Committee on Educational Policy (CEP)
January 29, 2016

In attendance: Faculty: David S. Hall, chair; Alexander George; Klára Móricz; Sean Redding; Catherine Sanderson (by phone). Catherine Epstein, dean. Students: Samuel Keaser '16, Rashid (Chico) Kosber '17; Steven Ryu '16. Recorder: Nancy Ratner, Associate Dean of Admission and Researcher for Academic Projects.

David Hall, Chair of the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP), called to order the CEP meeting at 8:30 a.m. in the Kennick Room in Cooper House.

Announcements

David informed the committee that an issue related to the admission of veterans will be coming to the CEP in the future. He also shared a note from Professor Moss inviting CEP members to participate in the capstone project for her course, Imaging Education Studies, which she is teaching with Robert Siudzinski. Students will propose a model Education Studies program for an elite liberal arts college, and she would like interested members of the CEP to participate in the students' presentation and defense. Many members expressed interest.

Senior faculty course evaluations review

David then briefly returned to the piloting of the new senior faculty course evaluation system and asked the committee next to provide feedback about the first trial run. Sean reported that she had received much better feedback when she wrote the questions herself, even when students were completing those evaluations online. This semester she received evaluations from about one-third of the class instead of the three-quarters who previously had completed course reviews, and the information that the students provided was less valuable. She thought the questions on the electronic form were not inspiring students to write more specific, thoughtful comments about the course. Catherine S. reported that she had the same experience, but in her case she had asked the same questions that she has always used. She said the responses were far less thoughtful, and she thought this was a result of the delivery method. When course evaluations are completed during class students feel peer pressure to complete them, and when she as a faculty member stops teaching to allow students to respond it provides a message that says she wants to hear what students have to say. Sean said her department has used online evaluations in the past but they were accompanied by a more personal email from her department's former ADC, suggesting that grades would not be issued until an evaluation had been submitted, and this might have been influential in garnering feedback.

Providing a student's perspective, Steven said he thought there was a different impact if the request originated with the professor rather than with IT. Sam said that while the email inviting course evaluations was signed by Catherine Epstein, it had an IT email address. Several CEP members thought students might not know who Catherine was.

Klára said she was very disappointed in the trial run. She had a fantastic class but only one student completed the evaluation. In the future she will distribute course evaluations in the middle of the semester with her own questions. Alex observed that the act of a professor introducing the evaluation during the class and saying it was important to her—that she would stop teaching to get that feedback— is a message that can't possibly be conveyed by a message delivered over the internet.

Chico thought there needed to be an incentive for students. Sam thought it was better if done during a class. Students should be allowed to fill them out after finals when there's more time. Klára thought that there were good reasons for asking students to evaluate the course prior to finals. Sean added that the timing of course evaluations is designed to protect junior faculty and to ensure that the evaluation of the course will not influence or be influenced by the student's grade in the course.

David said he would continue to work on ways to make the process more effective and still needs to meet with Howie Hanna to discuss the technological problems. Alex wondered whether IT could send the email from the instructor's address. David said he would inquire. Alex noted that this will probably require a long term cultural shift. He suggested that the letter explaining options to faculty should emphasize that they are likely to get the most effective feedback if they ask students to complete the form during class. Over time, faculty will gravitate in that direction. Sam thought getting data on responses by class year might also be interesting.

Web meeting technology

David next returned to the proposal from IT to allow a faculty member who wishes to conduct a class while away from campus to use Zoom technology to do so. Did the committee think Zoom was appropriate technology and would the committee endorse its use in a classroom? Alex noted that the technology would be used under special kinds of circumstances. He wondered who would decide whether the circumstances were appropriate. He also noted that this technology requires training for both faculty and students. David said he had mixed feelings about allowing this technology. Amherst prides itself on close contact between faculty and students. This seemed antithetical to what the college is trying to achieve. Klára thought it might be acceptable to try it out for a year, although she thought it might be an expensive experiment.

Alex observed that having this as an option could raise legal issues. If, for example, a student with a disability found it difficult to get to campus, would the professor be required to use this technology? He thought the college will need an answer to that question. He then proposed another scenario, noting that the college is already scaling back the minimum number of courses required for a student with a disability. What will happen when, say, a student can't be in the room with a lot of people? What will the college do? If the technology is available, students with a range of disabilities might insist on its use. These issues might arise down the road regardless of what is now decided about Zoom. Sean pointed

out that Zoom does require training. She thought technology might improve over time and better options would be available. Chico added that the issue could easily be solved using Skype.

The MOOC-like interaction that Zoom would create worried both Alex and David. David said he was hearing hesitation about proceeding with this. Catherine E. said the idea had originally been proposed as a way to deal with weather issues, but given the training required beforehand, she thought it clear that this would not solve that problem. It had also been proposed to help faculty teach while attending conferences but that this software may not be the right thing right now for Amherst. Catherine S. agreed, as did others. Catherine E. said she will convey this message.

FTE requests

David then asked the committee to turn its attention to the 17 FTE requests it has received.

American Studies/Art and History of Art

The Departments of American Studies and Art and the History of Art have jointly requested a new position in American art history. The CEP discussed this proposal.

Biology

The Department of Biology has requested a position in developmental biology as a replacement for Professor Poccia who has entered phased retirement. The committee discussed this request.

Chemistry

The Chemistry department has requested a position in inorganic chemistry to replace Professor Ball who resigned his position and departed this past summer. The committee discussed this request.

The meeting adjourned at 9:50 a.m.