

Committee on Educational Policy
February 12, 2020

In attendance: Faculty: Tekla Harms; Edward Melillo, chair; Christian Rogowski; Krupa Shandilya; Adam Sitze. Provost and Dean of the Faculty: Catherine Epstein, *ex officio*. Students: Cole Graber-Mitchell '22; Sterling Kee '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. in Beneski, Room 311.

FGO and Readmission Policies

Edward welcomed Deans Clotfelter and López to the meeting to share their concerns about the FGO policy and the readmission policy. Rick noted that the FGO policy is so complicated that both faculty advisors and their student advisees find it confusing. As a result, it is favoring students who can game the system and not helping those who may most need it. The class deans suggested a series of edits, and also presented the option of striking most of the current FGO language and replacing it with the following, which they thought would meet many of the same goals:

FLEXIBLE GRADING OPTION (FGO)

The aim of the Flexible Grading Option (FGO) is to encourage students to take intellectual risks, to explore the breadth of Amherst's open curriculum, and to reward students for engaging fully in all their courses.

Students may, with the permission of their advisor(s), elect to use the FGO on no more than one course per semester. When a student declares an FGO for a course, they are selecting to have a grade of "D" or better recorded as a "P." The "P" will not count towards the student's grade average or class rank. A failing grade, in all circumstances, will be recorded as an "F" on the student's transcript and will count toward the GPA and class rank. The deadline for electing this option is the last day of classes of the semester. Once a student has declared an FGO for a course, the student cannot later opt for the grade.

Students admitted as first-year students may elect the FGO four times during their Amherst College career. Transfer students admitted as sophomores shall have three FGOs, and those admitted as juniors shall have two.

Catherine suggested that this would effectively replace the FGO with a pass-fail system. Tekla agreed with her. Rick said it would be more flexible than the FGO while meeting the same stated objective. It would allow students to wait until the end of the semester to convert a course to a "pass." Students would decide at the end of the semester whether to stay on a graded path or elect to have a "P" after they had a good sense of their grade. Ethan noted that the deadline for that decision could be set earlier. The class deans had also considered setting the tenth week as the deadline for the conversion. Rick thought that changing the language as proposed would have several advantages. It would provide greater flexibility while keeping the decision squarely between the student and the advisor. The class dean would continue to play no role.

Catherine noted that this would allow a student to opt for the FGO effectively on the last day of class. Tekla thought the proposal was an intriguing option but she noted some problems. She thought it would very quickly evolve into a system through which students would drop grades they didn't like. She did not

favor creating an atmosphere that focused so closely on grades. Rick asked how this is different from the current FGO system in that respect. Tekla said that, in practice, students opt for the FGO as the result of an advising conversation and have to decide and commit during the add/drop period. In the proposed version, the decision occurs at the end of the semester after students know their grade, and this is not a small change. Rick and Ethan clarified that it would near the end of the term when the students have a fairly good idea of what their grades might be, not at the end, after students know their grade. She also noted that the FGO policy resulted from a multi-year committee conversation, which was followed by CEP conversations which then modified the committee's recommendations, and then was further modified by the Committee of Six.

Edward asked what obstacles the deans had encountered. Ethan said students had raised a host of exceptional circumstances to justify a late conversion of a course to an FGO. Those tended to favor students who knew how to navigate the system. The proposed changes would eliminate the need for a doctor's note or a Counseling Center visit.

Tekla said the exceptions arise from late requests. She asked whether those problems would go away once students understand that late requests are not an option. Ethan agreed it would likely improve over time. Turning to other problems that have arisen from the FGO, Rick said students meet with their advisor who may not fully understand the FGO option but may nevertheless encourage the student to use the FGO. This can lead to students regretting their use of an FGO for a course unnecessarily. He allowed that, if the CEP did not favor the deep revisions the deans propose, the committee could focus on the deans' smaller revisions to the current policy, and continue to revise it as things move along. The college has to educate new students every year about the option, and some will inevitably be more savvy than others about this. Catherine thought faculty advisors will understand this better over time.

Ethan also noted the adverse effect this has had on student group work projects, with students not fully contributing to projects if they were taking the course as an FGO. Catherine thought that should not be a problem. She thought the FGO would offer more motivation for a student to work hard than a simple pass-fail option would. Ethan thought students would still be inclined to opt for the "pass" after their first low grade in an FGO. Tekla thought the structure would be no different in the system they had proposed—the first low grade would raise the possibility of opting for the pass.

Rick urged the committee, if it is determined to retain the FGO, to allow seniors to opt for it. Tekla said this policy resulted from an issue raised by the registrar regarding second semester seniors. Ethan suggested the deadline be moved earlier to the final day of classes—which would then allow seniors to participate. Edward said the committee will discuss this proposal and then may return to the class deans with further questions. Tekla said she was interested in knowing what other policies this has run up against. Rick said he could send the CEP the answers to that and any other questions from the committee.

Turning then to the Readmission policy, Rick said the class deans found the policy on how the college grants academic credit conflicted with their practice and with what is legally required. Karu Kozuma and Scott Howard rewrote the policy to address those concerns. Tekla said the CEP had not concerned itself with aspects unrelated to academic policy. It seemed to her that the deans had retained the only issue the committee had been asked to address—students who want to transfer back credits after a voluntary withdrawal. She suggested that most of the deans' changes surround readmission, which should be the concern of the Committee on Academic Standing.

Rick then mentioned the conversation about degree requirements and said some of what the committee had struck seems problematic—for example, the idea that half courses are not normative. He asked, how are they not normative? They are used with frequency. The faculty has placed more limits on their use, which he appreciated, but their use is frequent. Tekla said the committee was trying to suggest that it is not appropriate for students to use half credits as a way to lighten their senior year load or to take repeated semesters of 3.5 courses. Ethan said he had no problem with retracting the struck out words.

Rick turned next to study abroad programs, which have proved one of the bigger challenges to manage. The deans have now added language that can be enforced. Tekla, returning to whether half courses should normally be included in the courses counted towards graduation, said one of her concerns is that students can now graduate with 28 courses. She did not want to see more students taking fewer courses simply because they had participated in a choral program or played with the college orchestra. Rick wondered who the policy was trying to signal what constituted the non-normative aspect. The student's advisor? The student? Students can enroll in endless numbers of half-courses, though the college now limits the number that may be counted towards graduation, and the Music department advises its students to seek credit for their participation in music programs. Tekla thought this was a conversation that the committee should have with the Music department. Rick said he preferred not to see language added to the catalog until there has been such a conversation with the Music department. Tekla said the faculty had discussed this aspect at a faculty meeting, so it should not come as a surprise to the faculty. Catherine argued against the CEP assigning relative value to half courses, based on the field. She agreed the committee could limit how these were applied towards graduation, but she did not support distinguishing between the half credits from one department and another.

Edward thanked the Rick and Ethan for visiting, and they departed at 11: 30 a.m.

FTE requests

Edward next asked the committee to return to its FTE rankings. Before turning to the requests, he noted that the faculty members of the committee had received letters from a number of students advocating for a particular position. He found this awkward, noting that students who have not been privy to committee conversations are unaware of the nuanced issues that are being carefully balanced during the FTE conversations. While understanding why students might want to advocate for an FTE, he urged the committee not to allow the letters to sway their recommendations. He then turned the remaining conversation over to Tekla, since his department was responsible for two of the requests before the committee.

Tekla said she felt a need to reiterate that conversations at the table should stay at this table. Unlike others, she said she was not bothered by the heartfelt emails she had received. Students should be able to speak when they feel strongly about something. She did, however, think there had been some confusion that voting on an FTE might equate to starting a program; this is just a conversation about an FTE.

Turning to the requests, she noted that the committee received five FTE requests and could recommend the allocation of as many as five FTEs. The committee's job is to advise the administration. She said she would like to do this by consensus, if possible. The committee then turned to the requests.

Course proposals

Nancy asked the committee to send her any edits or problems with course proposals before midday on Friday. The committee will review these at its next meeting.

The meeting adjourned at 12:15 p.m.