

Committee on Educational Policy
January 27, 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 January 20, 2021.

Lecturer in intensive writing

Catherine explained that she thought it best to create a lectureship position in intensive writing in order to maintain sufficient numbers of intensive writing courses. For a number of years, the courses were taught by Ben Lieber and Michele Barale, who have both now retired from teaching at the college. In 2008, the Committee on Academic Priorities (CAP), recognized the importance of these courses to the curriculum and recommended that new lines be allocated to departments in exchange for mounting these courses. Since then, the departments of Classics, Music, and Philosophy have each received FTEs with the promise that the departments would mount one such course per year. Frequently, however, these departments state that they are unable to offer such a course each year. In addition, not all members of these departments have the training to teach these courses, so this has not been an ideal solution.

Catherine said she would now like to create a lectureship in intensive writing and house this position in the English department. English has a visiting creative writing position. The previous individual in the position was recently hired into a tenure-line position. Tenure-line positions, however, cannot have continuous administrative duties. As a result, the college will continue to have a lectureship in creating writing that includes directing the creative writing program. Catherine said the intensive writing lecture position would carry a 2-2 teaching load and, in a parallel structure to the creative writing position, would be expected to engage in research in the area of rhetoric and composition. The position would also have responsibility for administrative work related to the intensive writing program, including running the intensive writing programs, determining who should be in the intensive writing courses and maintaining lines of communication with First-Year Seminar (FYS) instructors to ensure that students are being appropriately recommended for the intensive writing program.

Nicola questioned whether a top notch writing instructor would be interested. Krupa asked if this would be housed in the Writing Center. Catherine said she expected the person to work collaboratively with people in the Writing Center but to have a more formal relationship with the English department. English will launch a search this spring. Adam asked if a 2-2 course load would be sufficient to meet the needs of students. Catherine thought it would offer a good start and noted that Jyl Gentzler and Wendy Bergoffen may continue to teach these courses, as well. Adam said he supported this.

FGO, Pass-fail policies

Edward asked the committee to consider revising the FGO and the proposed pass-fail substitution policy to clarify how academic dishonesty would affect its use and offered the following revised language:

FLEXIBLE GRADING OPTION (FGO)

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. Students who enter Amherst College as first-years may elect to take up to four of the total number of courses required for the degree under the FGO; transfer students who enter as sophomores may elect to take up to three courses required for the degree under the FGO; and transfer students who enter as juniors may elect to take up to two courses required for the degree under the FGO. Students may not take more than one such course in any one semester. Courses taken in the second semester of the senior year are not eligible for the FGO.

To elect a course as FGO, students must file the FGO form, signed by their advisor(s), with the Office of the Registrar by the end of the add-drop period. Instructor permission is not required on the FGO form, and instructors are not informed if students have elected the FGO option for their course.

Students will have five days after the date grades are due to either accept the grade assigned by the instructor, or, in the case of passing grades ("D" or better), elect to have a pass ("P") displayed on their transcript for the course. (No grade point equivalent will be assigned to a "Pass.") If the letter grade assigned by the instructor is an "F," an "F" will be recorded. If the student takes no action, the assigned grade will remain on the transcript.

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.

Second-semester seniors who have not exhausted their FGO options may select one course to be taken Pass/Fail. To do this, seniors submit a Pass/Fail form, signed by their advisor(s) and the course instructor, to the registrar by the end of the add-drop period. (No grade-point equivalent will be assigned to a "Pass.")

In exceptional circumstances, and only once during their career at Amherst College, students who have not previously exhausted their FGOs and have not elected an FGO in that semester may, with the permission of their instructor, academic advisor, and class dean, convert one course to an FGO after the end of the add/drop period.

In exceptional circumstances, and only once during their career at Amherst College, students may, with the permission of their instructor, academic advisor, and class dean, convert one course to Pass/Fail after the end of the add/drop period.

Catherine asked how this policy, if approved, would be enforced. Nicola thought the onus should be on the faculty to report cases of academic dishonesty to the Office of Student Affairs (OSA), and the OAS will in turn convey this information to the registrar's office. Sandi asked what would happen if students were under investigation and then found innocent. Would they then be able to invoke the FGO? If there were a period of limbo when the FGO would not be able to be used, this would present challenging logistics. Cole thought that if a student had not been found responsible for academic dishonesty, the student should be able to use the FGO. If responsible, there would be a formal process through which the OSA would inform the registrar that the FGO cannot be invoked for that particular course.

Catherine wondered what would happen if the faculty member chose not to report the issue to the OSA, perhaps to avoid what can be an arduous process. Nicola thought instructors who chose that route would only have themselves to blame if the students subsequently opted for a pass in the course. Sandi said the policy might motivate faculty to report such behavior. Catherine, summarizing how such a policy could be put into effect, said all faculty would report such issues to the dean of students who would then send the list of students who have been found to have engaged in academic dishonesty to the registrar who would then act accordingly. Adam also thought that advisors have an obligation to make sure that students who have been involved in academic dishonesty do not invoke the FGO for that course. This establishes a norm.

Moving to the proposed pass-fail grading option (which would replace the FGO, if approved by the faculty), Edward asked the committee if it also wished to add a line clarifying how that policy would work if students were found responsible for academic dishonesty:

PASS-FAIL (P/F) GRADING OPTION

The aim of the Pass-Fail (P/F) option 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. Under this option, students may elect to declare one course per semester, and no more than four courses over four years, to be taken pass-fail. A declaration of pass-fail requires the permission of the student's advisor(s) and must be made before the final day of the exam period. If a student designates a course pass-fail, the student's transcript will have a "P" recorded in the case of passing grades ("D" or higher). No grade-point equivalent will be assigned to a "P." If the letter grade assigned by the instructor is an "F," an "F" will be recorded on the student's transcript and will count toward the student's GPA and class rank. Once students have declared a course pass-fail, they cannot later opt for the grade. Students admitted as first-year students may elect the pass-fail option four times during their Amherst College career. Transfer students admitted as sophomores shall have three pass-fail options, and those admitted as juniors shall have two. ***Not all courses are eligible for the pass-fail option. The first-year Seminar is not eligible to be taken pass-fail. In addition, the pass-fail option is not allowed to be used in any course in which a student has been found responsible for academic dishonesty. FGOs used in spring 2020, fall 2020, and one FGO used in each term of the 2020-2021 academic year do not count toward the maximum number of FGOs allowed during a student's time at the college. Spring 2020 FGOs will not count against the maximum number of pass fail courses, nor will the first FGO used in each term of the 2020-2021 academic year.***

Edward expressed concern that adding this caveat might raise even more objections when the policy again comes before the faculty for a vote. Cole asked about the objections raised at the faculty meeting. Edward said there had been concerns raised about encoding language in the pass-fail policy that would prevent its use in the FYS, even though it has been practice for many years not to allow the pass-fail option for the FYS.

Catherine supported codifying this interpretation in the language of the policy. She did not think the FYS restriction was the real issue for most faculty. Faculty are more concerned about the increase in the number of pass-fail options available to students and the changes in the timing that shift the goal of pass-fail from supporting course exploration towards providing an off-ramp for students who find

themselves in academic trouble. Adam suggested tabling this for now until the committee has seen more data on how the FGO has been used this past semester.

FTEs

Computer Science

The Computer Science department requested an open area search for two computer scientists—one as a replacement for Lyle McGeoch and one as an expansion.

Theater and Dance

The Theater and Dance department, in response to what was effectively a failed search, requested permission to search for a replacement in a slightly different field. The field originally requested for the search for Professor Eliraz, who will vacate his position at the end of this year, was focused on acting and directing. The department proposed shifting its focus to an artist-scholar whose primary area of expertise would be scholarship in Black theater and performance, preferably in a practice area such as devised, applied, or documentary theater or multi-disciplinary performance making.

French

The French department requested authorization for a position in Francophone Studies, as a replacement for Professor Rockwell, who began phased retirement in the fall of 2019. If granted, the department would be able to shift its offerings from medieval French literature and culture to the literature and culture of Francophone African and Caribbean countries, reflecting changes in the department and the field.

Physics

The Physics department has requested a new position in Astronomy to supplement the work of its sole astronomer and respond to the growth in the program.

The committee agreed to return to the issue of pass-fail, questions about Workday, TO requests, and the calendar at the next meeting.

The meeting adjourned at 12:00 noon.