

Committee on Educational Policy
June 17, 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. 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 and welcomed Jesse Barba to the meeting.

Class schedule for the fall and the academic calendar for next year

Jesse explained some of the reasons for changes to the class schedule. He noted that he had added time between classes in an effort to minimize the number of individuals moving between classes at any one time. He added that the number of useful classroom stock has diminished due to Covid-19 concerns, so this was yet another reason for adding slots to spread classes throughout the day and into the evening.

Tekla said that when trying to schedule introductory geology classes she discovered that the long blocks on Tuesdays and Thursdays conflicted with the first-year seminar (FYS). This would make it impossible for first-year students to take the courses. She wondered if there could be an additional long block on Monday/Wednesday/Friday mornings, perhaps meeting in a slot from 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m. Jesse said that would be possible, but it would leave just ten minutes between sessions for students to move to their next classes. He agreed it would be important to avoid conflicts with the FYS. Jesse then noted that the college does not have 34 seminar rooms, so it will not be possible to run all FYS simultaneously during the traditional Tuesday/Thursday slot. Catherine mentioned that about a third of FYS faculty will teach their courses online, so the need for seminar rooms and to travel between classes will be reduced.

Adam asked whether Catherine had a sense of the number of online-only courses. He wondered if there were concerns about bunching in the evening online slots. Catherine said most classes, even remotely taught ones, will be held throughout the day. In addition, one course in the evening will be reserved for online-only courses.

Catherine then asked Jesse about the possibility of a community hour. He said there are still too many unknown variables at the moment to assign a slot to a community hour. He still needs to know how many students will return and how many will enroll in only three courses, before he removes a teaching time slot so it can be reserved as a community hour. Responding to an earlier question, he said the faculty currently have the flexibility to vary their start times and this could still be the case; he could change the descriptors to clarify this fact. Following Cole's suggestion, Tekla thought it was a good idea to stagger the start and end times to minimize interactions. Adam asked about a scheme for allocating the most popular meeting times on the basis of expected enrollments, but Jesse did not think he had enough time this semester to assign course times in this way.

Academic calendar

Jesse next presented a revised academic calendar which would offer a 13-week fall semester, without breaks; classes would end at Thanksgiving, followed by two weeks of a remote reading period and exams, for a 15-week semester which would end on Dec 11, 2020. This could be pushed later if circumstances made it necessary. The calendar also includes a January session which would start on January 4, 2021, and end on January 29, 2021, followed by three days for evaluation; it would include a day off for Martin Luther King Day. The January term assumes each class will meet for two and one-half hours daily of class time. Since students can only take one January term course, Jesse said he has not built a rigid schedule; courses may also be very different in structure. The calendar also includes a spring semester which would start on February 3, 2021, and run straight through, without a break, allowing for a May 23, 2021 Commencement. This spring schedule removes two days of make-up days and has very little flexibility.

Tekla said she did not think the CEP should just be a rubber stamp on the calendar, but she was prepared to vote to support this proposal this year, given the unusual circumstances. Catherine pointed to one piece of flexibility in this calendar: if the college wanted to add a spring break, assuming cases of Covid-19 were not again on the rise, the college could do so by canceling senior week. In that scenario, there would not be time for students to receive their actual diplomas at graduation; they would instead receive them via the mail.

Adam asked how this would affect cooperation with the Five College Consortium. Catherine explained that it works well in the fall semester for everyone except Mt. Holyoke students and courses. The spring term is genuinely tricky since it does not line up well. Amherst College students who don't take a course during the January term could take a University of Massachusetts spring term course, but it would be much more complicated for Amherst students to take a course at either Smith College or Mt. Holyoke College in the spring.

Jesse said he would revise the block schedules, shifting them by ten minutes in places. Catherine said that if the CEP approves the revised schedule and calendar, these will then be reviewed by the Committee of Six. Assuming the Committee of Six votes to bring the schedule and calendar to the faculty, an electronic vote of the faculty will take place. Tekla asked if the intent is that students will leave before Thanksgiving and not return until February. Catherine said that is generally true, although students working on a senior thesis in a lab might be able to return during January. Tekla also noted that students who take the January term option will only have three days to get to campus after the end of their course.

Role of the CEP in course approvals for revised and/or new courses for the Fall Semester.

Edward next asked the committee how it wanted to treat changes to course descriptions at this stage. The committee thought that for courses that have already been approved, faculty could be trusted to change enrollment caps, as long as the changes fell within the limits outlined in a letter from the CEP, the instructors, and the number of meeting times. The committee thought the faculty should also be asked to add a statement describing how the course will change if the

instructor now intends to offer it online. Major changes would be restricted to courses that are so entirely changed that they essentially constitute new courses.

Adam wondered whether there was any sense of the variation between courses that will be offered partially online and whether anyone was keeping track of these changes. Tekla said she favored interfering as little as possible in how online courses will be taught. Adam said he felt nervous about having no central institutional consciousness about how courses have changed, especially online courses. Trusting colleagues and departments, Tekla said she wanted to discourage faculty from submitting “major” changes that required CEP review at this stage and suggested the CEP or Catherine write a letter explaining what constituted a major or a minor revision. Cole thought the letter should say that the description should remain the same but that faculty could be encouraged to add a paragraph to explain how the course will change during Covid-19.

Adam suggested there needed to be a principle for what constituted major changes: perhaps anything that reflects major changes to the content of instruction, courses whose material has been substantially modified. Tekla said she never consults with the CEP about these kinds of changes and thought this was unnecessary. Krupa asked whether there were policies about course caps, in particular for co-taught courses. Catherine said a class can be co-taught with fewer than 30 students but cannot be subdivided if the enrollment is expected to be under 30.

Adam said he remained uncomfortable with the idea that any transition is permissible during Covid-19. If the CEP is not reviewing existing courses, it would be committed to that proposition and abdicating its responsibility. Tekla disagreed. She said online teaching is just another form of teaching. The CEP needs to trust the faculty and not micromanage whether this is being done robustly. She thought it problematic to divorce mechanisms for teaching from content when this has never been done before. Adam said new technologies are available that really change the way a course is taught. He was sympathetic but uncomfortable with unleashing these entirely new courses with minimal oversight.

Krupa suggested saying that departments have oversight about these matters to make sure department pedagogical goals are reached. The CEP could ask for a letter from each department chair about how the department’s curriculum will change this year. Cole asked whether the committee was envisioning that all professors would state how their courses will change. Catherine noted that she will be receiving departmental plans and was worried about asking chairs to provide the same information for the CEP. Cole said he thought students would want to be able to see how online courses will be different. Catherine said the faculty will state if a course will be remote.

Ted asked whether he should draft a letter to send today, and the committee agreed that he should. Adam suggested the letter ask faculty members who are contemplating major revisions to the material and to the course descriptions to flag these as major changes. The committee could then just review those.

Faculty who are planning changes due to the remote teaching would be asked to add a new paragraph at the end of the description explaining how this particular iteration of the course will be different during Covid-19. This paragraph would be considered a "minor" revision.

If the enrollment cap will change along the lines suggested in the letter from Catherine or the course will be divided according to the stated criteria, these too would be considered "minor" revisions. Any other changes that depart from those guidelines should be flagged as "major" revisions.

Grading policy for next year

Edward said the committee will need to make a decision about grading policy by mid-July. He suggested the committee meet again on Wednesday June 24, 2020, to discuss whether to return to the regular FGO and also to discuss a proposal that all first-year students should be graded pass/fail. Catherine thought the number of students who had used the FGO this spring was quite low. The committee asked for the numbers from Jesse. Edward said the committee also needs to discuss the withdrawal policy and the add/drop shopping periods. Tekla suggested the new faculty members be asked to attend the meeting. Edward said he would invite them.

Vote on course schedule and calendar

Edward asked for a vote on the course calendar and course schedule. The CEP approved both.

The meeting adjourned at 12:15 p.m.