FYS instructors to make recommendations. Those recommendations then are sent to advisors, and not all advisors act on the recommendations. The result is that not all students who would benefit from intensive writing support receive recommendations, and even those who do may not necessarily be channeled into a writing-intensive course. Tekla said the course is still voluntary, and some students may be too scared to take these courses during their first year at the college. Jyl suggested the CEP ask Admissions how many students receive lower reader ratings and how many are first-generation/low-income college students. Tekla asked Nancy to make those inquiries.

Adam asked what priorities the CEP should focus on. Were there other models? Should the college become more aggressive in its attempts to encourage tenured faculty to participate? Tekla asked Jyl to describe what is involved in teaching a writing-intensive course. Jyl said students may be taught in high school to write a report. Many students, however, are not taught how to orchestrate a conversation with a voice and an argument. This is especially true of international students from particular parts of the world. Developing these skills sometimes involves a huge and challenging transition. She said that while it is difficult to do in one semester, it is possible to help students to understand the expectations and conventions of how to organize a paper and how to argue an idea if the course is designed to accomplish these goals. Faculty are well-trained in the conventions but without training in writing pedagogy may find it difficult to step back to help students see how it all works.

Jyl explained that while the college could consider hiring people who are trained to teach writing, the primary missing piece is not basic composition; rather it is the argumentative moves that academia requires. The faculty know their field's literature and the flaws in the arguments that students make, so they are logically the best placed to teach these skills. The difficulty is making sure that faculty have the

intrinsic motivation to teach the courses. External incentives will be insufficient in the long haul. She also noted that the Writing Center has excellent people who could teach these courses, but the CEP has been resistant to having staff members teach courses. Edward asked whether the college should hire someone to teach these courses. Jyl said that idea has never been seriously considered. She thought someone needs to oversee the program the way Ben did.

Tekla said she thought it would be a sad day for the institution if the faculty were to decide not to teach the courses that students need. She did not want to assign this responsibility to someone else. She also said she was troubled by the number of courses that the CEP approves each semester that may be fascinating to the instructor but of little interest to students. The faculty are declining to do the work necessary to teach the courses that are needed. Nancy asked whether Writing Center staff could provide assistance to faculty who would like to teach these courses, as they do for the FYS program. Jyl said the Writing Center staff cannot meet all the writing needs now. Going into classrooms to help FYS faculty already draws staff away from one-on-one appointments, but they certainly could do so if the size of the Writing Center staff were increased.

Adam asked about policy options. Jyl said ideally the faculty who are capable of teaching these courses and interested in doing so would be encouraged by their departments to do so. Although this is her last year in the Writing Center and Center for Teaching and Learning, there are others—Kristen Brooks and Cassie Sanchez—who could run a training seminar in the future. The college could take advantage of faculty idealism to teach courses. That said, she cautioned against expecting faculty to teach these courses year after year. The college will need to offer training to many faculty, with stipends, and get a commitment from the faculty that they will teach these courses at least two times. Tekla pointed out that they will also need department buy-in. She thanked Jyl, and Jyl departed.

Course solicitation letter

The committee turned next to a letter to be sent to faculty soliciting new courses for the 2020-21 academic year. After a brief discussion about whether or not to include pre-registration procedures, the committee decided to retain them. Tekla suggested a minor change to formatting, and the committee approved the letter.

Liberal Arts Consortium for Online Learning (LACOL) course

The committee approved a course on Linear Programming for the spring semester. The course will be offered by Professor Steven Miller at Williams College through the Liberal Arts Consortium for Online Learning (LACOL) program as part of the ongoing Bayesian Statistics pilot, and Professor Leise will serve as the local liaison for the course. Tekla suggested the professor adopt the plural when discussing “data.”

Tekla urged committee members to read the minutes promptly and then adjourned the meeting at 9:45 a.m.