

**Committee on Educational Policy  
March 11, 2020**

**In attendance: Faculty: Tekla Harms; Edward Melillo, chair; Christian Rogowski; Krupa Shandilya, by phone; Adam Sitze. Provost and Dean of the Faculty: Catherine Epstein, *ex officio*. Students: Jae Yun Ham '22; 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. in the Beneski, Room 311. The committee approved the minutes of March 4, 2020.

**Late term FGOs, flexibility during coronavirus**

Edward and Catherine explained that the class deans would like to communicate with students about a loosening of some rules during the remainder of the semester. In particular, they have asked for greater flexibility in allowing late-term FGOs and late-term course withdrawals, since students may have difficulty getting the medical documentation for such a change at this time. The committee endorsed the proposal to allow the use of the first-year/sophomore/junior drop if the professor and advisor approves, and if the student has not fallen behind in the progress toward graduation. This would not be retroactive to requests made earlier in the semester or previous semesters.

Asked about further relaxation of the rules for a late-term conversion to FGO, Tekla urged the committee to allow the remote learning system to have a trial run of perhaps three weeks. If the problems persist, the college could decide at that time to push the late deadline even later. She thought the students would benefit from ramping down the dropping of classes. Decisions to delay action until the remote learning is fully underway might actually reduce student anxiety. She suggested the deans broadcast their intention to increase flexibility, but wait with decisions about who should drop courses or change to an FGO until students have experienced the remote learning model. Catherine said students are emailing deans about their concerns. She thought a message about flexibility might be helpful.

Cole said lots of students are worried about how they will manage remote course work. They are accustomed to their Amherst routine and depend on the resources at the college. Some don't have homes to go back to; some have homes that aren't ideal; some students don't have access to a library or technology. Catherine pointed out that much of the anxiety involves facing the unknown. She thought it would be good to send a message about greater flexibility and said she would ask the class deans to hit the pause button with students.

Adam said he would like to better understand the reasons for these requests. He thought students had real questions and worried that the discussion on Tuesday night felt infantilizing to the students who were there. Many students are pragmatists, grappling with how to manage remote learning while living in places that are in vastly different time zones which will make participation in class extremely difficult. He thought the students were genuinely concerned about how they will be able to get their work done from home.

Tekla thought the challenge would be finding the right solution for problems as they arise. Adam agreed, but suggested that because this involves trials and errors in real time professors would be conducting an educational experiment, with student grades hanging in the balance. He had just engaged in a lengthy and complicated Moodle discussion with his 8:30AM class in an attempt to find a mutually acceptable time to hold his class, which includes students from several disparate time zones; he was unsure that this would be workable.

Tekla maintained that the timing issue would not be solved by students dropping courses. The class deans need to see how remote learning will work before resorting to a relaxed set of rules. Adam stated that the uncertainty students were feeling was real and needs to be addressed.

Edward suggested that Catherine communicate with Rick to explain that there will likely be greater flexibility but that it is too early to change the rules. Catherine said she would do so and would work with Rick on the message that he sends out. She noted that students might not all have the same educational experience this year, but the goal is to help as many students as possible get through the semester. Adam asked how he could do this if several students cannot join a Zoom meeting because of time zone differences. Tekla said she intended to ask students to indicate on a spreadsheet their time zone and their home address so she can ship them supplies. She hopes to find a way to simulate, to the extent possible, what would have occurred in a lab or field setting. She will set up private discussion times, if necessary, to meet all of the students' needs. Faculty will need to be flexible and creative about how they teach.

Catherine suggested Adam consider recording the discussion for students who live in other time zones. This would allow a discussion for close to 80% of the class, which would be better than for none. Adam said it would not really be a discussion then for the remaining students and would fall short of the college goals of diversity and inclusion. Catherine acknowledged that the solution is unlikely to be perfect; during this global pandemic, she urged that the perfect not become the enemy of the good.

Christian added that some students, just like faculty, will have to make adjustments in order to best take advantage of the changed situation. Adam said that this would just be going through the motions, not really offering an education. Catherine said the goal is to give all students a decent educational experience, not to just go through the motions; she encouraged him to take a positive attitude, given the difficult situation. Adam said that the issue was not attitude but time zones, and that three of his students were from time zones that would make their participation in class extremely difficult or even impossible. Tekla thought the students would find ways to adjust and urged him to try it. Jae, noting that he lives in Hawaii, suggested Adam set up a separate discussion for the students who live in the other time zones and provide as much flexibility as possible for them.

Edward then asked the committee to focus its attention on the policy issue that was at hand—whether the committee wanted to grant the class deans additional flexibility in allowing conversion of courses to the FGO. Christian said he would favor allowing the class deans maximum flexibility. Krupa said she agreed and also thought there should be flexibility in how the faculty teaches after spring break. Faculty will have to change how they do what they do and will just have to change to accommodate students.

Adam said the nature of education offered under this change still troubled him. He then proposed that the college place an asterisk on students' transcripts stating that a portion of the term had taken place online, due to COVID-19. Tekla did not support adding an asterisk. To be consistent, the college would then have to add an asterisk to every course that was suspect, and the asterisk in this case would be interpreted by others outside the institution as a qualitatively different kind of credit. Remote learning, in the hands of Amherst faculty, will not resemble online education as practiced by many other institutions; adding an asterisk that this was an online course would risk suggesting something very different. While the remainder of the semester will be temporarily taught remotely, this change will not jeopardize the way Amherst offers education in the long run.

Christian agreed with Tekla and said he supported signaling flexibility, pushing deadlines back, and waiting. He suggested there was no need to legislate before seeing what will happen.

Cole said he worried about signaling flexibility because it is likely to be misinterpreted by students. Since the college is not really changing rules, he thought students would be better off receiving a clear statement that policies will remain unchanged for now. Tekla suggested the message say that the college is holding policies steady and will review the situation in three weeks to determine how the shift to remote learning is working.

Adam wanted to know what problems were being solved by adding flexibility. Would this address feelings of panic? Real problems? Academic integrity? Feelings of inclusion? Christian said it will be up to faculty members to adjust their approach to teach remotely. Faculty will find alternative methods over time and may have to be more forgiving and more flexible during this exceptional situation.

Edward asked what the committee wanted to recommend to the class deans regarding the FGO policy and how the committee wanted to respond to Adam's suggestion of adding an asterisk to student transcripts. Christian said the changes to remote learning are happening at many colleges and universities, so he thought the asterisk was unnecessary. Tekla agreed and said the faculty will offer the best education it can under the circumstances. Adam said that he saw a difference between bending in order not to break and twisting beyond recognition. He was particularly concerned that the college was about to confer full academic credit for classes that will have been conducted in an entirely improvised, untested format using unfamiliar software. He thought this education would bear little resemblance to the Amherst education and that the college should be frank about the diminished credit. He did not want to sanction diminishing the Amherst education in this way, and he did not think it was a good idea to use academic credit as a means to the end of resolving non-academic problems.

Tekla said the coronavirus pandemic is requiring faculty to find solutions for teaching in a more diverse and complex world. In response, faculty will need to devise new methodologies, and these new approaches will prepare them for a future when they may need to teach students with more challenging accessibility issues, such as participating in geology field work while confined to a wheel chair, or participating in a discussion course with students who are profoundly deaf, etc. Edward agreed that faculty will need this year to abandon, temporarily, some of the fundamental pedagogical methods they have depended upon in the past. As an example, he said he has decided to be more aggressively attentive to students' writing for the remainder of the semester to compensate for other things he will not be able to do. Summarizing the committee's deliberations, he said the committee would not

propose a policy alteration at this point but will be prepared to revisit this issue in a few weeks, and it would not support adding an asterisk to student transcripts. Catherine will convey this to Rick.

### **New courses**

The committee approved two new courses.

### **Data Science initiative**

The committee returned to the proposal to create a catalog page on Data Science. Edward noted that all of the changes requested were included. He will write to the Committee of Six to say that he CEP supports a Catalog page on Data Science. The issue of resources is not the CEP's to decide.

### **Changes to the FGO policy and related policies**

Edward next asked the committee to return to its recommendations to clarify the intentions behind the FGO policy, to revise aspects of the policy, and to amend related policies, as requested by the class deans.

Adam expressed some sympathy for the simplified version of the FGO that the class deans proposed. Tekla said she found the simplified version fundamentally different from what the faculty had passed and would vote against it if it went to the faculty. She thought the changes to the language in the FGO better reflected the intention of the faculty when it voted for the FGO policy. Although starting from scratch with the simplified version might be a wise choice, she thought the committee should not abandon the policy that the faculty had approved. That said, she thought the language in that policy was unclear and needed tweaking. The committee has done that, and the deans have added some additional tweaks. If the committee preferred to send both the edited version and the simplified version forward, she thought there needed to be a discussion about the simplified version because it would change the policy in substantive ways.

Others on the committee agreed that the simplified version was sufficiently different that it could not just be offered as a substitution. Adam thought it might help to enumerate the pros and cons of the simplified version if the committee decided to send it forward for consideration. He thought it had some merit in that it would remove much of the complexity and make the option equally accessible to everyone. He also thought it could avoid some of the pitfalls of grade inflation that the FGO had created at institutions like Dartmouth and might free faculty to issue a wider and more meaningful spectrum of grades.

Tekla noted that students would still receive grades throughout the semester. She preferred the timing of the decision to declare a course FGO because it requires students to discuss their decision to do so with their advisor at the beginning of semester, before they have received a grade, and supported a larger conversation about the student's educational goals. If action is only taken at the end of the semester, it would just become a decision to drop the lowest grade.

Cole questioned the purpose of the policy. If it is intended as an off-ramp, he thought the revised version of the policy made more sense, but he thought it didn't seem like this was the original intention behind the FGO. Tekla said it began as a pedagogical tool, but the class deans have tried to use it as an off-ramp when needed, so it has taken on a dual purpose. She did not think the committee could prevent this dual-purpose use. At the same time, she did not want to see this reduced to being solely about the grade. Edward said the committee could present two versions to the faculty with the pros and cons of either option. The committee will return to this at its next meeting.

### **Pre-registration**

The committee next raised a question about pre-registration and whether the intention is for this to happen remotely. Catherine said she is expecting a normal fall semester, so she expected faculty advisors to conduct remote advising sessions and students to pre-register for the fall semester. She also mentioned that study abroad programs are offering flexibility about students' commitments to study away, with easy withdrawal options, if necessary. Christian wondered whether students contemplating studying away should be registering for fall courses on campus, in case they cannot study away. Otherwise, they may find themselves locked out of courses. Catherine said she needs to consult with others about this possibility and suggested the committee return to this issue after spring break.

### **Remote CEP meetings for the remainder of the semester**

Edward noted that the committee would like its student members to continue to participate in committee deliberations after they leave campus. Cole expressed concern about not being on campus for meetings and said he did not want the committee to lose the student voice. He was especially concerned about expedited college policy decisions being made without the administration hearing students' voices. Krupa agreed with Cole that it might be necessary to scale back on some deliberations. She had some other questions. What will happen if a faculty member falls sick? Who will teach the classes?

Catherine noted that administrative departments have been asked to formulate contingency plans should some colleagues fall ill. If one person becomes ill, the college can make adjustments, but the administration has not discussed what would happen if large numbers take ill. Normally, a committee continues to meet, even if one or two members need to miss a meeting. It is not uncommon for student members to miss meetings. She thought the question will depend on the threshold, especially if the committee lacks a quorum.

The committee agreed that it would conduct meetings after spring break using Zoom. Those who are on campus will continue to meet in person, but, if necessary, the entire meeting could take place online. The timing will make the presence of one of the students more challenging. Tekla thought it likely that the committee could push through its most urgent remaining issues in the next few meetings. Catherine said she may want the committee to weigh in on continuing issues, however. The committee will continue to meet in Beneski, using the room's projection screen and an additional microphone for the computer that is used for projection.

The meeting adjourned at 12:10 p.m.