

**Committee on Educational Policy
February 10, 2021**

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: Nicholas 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 February 3, 2021. Edward welcomed Jesse Barba, director of institutional research and registrar services, to the meeting.

Flexible Grading Option (FGO)

Edward asked Jesse to address the ways that the Flexible Grading Option (FGO) has been used this past semester. Jesse said 149 students used the FGO last fall for 155 courses, and no student used it for more than two courses. Men used it more frequently than women, and more athletes used it than other groups: one-third of students are athletes, but 43% of the students who used the FGO were athletes. Many more FGOs were used for math, computer science, and economics courses than for other courses.

Turning to possible reasons for these trends, Jesse noted that most students took advantage of the option to reduce their course load to three courses during the fall, and the lower course load may have contributed to students receiving higher grades, diminishing the need for the FGO. Adam noted that the data indicate a drop in the percentage of enrollments in the humanities, and this correlates with the usage of the FGO, which was used more frequently in STEM areas. Jesse agreed with his assertion. Among this year's seniors, Jesse said 48% of students will have at least one major in a STEM area, outnumbering the percentage majoring in the humanities. He also noted that humanities courses were far less likely to be taught in person this fall, and that matters to students. This year the college has also seen an accelerating longer term trend of students moving from humanities majors to STEM majors.

Adam pointed out that humanities faculty seem to have kept their course caps low, and this also may have had an impact on humanities enrollments. Catherine said she did not understand why the FGO would be driving down enrollments in the humanities. Adam said he thought the FGO is just one factor. The FGO incentivizes students to enroll in courses that they otherwise might not take. Catherine disagreed with his analysis. She said most students are grade-oriented, and they use the FGO to protect their GPA. Jesse mentioned that students don't need to declare the FGO in advance, so it is hard to know what reasons have motivated this trend.

Nicola expressed alarm at the big drop in humanities enrollment this year and said she thought the reduction to three courses might be the explanation. Humanities may serve as the fourth course for many STEM majors, so it was the course dropped this past semester. Edward said many of his students decided to prioritize pre-requisites when taking the reduced course load. Sandi said, anecdotally, most of her advisees used January for their fourth class—often a humanities class—so this may also explain the drop in humanities courses taken during the fall. Jesse said the three or four points drop in humanities this year remains unexplained and noted that the current students are leaning heavily towards STEM areas.

GPA scale

Edward next asked Jesse about the proposal to adopt a four-point GPA scale and the question of whether to continue to include additional points for A+ grades in that scale. Jesse said this is the first among many issues that will be raised by the Workday Faculty Committee.

Edward said the committee was wondering whether a move to a 4-point scale would retroactively affect past transcripts. Jesse said in the system everyone would have a 4-point GPA. There are a couple of options for what is displayed on the transcript. It could be a rounded letter grade, or the registrar could include the historic grades, with a letter explaining about the change from the 14-point system to the 4-point system. What is visible can still be decided. He thought it useful to provide the GPA on the transcript.

Adam said he is concerned about grade compression and grade inflation, but this problem needs to be dealt with by other means. He asked how retroactive grades would differ after a conversion to the 4-point system. Would the conversion actually change the letter grade? Jesse said the GPA would always be the same. As for grade inflation, students' average GPA has risen in recent years from 11.4 to 11.8. The college could choose to make a transcript available without the GPA, but this would involve additional work, and most alumni would like to see their GPA on their transcript.

Sandi noted that most of the reasons for moving to the 4-point scale appear to involve primarily external considerations. She wondered whether most other schools tend to use the A+ grade? How would dropping this affect students? Jesse said colleges differ. Williams College just abandoned its A+ grade this year. It could become an honorific grade, not calculated in the GPA. The A+ grade remains an unusual grade at Amherst, given only for work of a distinctly different nature. By contrast, grades of A now comprise 38% of all grades at the college. If the college were to drop the A+, it would lose the ability to make that distinction. Departmental cultures vary. He said he would recommend retaining the 4.3 for A+ grades.

Calendar

Jesse next presented an academic calendar for the 2021-22 calendar year, which would begin on September 1, 2021, include courses on Labor Day, and conclude on December 17, 2021. He explained that final exams some years have ended very late in December, leaving students with few travel options. Sometimes faculty have rescheduled their exams on their own when their exams were scheduled for the final day, and this inevitably messed up the exam schedule for others. By scheduling an earlier start to the semester, the calendar would provide a better cushion between the end of academic activities and holiday travel dates and respond to concerns expressed by a number of faculty members.

Jesse also offered a January term schedule. To accommodate the brief gap between the end of the January term and the beginning of the spring semester, he recommended eliminating the snow make-up days, since it is now clear that instruction can continue with remote technology. While other options exist—canceling spring break, which students would not like, or delaying commencement exercises, which would delay faculty research—they would all seem to have higher costs. This calendar would also allow a longer gap before the spring semester begins.

Cole asked if just 15 days of January instruction differed from the number of days allotted this year. Jesse said there were 16 days this year, but he wanted to include at least one reading day in the schedule next year. Lengthening the term would result in a later spring term. Sandi asked why the fall semester begins midweek on a Wednesday rather than starting on a Monday and allowing a full week for the first week of the semester. Catherine said this allows the semester to begin in September rather than in August. She asked if the committee would prefer to have Labor Day off. Sandi said she thought it

would be nice to start with a full first week of the semester and said the Labor Day question was secondary to her.

Turning to the remainder of the calendar, Sandi, while noting that spring semester is constrained by the January term, asked about the timing of spring break. This calendar reverses the way the current spring term works. Jesse said he tries to sync Amherst's spring break with the other schools in the Five Colleges. UMass has been moving its break around, and many Amherst students take UMass courses, so keeping in sync with them gives students a real break, but he could flip the weeks for the break, if desired.

Krupa asked whether the January term would be on Zoom or in person. Catherine said that has not been decided yet. Students are equally divided on this issue, so it may end up as a hybrid January term. There are also accreditation concerns, since it involves online teaching, which Amherst is currently not accredited to offer. Nicola said there are fervent attitudes on both sides. She thought it would be good if students could make choices. Cole asked when first-year students would arrive for the fall semester. Jesse said they usually arrive the week before classes begin, which would be the week of August 23-27 for orientation and LEAD trips. International students arrive earlier, as do summer bridge programs. The start date for other years is still a question. Catherine said the early start would just occur during years when Labor Day comes late.

Course Schedule

Jesse also introduced a revised course schedule that would include additional blocks in the evening for some courses. While the academic day would end by 5:30 p.m. for most courses, this modification would offer an extended block for labs on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday as a hedge against the potential need for a modest amount of social distancing in the classroom. Jesse explained that social distancing requirements could reduce the number of appropriately sized classrooms at higher demand times. He recommended that the college consider scheduling rules that encourage only those courses with multiple sections to use the late afternoon blocks as a way to minimize the conflict between curricular and co-curricular activities.

Jesse noted other complications. Next year the college could have many more students, with a maximum student body close to 2100 students, as it attempts to accommodate the students who opted for a gap year this year. This could increase the student body by more than 200 students, including more than 500 first-year students. If indoor social distancing is still required, this will be logistically challenging. If just modest social distancing is required, the college could adopt a modified schedule to accommodate the larger student body with additional sections. If real social distancing is required, more extreme measures will be necessary. The college could revert to the classic schedule if these extended hours are not needed.

Nicola supported these extended times and agreed that courses that don't have multiple sections should not be allowed to take advantage of these later hours so as to not disadvantage athletes. Sandi had concerns around labs. These usually require 180 minutes, not the 170 that Jesse had allotted in this schedule, and some last as long as 3.5 hours. Those blocks need to be available; the 2.5 hour blocks will not suffice. She asked whether the Monday/Wednesday/Friday afternoons could have one big block from which faculty could carve out longer labs. Jesse said they could. She also noted that late afternoons are very problematic for the chemistry labs which are taught every afternoon, with seven sections and 18 students per section. After the labs end, staff need to remove the lab materials and set up labs for an early start the next day. She thought it unreasonable to ask staff to return in the evening to do this for the 8 a.m. classes. She encouraged Jesse to create the flexibility for the full 3.5 hour labs during the

afternoon and allow for the set-up time prior to the beginning of the lab. The fall aggregate numbers would make distanced configuration much more challenging. Jesse said he will modify the schedule to accommodate these concerns, allow for different start times, and send the updated calendar and course schedule to the committee. Catherine asked that the committee be prepared to make a recommendation by next week.

Jesse noted one additional problem—that of departments offering all of their courses at the same time. He said his office may need to be able to tell departments that the faculty need to reschedule their courses for a different time if the rooms are not available. The practice of scheduling courses in a cluster places a large weight on the open curriculum that is very problematic. Adam said he supported Jesse's office taking these actions, but expressed concern about how discussions about teaching times might play out inside of departments, given the sometimes personal nature of the motivations that lead faculty to choose one teaching time over another. Catherine said she will also need to make some clear statements asking faculty to share the burden and distribute their courses in more equitable ways. She noted that humanities classes cluster the most. Faculty concerned about enrollments in the humanities may wish to consider how the clustering of courses may also be impacting the humanities enrollments. Jesse left the Zoom at 12 noon.

FGO and pass/fail

Edward returned to the FGO and pass/fail proposals and asked whether students should be prevented from using those options in a course in which they have been found responsible for academic dishonesty by adding the following line:

The FGO option cannot be used to remove or reduce the penalties in any course in which the student has been found responsible for acts of academic dishonesty.

The committee voted in favor of adding this sentence to both the FGO and the pass/fail policy and asked Edward to make this recommendation to the Committee of Six.

GPA scale

Edward next moved to a committee vote on the GPA scale. Seven members opted for the 4-point scale, and one member opted for the 14-point scale. Edward said he will draft a letter to the Committee of Six making this recommendation. He will also address in his letter the advantages of retaining the A+ grade and the issue of retroactivity. Sandi suggested he also raise the issue of how the A+ interacts with Latin honors. Cole asked that he also address rounding of grades. Sandi noted that the 4-point scale will require a GPA with several decimal places. Nancy said the Workday default is three decimal places.

Course proposals

Edward asked the committee to consider 61 new course proposals for the 2021-22 academic year. Nicola pointed to the great variation in how faculty cap their courses. She also wanted the research tutorials to be more consistent in how they describe the program. The committee then realized that the PDF does not allow them to see the new required section on course expectations. Nancy said she would send them a link to the actual courses, so they can see the expectations.

Adam noted the low enrollment caps in many humanities courses, including a co-taught course limited to 20 students. Edward asked the committee to send concerns about individual courses to Nancy by Thursday.

The meeting adjourned at 12:30 p.m.