

Committee on Educational Policy (CEP)

December 8, 2015

In attendance: Faculty: David S. Hall, chair; Alexander George; Caroline Goutte; Klára Móricz; Sean Redding. Catherine Epstein, dean. Students: Samuel Keaser '16, Rashid (Chico) Kosber '17; Steven Ryu '16. Recorder: Nancy Ratner, Associate Dean of Admission and Researcher for Academic Projects.

David Hall, Chair of the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP), called to order the CEP meeting at 3:00 p.m. in the Physics and Astronomy Meeting Room (Merrill Science Center 222) and the committee approved the minutes of the meeting of December 1, 2015.

Updates and announcements

David shared information about new distance learning technology that could potentially be used by a faculty member who wanted to teach students during a snow emergency or while attending a conference. He said the committee could discuss this at a future meeting if it wished. He also shared some changes that have been proposed for the statistics major and said the committee would consider that proposal at its next meeting.

New keywords

Returning briefly to the discussion of new keywords, David mentioned that one department had proposed expanding “race” to “race and ethnicity.” Catherine pointed out that ethnicity would include courses covering other cultures. She thought expanding the keyword in that way would effectively dilute it and undermine the purpose of a keyword on race. Committee members agreed. The committee also agreed that the suggestion to expand “gender” to “gender and sexuality” should be accepted.

Klára briefly worried that the subject-oriented keywords might lead students to utilize the keywords as an index for selecting courses and not read the full course description. She worried that students would then be dissatisfied if the topic proved to be only tangential to the course. Caroline thought the motivation was to draw students’ attention to courses they might not have otherwise found. Sean concurred, saying students may not read the catalog comprehensively when selecting courses, and this may provide an alternative path to uncover courses outside the usual departments. She agreed with Caroline that, even if used as an index, the keywords may still prove useful if they guide students to unexpected courses. Student members thought it unlikely that their peers would not read the full description after finding a course by using a keyword.

Meeting time for next semester

The committee agreed that meetings next semester would take place on Fridays at 8:30-9:50 am in the Physics Lounge in Merrill.

Course evaluations

David asked about the committee's experience with the new course evaluations. Chico reported that student TAs are receiving evaluation forms for courses they are assisting. A question was raised as to the timing, asking why the deadline cannot be the end of the finals period. David noted that courses end at different moments. Evaluations are meant to be more reflective in nature, so some faculty wondered whether they could be distributed at an earlier moment in a course. Caroline pointed out that there is nothing stopping an instructor from sharing the questions with students earlier in the semester. David said some instructors have objected to the web form, but it is the only software available at the moment.

Transcript policy

David also reported that he has heard some discontent with the idea of instructors not having easy access to their students' transcripts. Catherine said there had been impassioned feeling on both sides of this issue at the Committee of Six. David said some faculty, particularly in the sciences and mathematics, hope to ensure that their students are properly prepared both to take and to succeed in their classes by examining their grades in various courses before allowing them into the class. Caroline noted that there is an AC data tool that allows pre-requisite checking, and that tool should satisfy the need to review student preparation for a particular course since an instructor can use it to see how a student has performed in up to three prior courses. She thought this tool works well because it allows the faculty member to inquire about relevant information rather than the entire transcript.

Internships

Returning to the question of whether Amherst should allow credit for student internships, David shared some data from the Career Center on the number of students who have sought such internships in the past and information on how Dartmouth has dealt with this issue. Dartmouth does not award credit but notes in a letter to the organization sponsoring the internship that such experiences have educational value and are seen as an integral part of the student's education. The letter urges employers to cooperate by allowing students to participate without complying with the normal stipulation that credit must be arranged. Sean said she found the Dartmouth solution acceptable and recommended that Amherst write a similar letter to companies asking that students receive credit. The committee agreed and asked David to write to the Career Center with that recommendation, with copies to the dean and to her associate dean, Austin Sarat.

Course proposal letter

The committee suggested a few revisions to the course proposal letter and then approved the letter, asking that it now be sent to the faculty. David said he also planned to write to the Committee of Six about the additional keywords.

FTE requests

Catherine said she expected to be able to award as many as eight to ten FTEs in the coming year and stated that the Board is willing to raise the cap so as to permit five additional FTEs for diversity

purposes, all at the senior level. Two of the 17 FTE requests received by this year's committee will be approved separately, having already been approved in a previous FTE round.

Course calendar and related academic workload issues

Turning next to the academic workload, David asked whether there were steps that the committee could propose that would address any of the concerns raised by students. Sam asked about allowing students to take more half courses in consecutive semesters and have those half credits count towards graduation.

Committee members also suggested introducing a more flexible pass-fail policy, such that students could opt later in the semester for a course to be converted to pass-fail. Sean also asked that the committee discuss the possibility of making the first semester entirely pass-fail. Catherine said that the Curriculum Committee is also discussing pass-fail—including increasing the number of courses that could be taken pass-fail and making the deadline more flexible for declaring a course pass-fail—all in the hope of encouraging risk-taking. Originally, members thought the early deadline was established so students wouldn't use pass-fail merely as a way to avoid a bad grade. Klára thought it would be better for students if they could make the course pass-fail much later in the semester. Sean agreed, saying students sometimes devote less energy to a course if it is being taken pass-fail. Nancy pointed out that some schools avoid this problem by making the course pass/D/F.

Alex suggested that one important principle that the committee could establish might be to declare that breaks should be treated as breaks, without work assigned. Some others agreed.

Students said that the idea of creating Wifi-free zones was not particularly popular with students. Sam pointed out that there is institutionally available software for limiting computer use, making the zone potentially unnecessary. David said the committee would return to these issues. The meeting adjourned at 4:30 p.m.