

Committee on Educational Policy

December 8, 2022

In attendance: Faculty: Robert Benedetto, Chair; Sandra Burkett; Mekhola Gomes; Chris Kingston; Geoffrey Sanborn. Provost and Dean of the Faculty: Catherine Epstein, ex officio. Students: Gent Malushaga '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 after a brief discussion about getting additional data on FTEs.

Course proposal solicitation

The committee approved the letter soliciting courses for the next academic year.

FTEs

Rob asked the committee if it objected to receiving a slightly late FTE submission. The committee agreed to accept it.

Faculty meeting time slot

Rob next asked the committee to consider the feedback from departments regarding academic conflicts that would occur if the College decided to hold faculty meetings on Friday afternoons. He noted that while the range of feedback suggested there might be considerable opposition to this idea, only a few departments reported curricular or other academic conflicts that would make Fridays difficult. Those tended to be either labs, which could in some cases be taught by instructional staff who are not required to attend faculty meetings, or music courses. In both cases, the departments reported that the specialized rooms that are required for their courses necessitated their using every teaching slot in the current schedule. The most common other objections seemed to center around a desire to use that time for scholarship, for travel to conferences, and for responsibilities related to child care. A number of faculty asked that the dates be announced at the beginning of the year to allow departments to plan other events, such as seminars and department meetings on the remaining Friday afternoons.

Rob concluded from the feedback that the 3-5 p.m. slot created fewer academic conflicts than a slightly earlier 2-4 p.m. slot. While Chris thought it might be feasible to develop an entirely new class schedule that would situate the faculty meeting midweek, which would have the advantage of providing a community hour on alternate weeks that would not conflict with athletic events, Rob was highly skeptical that the Friday afternoons would ever become a popular class time for either faculty or students. For now, he will write to the FEC that the best time appears to be Fridays, 3-5 p.m., provided instructional faculty are allowed to teach during that slot. He will share the responses from departments, and he will also explain that the narrow window of time provided to the committee had not allowed sufficient time to develop an entirely new schedule.

Chairs' Meeting

Geoff reported on the discussion at the Chairs' meeting about course levels, caps, and enrollments. Following Jesse Barba's presentation on the growth of majors in STEM, Geoff had asked the humanities departments to consider how they could help relieve pressure on STEM faculty, such as adding seats in intro classes, raising caps, and making the classes more attractive. Although this particular framing of the problem was not especially well received, Catherine thought a number of humanities chairs heard the message that they need to think about more classes at the 100-level. Catherine said the chairs heard that the real need is for humanities faculty to teach more 100- and 200-level courses than they do now and fewer 300- or 400-level courses than they do now. The chairs also discussed the impact of scheduling on enrollments.

Rob shared a message that Darryl Harper sent after the chairs' meeting in which Darryl asked that the committee minimize formulations for pitting STEM against humanities and consider the national context when discussing these issues. Chris thought the Office of Admissions might also bear some responsibility in the growth of STEM students. Many applicants express academic interest in the liberal arts, but many arrive with very narrow interests. He noted that he had observed during his time on FCAFA that admissions deans tended to disfavor applicants viewed as "all-rounders." Catherine suggested inviting Matt McGann to a future meeting. She also noted that the expression of interest on the application may be irrelevant since the percentage of students who initially express interest in the humanities drops to 82% of its initial level after the students enroll.

Mekhola pointed out that students like the open curriculum because it allows them to avoid courses outside their comfort zone. Gent said his friends who attend schools with general education requirements strongly dislike those courses, and this is a factor in the decision to attend Amherst for many students.

Rob then turned to how departments balance their offerings across course levels. He thought departments should reduce the percentage of higher-level courses.

Sandi said it is a mistake to conflate general education requirements and 100-level courses. Introductory courses at Amherst can be quite interesting and are a potential entry point to a major. Geoff agreed that 100-level courses in the humanities at Amherst are actual introductions to the majors, not GenEd courses designed for non-majors. He thought that a shift in the way that humanities faculty view 100-level courses was going to have to be a part of whatever changes might follow from this initiative. Catherine said departments need to offer courses that attract higher enrollments, not necessarily more majors. Rob said the entry-level courses present an opportunity for departments to convince students that the field is interesting and enjoyable.

Proposed revision to the Faculty Handbook

Catherine said there has been a problem this semester with faculty who believe they do not need to teach every class. She felt she needed a policy to point to that states explicitly that faculty are expected to teach all of their scheduled classes. Snow days are different, and the spring calendar allows faculty to use one make-up day for a missed snow-day class. Rob asked the committee if it wished to clarify the teaching policy in the Faculty Handbook to specify that if class meetings need to be canceled, the cancellation should be compensated for in some meaningful way, such as a substitute instructor, a Zoom meeting, or a lecture video. He noted that asynchronous teaching is sometimes the easiest way to make up for missed classes, and that in fact, some students find it very useful in small doses. The committee drafted possible language for inclusion in the Faculty Handbook:

Faculty are expected to hold all scheduled classes. In rare instances, faculty may cancel up to the equivalent of one week of classes during the semester due to illness or other pressing matters. Faculty are expected to reschedule those missed classes, teach asynchronously, provide additional reading, or ask a colleague to teach the class in their place.

If faculty members become unable to teach class in person for a longer period, they may teach remotely or communicate material asynchronously to students (e.g. recording lectures and/or communicating) for no more than the equivalent of two weeks of classes during the semester. In the event that faculty need to teach more than the equivalent of two weeks remotely, they should be in touch with the chair of their department to make other arrangements for the teaching of their classes.

FTE review

Nancy reported that the committee has now received requests for 16 FTEs from 11 departments. She provided a brief overview of how the committee generally reviews the requests. The committee agreed that departments should not lobby for FTEs and that any such letter would be returned to the sender.

The committee then thanked Sandi for all her work on behalf of the committee over the last two and one-half years and especially for her year chairing the committee during the 2021-22 academic year.

The meeting adjourned at 9:50 a.m.