

Committee on Educational Policy
March 30, 2023

In attendance: Professors Mekhola Gomes, Dave Hanneke, Christopher Kingston, and Geoffrey Sanborn (who chaired the meeting in Rob Benedetto's absence); Provost and Dean of the Faculty Catherine Epstein, ex officio; Gent Malushaga '25; and Associate Provost Janet Tobin, who served as the recorder for this meeting (in Nancy Ratner's absence).

Geoffrey Sanborn called the meeting to order at 2:30 p.m. in Porter Lounge, and the committee approved the minutes of March 23, 2023.

Course Proposal

The members reviewed a course proposal.

Proposal to Update and Clarify the Independent Scholars Policy

Discussion turned to concerns surrounding the College's Independent Scholars Program that the Committee on Academic Standing and Special Majors (CAS) has conveyed to the CEP. The CAS noted that, even though very few students petition the CAS for an Independent Scholar major (and that no student has been permitted to become such a major in many decades), it is important to define clearly what the petition process should entail and to set a high bar for granting students' requests. The CAS drafted a "Checklist for Independent Scholars," modeling the document on a checklist for proposing Interdisciplinary majors. In addition, the CAS proposed revisions to sections of the *Amherst College Catalog* that reference the Independent Scholar major

The CAS explained the differences between Independent Scholar majors and Interdisciplinary majors. Interdisciplinary majors follow a self-guided program of study that comprises Amherst College and/or Five-College classes, while Independent Scholar majors pursue a program of study that is not made up of Amherst or Five-college classes, and that traditionally takes place off-campus. For example, an Independent Scholar could be working in specialized archives, or in a scientific laboratory, to develop an original research project. The CAS also noted that the Independent Scholar experience is not comparable to study away, because another credit-giving educational institution is not involved. For Independent Scholars, Amherst awards a full semester's worth of credit for the project they pursue. In the CAS's view, the current catalog language about the program does not offer enough safeguards to ensure the prioritization of academic rigor. The CAS also found that supervisory and evaluative mechanisms are not adequately explained, and that the role of the CAS should be defined more clearly. Another concern is that the confusing language describing the Independent Scholars major presents a significant obstacle for any student who may be interested in petitioning for it. Finally, such a lack of clarity may lead to situations in which both students and supervising faculty would struggle to clearly understand what is expected of them, with the potential for miscommunications and disappointing results, the CAS noted.

The CEP expressed appreciation to the CAS for raising this issue and for the proposed revisions to existing catalog language about the program. Some members said that they were completely unaware of the Independent Scholars major. Chris noted that a senior could potentially receive credit for eight courses (two full semesters) under the program, a full year of college, while being off campus and doing independent work. He argued that the program is inconsistent with Amherst's mission as a residential liberal arts college and should be abolished. If a student does not want to have a residential experience at the college or to study away through a formal program, the student should take an educational leave,

in his view. Chris also noted the problems that could arise if a student is relying on the faculty advisor that is required under the program, should that faculty member be unable to serve in this role for any number of reasons. Under such circumstances, the student could potentially not complete the envisioned honors thesis that is part of the major or graduate.

Mekhola said that she could imagine some exceptional circumstances under which a student could benefit from this program. She expressed the view that, under the proposed revisions to the language about the program, there would be so many hoops that a student would need to jump through that it would effectively be impossible for students to take advantage of the program. Gent said that he favors retaining the program on the off chance that a student can take advantage of it. Dave wondered if the program was envisioned as a way for the college to maintain an affiliation with extraordinary students who have exhausted the college's curriculum and/or who want to pursue a unique opportunity, such as creating a new company, when such students might otherwise just leave Amherst. Dave, noting that he is not opposed to abolishing the program, said that, if the program is retained, he would make further revisions to the CAS's proposed language. He would stress the CAS's approval authority when it comes to student proposals to become Independent Scholars, and he would not—on principle—prohibit untenured faculty from being primary academic supervisors as part of the program. Geoff expressed concern about quality control; he worries, he said, whether sufficient safeguards could be put in place that would ensure the rigor of the educational experience of Independent Scholars. Catherine expressed the view that these are all good questions. The members decided that the CAS should be asked to consider whether the Independent Scholars Program should continue or be abolished, and to make a recommendation to the CEP.

Film and Media Studies (FAMS) Proposal

The committee next discussed a revised proposal that the Film and Media Studies (FAMS) Program become a department. It was noted that the CEP has considered previous iterations of the proposal over several years, and that the one under discussion includes some revisions that were made in response to the committee's feedback.

The meeting adjourned at 3:50 p.m.