

Committee on Educational Policy
March 10, 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 March 3, 2021.

Courses

The committee then turned to additional course proposals and approved all but one, which had a very low cap on enrollment and would be taught by two professors. Given the increase in the number of students anticipated next year, the committee thought it important to allow a few more students into the course and asked Edward to contact the faculty members.

FTE recommendations

The committee next discussed the letter summarizing its FTE recommendations. After making a few revisions, the committee approved sending it to the president and dean.

Five College Certificate in Queer, Trans, and Sexuality Studies

The committee then turned its attention to a proposal to change the name of the Five College Certificate in Queer and Sexuality Studies to the Five College Certificate in Queer, Trans, and Sexuality Studies. Khary Polk, one of the co-chairs of the program, explained in his letter that the certificate provides an opportunity to pursue a course of study that critically examines the relationship between sexual and gender identities, experiences, cultures and communities in a wide range of historical and political contexts. The certificate also leads students to investigate how non-normative and normative genders and sexualities intersect with other social categories such as race, ethnicity, gender, class and nationality. While the proposal would change the name of the certificate, the course requirements would remain unchanged. The name change will go into effect on July 1, 2021. The committee approved the name change and recommended that it be sent to the Committee of Six for consideration by the full faculty.

Change in department status

The committee next took up a request to shift half of a colleague's appointment to another department.

Latin honors

The committee then turned to the college's policy on Latin honors. Adam offered four possible approaches to the awarding of Latin honors, all designed to reduce what seemed to him to be an arbitrary process and increasingly intolerable to a number of faculty. All his options eliminated the responsibility of the Committee of Six to read *summa* theses.

Option one would retain current cutoffs but would add an appeals process in the case of exceptional students whose honors level had dropped two levels, from *summa* to *cum*. Students would have to agree to the delay of their diplomas, to allow time for the Committee of Six review, which would be final.

Option two would retain current cutoffs but change the timing and add an appeals process. At the end of the spring semester, the college would calculate the required GPA from the prior five academic years to establish cutoffs. Seniors would know the required floor for their GPA at the beginning of their senior year. There would still be an appeals process to the Committee of Six to reduce arbitrariness, again restricted to a drop of two levels (*summa* to *cum*). As in the first option, the Committee of Six would review the thesis and appeals letter, and students would have to agree to a late diploma. He noted that this option introduces the ability of students to game the system by enrolling only in easy classes.

The third option, the simplest, would make departments exclusively responsible for determining Latin honors, eliminating the GPA cutoff. The expertise to judge the work would rest at the department level. He acknowledged that this could lead to honors inflation, which might be discouraged by publishing department averages.

The fourth option would introduce a breadth requirement, as proposed by the Curriculum Committee a few years ago. As in option three, eligibility for Latin honors would not be based on GPA. Departments would determine the level of honors but students would have to meet a breadth requirement—for example, eight courses in each of the college's four divisions (STEM, humanities, social sciences, and arts/music) for a *summa*; seven courses in each division for a *magna*; six for a *cum*. There would be a review process and departmental honors percentages would be published annually. Finishing, Adam said there will be some student disappointment no matter what kind of cutoff the college uses, but the committee needs to be clear about what academic norms govern cutoffs, it needs to ensure that the practices determining cutoffs need to be reasonable and not sudden or arbitrary, and it should allow some sort of process for hearing appeals in exceptional cases.

Students thought greater transparency would be helpful and would remove some uncertainty. The idea of adding divisional requirements raised some concerns. Many majors require more than eight courses, so option four, as proposed, would automatically disqualify students in those majors from *summa* or *magna* honors. In addition, the implementation of such a requirement would have to be delayed for several years to allow students sufficient time to complete the divisional requirements.

The committee noted that most students who are recommended for a *summa* receive one and agreed that the real problem is the number of students who drop from a *magna* to a *cum*. Committee members thought there would be lots of support for departments having a greater role in determining honors, and supported abandoning the requirement that a *magna* be tied to a particular GPA percentage. There was also a lot of support for removing the Committee of Six from the adjudication of *summa* theses. While reading *summa* theses exposes faculty on the Committee of Six to stellar work in other departments, on balance it is not a great use of time for the Committee of Six.

Several members preferred the options that abandoned the competitive model that pegs the honors level to a GPA percentage. They wondered whether the college could require a certain number of grades of A or a particular GPA and whether this might be consistent with recent trends at other schools. Students would then be competing against themselves rather than against their classmates. This,

however, did not address students who have experienced a bad semester due to circumstances beyond their control.

Requiring a more limited divisional breadth appealed to some members of the committee—a requirement perhaps that students complete one or two courses in each of the four divisions. While some thought the breadth requirement unnecessary, others thought a breadth requirement would offer an incentive to students to expand their course exploration. More than 20% of humanities majors never take a STEM course, and 9% of humanities majors never take a social science course. Even higher percentages of students in all divisions avoid courses in the languages and the arts. Looking for inflection points, some noted that grade inflation has resulted in a GPA that is no longer meaningful as an indicator of excellence. Introducing a divisional requirement could underline the values of Amherst as a liberal arts institution and might also reduce the number of double majors.

Allowing a process for a Committee of Six appeal would be reserved as a formality for adjudicating case-by-case appeals. While an appeals process could take the bite out of anomalous cases, most thought it unlikely that faculty would ever be able to deny an appeal.

Faced with the epistemological question of what should qualify work for college honors if no one has sufficient expertise to overrule a department recommendation, the committee thought there were three options—the work could be tied to a particular GPA, a distribution requirement, or just become a department decision. Removing the GPA percentage cutoff appealed to many, but this would likely result in honors inflation, particularly for *magna* degrees. Tying college honors to GPA would be further complicated if students' GPA averages differ significantly by department, giving advantage to majors in some fields over others. The committee then turned to the philosophical values of the institution and what Latin honors should reflect, even though the concerns are currently centered around whether to honor a student's GPA, discourage grade inflation, reduce the seeming arbitrariness of a percentage cutoff, or address the timing of Latin honors decisions. Committee members suggested doing something simple this year and looking for a more robust solution next year.

The meeting adjourned at noon.