

Committee on Educational Policy
June 24, 2020

In attendance: Faculty: Sandra Burkett; Nicola Courtright; 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. Edward thanked Tekla and Christian for their outstanding service on the committee and welcomed the two new faculty members to the committee. The committee approved the minutes from the meeting of June 17, 2020.

Grading Policy for 2020-21

Edward asked the committee what changes, if any, should be made to the grading policy for the coming year, given the concerns about teaching during Covid-19. Catherine explained that she had heard that some Committee of Six members had heard from colleagues that they were interested in a universal pass/fail or pass/fail for all first-year students' courses. She informed the committee that every school in the northeast seems to be returning to its original grading policy but had not heard the Amherst College faculty's sentiment on this topic.

Tekla noted that returning to the former FGO policy would limit the number of FGOs to four over the students' four years. She wondered whether the committee should relax this limitation for the duration of the pandemic, perhaps allowing students to declare one FGO course per semester.

Edward said he would be inclined to return to the previous FGO policy, with the change suggested by Tekla, allowing one FGO per semester which would not count against the limit of four FGO courses. Catherine asked whether students would need to declare the FGO during add/drop, as the policy now requires, or whether they could wait to declare it at the end of the semester? In the first instance it would support exploration of the curriculum, and in the second instance it would function as a GPA corrector.

Sandi said she had a similar question and wondered whether the committee might be willing to consider an FGO option that would apply to all courses taken by first-year students or during their first semester. Many courses will be online for first-year students, creating new challenges. Adam thought her idea might help reduce the need for students to request a course withdrawal. Tekla said the FGO encourages risk-taking, which she wanted to promote, especially during a semester when students will only be enrolling in three courses. She noted that pass/fail policies make pre-med students very nervous because the "pass" is generally not accepted for pre-med credits unless it is received under a universal pass/fail policy. She also thought Amherst students were often uncomfortable giving up good grades. Sandi said she was just thinking about the FGO, not a pass/fail policy. Adam noted that the reason for the FGO is to promote experimentation and said he continued to support this aspect of the policy.

Cole said many students will want to take four courses, with one as an FGO. He predicted that most will be resistant to taking just three courses and wondered whether there would be pressures to take only three. Catherine said students should discuss their plans with their advisors. She hoped that advisors would encourage students to enroll in just three courses, but noted that students will be allowed to enroll in four. She hoped students would take advantage of the January option as well. Cole thought that made sense, especially the option to take three courses in the fall followed by one course during

January, but he said he will try to take four courses and would appreciate having an FGO for that fourth course.

Nicola said she supported allowing students an optional FGO each semester during the pandemic and would also support allowing first-years to take all of their courses under the FGO as a way to reduce student anxiety. Tekla said she did not feel strongly about having a universal FGO for first-year students. Adam pointed out that the data from Jesse suggests that first-year students did not make frequent use of the FGO, even during this spring semester. He advised the committee against creating complex instruments which might have unintended consequences and suggested the committee instead err on the side of simplicity. Amherst already has a grade inflation problem, with students receiving many grades in the A and A+ ranges, so he was not overly compelled by the notion of student anxiety about grades. He thought their anxiety had already been addressed by the expectation that they would take a reduced course load. Krupa agreed with Adam and recommended a return to the normal grading system.

Sandi asked whether students would be expected to designate before the end of add/drop which of their classes they would take FGO. Catherine said that would be the case if the college is returning to its normal grading policy. Tekla noted that students will presumably not have to adapt on the fly to a dramatic change in the middle of the semester this fall so she thought they could be expected to make the designation before the end of add/drop and supported expanding the FGO option to allow students to take one FGO course per semester during the remainder of the pandemic.

Cole strongly supported allowing one FGO next semester. He also supported allowing students to elect that course toward the end of the semester, rather than during add/drop, saying he was concerned about students who might experience illness during the course of the semester. Tekla said exceptions were built into the policy that would allow a late election under extraordinary circumstances. Cole worried that students would need to contact a complicated list of people while sick to invoke those special exceptions. Catherine thought this use of a late FGO would undermine the original reason for the FGO. She said she would prefer making a temporary policy change rather than relying on class deans to reinterpret policy in the case of sickness.

Christian thought the most elegant solution would be to extend the FGO deadline to the end of the semester. This, combined with the reduction to a three-course load, would provide a flexible arrangement which would alleviate anxieties. Tekla said that is the model that will lead to the most grade inflation.

Cole said his preferred solution would allow students to declare one FGO before the end of each semester during the pandemic without those counting against the four allowable FGOs. Catherine suggested the committee keep the policy simple. Allow every student one FGO per semester as long as the pandemic continues. These would not count toward the total limit. While this could increase the number of passes taken, that is not the choice most Amherst students will choose. Tekla summarized the recommendation as a return to normal grading, but allowing students one FGO per semester during the pandemic, with those FGOs not counting against their total of four, and with the election of the FGO happening at the end of the semester once grades have been submitted. The committee recommended this course of action, which Edward said he would recommend in a letter from the committee to the Committee of Six.

Withdrawal Policy for 2020-21

Edward next asked the committee to discuss whether it wanted to retain its course withdrawal policy. Currently, students may withdraw from one course, without penalty, in any semester prior to the senior year by the end of the tenth week of the semester and graduate with 31 credits. Tekla asked what would happen if a student who is taking three courses wants to drop a course. Must they stay in the course until the end of term and then withdraw? Catherine said that, after checking with Gail Holt in Financial Aid, she had learned that as long as students are registered for three courses through the end of add/drop, they will be considered full-time students and will not jeopardize their qualification for federal financial aid. Catherine said her hope was that if students were taking only three courses, they would not need to drop a course. The committee did not see a reason to modify this policy.

Add/Drop and Shopping Policies for 2020-21

Edward then asked the committee whether add/drop and the shopping period should remain the same during the coming year. Jesse had previously written to the committee that he could not schedule two rounds of registration, followed by first-year registration, all before the beginning of the fall semester. Catherine said she had also asked Jesse whether the pre-registration commitments from spring could be honored and has not heard his recommendation yet. Her preference would be to retain pre-registrations, if possible, especially since there is not sufficient time for two rounds of pre-registration now. Tekla said she felt hesitant to discuss add/drop without knowing the answer to how the registration process will work, but she was unclear how pre-registrations can be honored, given the reductions in enrollment caps and changes to the teaching schedule.

Nicola agreed with Tekla that the process would need to start from scratch. She too thought that there have been too many changes to courses to assume that previous pre-registrations could remain in place. Edward agreed. Krupa also thought there would need to be a whole new registration process since international students will not be able to take any courses that are not offered online and will be constrained by teaching times.

Tekla repeated that she did not believe students would be able to retain their original course registrations. She urged the committee to schedule two rounds of registration with roster management and reduce the length of add/drop. Catherine said she was intrigued by a recommendation from Nicola, based on a recommendation from the Harvard administration to its faculty, that faculty produce and post, in advance of the beginning of the semester, a brief video about their course, so students can make choices without relying on the traditional add/drop shopping period.

Christian, noting that remote classes require an invitation, asked how students could drop in to a Zoom class during add/drop. Nicola thought students would have access. She was more concerned about the shopping process. Some classes—including her own—will take place in a physical classroom, even though the instructor will not be physically present. She worried that too many students could end up flooding a room, potentially exposing each other to illness. She would favor dropping the shopping period and adopting the use of videos instead.

Catherine said she liked the idea of posting videos, along with course syllabi stating clear expectations at the time of registration. She was wary of proceeding with the usual shopping period. Tekla said the college needs advising, registration, and roster management. This could happen in the time available if roster management were shortened to 48 hours. Cole thought it made sense to avoid attracting too many students to a room during the shopping period, but he worried about the ability of the faculty to create a syllabus and a video that will adequately explain a course and their willingness to post these on

the internet, visible to more than just those pre-registered for the course. Tekla said these could be mounted on a YouTube channel that is accessible only to Amherst students. Cole said it still might not be totally private. He was more worried about syllabi since faculty often prefer not to share them widely. Sandy noted that if students list the course on their preferred course list, they can access the course's Moodle site. Faculty can safely post videos and syllabi there. Others agreed. Nicola pointed out that students can also email faculty for course syllabi.

Edward asked if faculty would need to mount videos by the registration deadline. He thought this was asking a lot of faculty at a very busy time. Catherine pointed out that advising begins in mid-July and continues for two weeks. Tekla thought the videos and syllabi did not have to be posted before registration as long as they were posted before the first day of class. She was satisfied that this could substitute for shopping. Cole did not think videos would help students during shopping. They feel they need to attend the first day or two of class. Tekla said the administration needs to tell the faculty to advise students to put any courses they have interest in on their list of preferred courses. This will allow them to shop courses prior to the beginning of the semester. Sandy said faculty should then link Zoom to Moodle; that will allow students to attend the class.

Krupa asked about the policy in case students become ill. Catherine said, if quarantined, students will work remotely. If sick, they will work with their class dean to arrange accommodations. Tekla noted that medical withdrawals are routinely handled by Student Affairs.

Course proposals

Edward next turned to course proposals. The committee briefly discussed the maximum number of courses that can count towards the thesis and whether this number would be exceeded if a department also offered a separate course on thesis work. The committee noted that the department in question would not be exceeding the maximum number permitted with its course. The committee also discussed some wording issues and some plans for handling over-enrollment. In one case, the committee was uncomfortable with a faculty member's plan to select students in a manner designed to achieve "representative equity" based presumably on the instructor's perception of a student's identity. Edward said he would contact the faculty member. He also agreed to contact the instructor of a course and ask about reducing the hypotheticals at the beginning of the description and adding a sentence about the course's intent.

Edward ended by again thanking Tekla and Christian for their outstanding contributions to the committee's work, and in Tekla's case for her considerable contributions over a period of three years. He said there would be no meeting next week but the committee would continue to review and discuss course submissions over email. The meeting adjourned at 12:15 p.m.