

Committee on Educational Policy
January 13, 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 December 9, 2020.

Intensive Writing Lecturer

Catherine informed the committee that she would like to appoint a lecturer in intensive writing, presumably with the position residing in the English department but said the details that would allow this to occur still need to be finalized with the department.

Use of the Flexible Grading Policy (FGO)s in case of academic dishonesty

Edward said Adam asked that the committee discuss an issue that arose just before break. The committee at that time was asked if it was the intention of the CEP that students should be allowed to convert a grade to a "pass (P)" using the Flexible Grading Policy (FGO) option after receiving a lower grade as a result of engaging in academic dishonesty. In an email exchange, the faculty members on the CEP unanimously said no. After reviewing this exchange and consulting with the director of institutional research and registrar services, the provost determined that the students had the right to use the FGO option under the current FGO policy.

Adam asked how many faculty members had been involved in this case, whether the faculty knew that the FGO would be used in this way, and whether the students had consulted with their advisors about this use of the FGO. Catherine said this particular case involved two professors and three students, but she believed there have been additional cases. Nicola said she had an advisee in a similar case who had consulted with her about using this option. She informed the student that this was an ethical issue and asked the student to speak with the class dean for first-year students. She later learned that the student could not use the FGO because the professor had assigned the student a failing grade.

Adam said the issue underlying this question is under what circumstances students can change their grade. If the element of academic penalty is ignored or made secondary, he believed the FGO could indeed be used for changing a grade to a P. The fact of academic dishonesty, however, makes the question qualitatively different than other kinds of grade changes. The central question then becomes whether students should be able to eliminate a penalty for academic dishonesty. He argued that this use of the FGO so clearly violates students' fundamental educational compact with the college that it should not need to be stated explicitly in the policy. Adam also noted that the existing FGO policy states the purpose of the FGO policy very clearly: "The purpose of the Flexible Grading Option (FGO) is to encourage students to explore the breadth of Amherst's open curriculum as they seek to meet the college's stated learning goals." Given this explicitly stated purpose, the onus should not be on the college to say why the students cannot use the FGO as a means to the end of concealing or reducing a penalty for academic dishonesty. Rather, the onus should be on the students to try to explain why their use of the policy in this way is consistent with the policy's explicitly stated purpose. If a student is using the FGO to conceal a grade that was meant to be a penalty for academic dishonesty, in his opinion the

student would be engaging in a second form of dishonesty. Both forms of dishonestly, he argued, clearly fall outside the explicitly stated purpose of the FGO policy. For these reasons, he said, the clear answer should have been that the students could not use the FGO in this way.

Catherine said she disagreed with Adam. The real problem in her view was that the faculty members did not penalize the students with a failing grade. It would be far preferable if the college maintained a standard policy on how faculty should respond to cases of academic dishonesty. She added that receiving a P could still be a penalty in some cases, for example, if a student intended to apply to medical school (and needed a grade to do so). In that situation, the student would be unable to mask the penalty as a P. She noted that when the policy was written, the committee did not anticipate this use of the FGO and now needs to include this explicitly in the policy if it wants to prevent further use of the FGO in this circumstance. She added that she wished the faculty would decide to be more consistent about how to deal with academic dishonesty and informed the committee that she anticipated that it would receive a letter from a faculty member hoping to address this situation. Nicola said the student who received a failing grade also passed through a process for acknowledging the cheating, and it is now in the student's record.

Adam agreed that the FGO policy was very flawed, but maintained that nothing beyond its explicitly stated purpose was necessary to arrive at the conclusion that it couldn't be used to conceal or reduce a faculty penalty for academic dishonesty. He further argued that Rick López, as first-year dean, had asked the CEP, as authors of the policy, how the committee thought the policy should be interpreted, and noted that the dean participates in the CEP on an *ex officio* basis. In this case, the faculty members of the CEP, who often reach split votes, had voted unanimously on that interpretation saying the students should not be allowed to invoke the FGO to conceal or reduce an academic penalty. Why then, he asked, had the dean changed the decision after the CEP's unanimous decision? If the dean reserves the right to reverse a CEP decision each time the dean thinks the CEP has erred, he continued, then what rational limit is there to that ostensible reserved right? And if it has no rational limit, what is it if not an unlimited power? Recalling that the *Faculty Handbook* gives faculty the power to establish "rules of conduct to be observed by the students and penalties for the violation thereof," he thought the dean's decision on this issue had wrongly implied that the CEP does not have the authority to determine the rules of conduct that the *Faculty Handbook* says it has.

Catherine said the dean's job is to implement the policy that the faculty has voted. She interpreted this as an administrative decision, backed up by experts responsible for validating rules at the college. This policy had not been voted by the faculty. Edward suggested that the committee return to this issue when it receives the letter seeking further clarification of the policy.

FTEs

Edward next asked the committee to begin its review of requests for FTEs. Nancy reported that the committee received eleven requests—four for new lines and seven for replacement lines—from ten departments for the five available FTEs. One request came jointly from two departments for a two-FTE cluster hire. The committee could continue to receive cluster hire proposals through February 15, 2021. Edward suggested the committee begin by evaluating each request on its own merits, asking of each request whether it is internally consistent. After the committee has finished reviewing all of the requests, the committee will rank them. The order of review was established using a random number generator.

German FTE request

Edward said the German department has requested a replacement position for Christian Rogowski, who enters phased retirement this year and plans to complete the phase in December of 2023, reducing the department to two tenure-line faculty and one lecturer. The department seeks a generalist at open rank. He asked the committee to discuss the request's merits.

Biology FTE request

Edward said the Biology department has requested an expansion position in organismal neurobiology that would contribute to both the Biology and the Neuroscience programs. Biology currently has 12 tenure-track faculty, one senior lecturer, one visiting faculty member, and two laboratory instructors. The majority also have commitments to other departments or majors. The committee discussed the request.

Psychology FTE request

Edward said the Psychology department has requested a tenure line position in cultural psychology, focusing on emerging adulthood or adult populations, to replace FTEs held by Buffy Aries who will fully retire in 2023 and Lisa Raskin who is scheduled to fully retire in 2024. The committee discussed the request. The meeting adjourned at 11:55 a.m.