

Committee on Educational Policy
March 3, 2021

In attendance: Faculty: Sandra Burkett; Nicola Courtright, acting chair; Krupa Shandilya; Adam Sitze. Students: Nicholas Graber-Mitchell '22; Robert Parker '21; Jalen Woodard '23. Recorder: Nancy Ratner, Director of Academic Projects. Absent: Edward Melillo and Catherine Epstein.

Nicola Courtright, acting 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 February 24, 2021.

FTE recommendations

Nancy asked the committee to read the summary of its FTE recommendations and suggest revisions before it is sent to the president and dean.

Target-of-opportunity requests

The committee turned first to a request for two target-of-opportunity senior hires for Black Studies and History.

The committee turned next to a request for a target-of-opportunity request from Biology for a neurobiologist.

Latin honors

Nancy mentioned that the committee has data on the percent of students recommended for Latin honors versus the percentage awarded at each level by department and by division for classes graduating in 2016 through 2020. The committee also has information about how honors degrees are awarded by peer institutions. She asked the committee if it needed additional data before beginning a discussion of Latin honors at the college.

Adam said he found the Harvard, Princeton, and Yale models attractive, since they seem to defer to departments, but noted that there was some indication that this has led to grade inflation at Princeton. He wondered if that was also true at Harvard and Yale. Princeton is the only one that requires a thesis.

Cole thought the committee needed to consider the purpose of honors before having a conversation about it. What should the program look like? What are its goals? Nicola said there might not be agreement about the purpose of honors or who should determine honors—the college or the department. She thought there was merit in limiting the *summas* to protect the honor of receiving that designation.

Adam said the college also needs to consider its values. He agrees that Amherst has a grade inflation problem, but said that while related this is a separable problem in need of a separate solution. He agreed that past minutes seem to indicate that the reason for the current arbitrary cut-off for a *summa* is to maintain the value of a high honors degree. One other way to do this might be to introduce a distribution or breadth requirement for a *summa*. He wondered if Jesse could model how this would affect *summa* awards.

Cole thought there might be different ideas among committee members about honors. Krupa said it is hard to disaggregate honors from grade inflation. The percentage of A and A+ grades has increased over

time. Adam noted that many peers award honors on the basis of a GPA, limiting honors to a particular percentage of the class as a way to retain control over the number of top awards. He agreed that these are conjoined discussions. He also noted that past a certain point, it is not workable for a faculty member to mentor a large number of theses, so thesis work will always need to be limited. Nicola asked for information on how many departments require a thesis. Sandi said she was interested in knowing how many departments impose a hurdle, such as a minimum GPA, for doing a thesis. Krupa thought the committee needed a sense of how this is done in other places. Is there a GPA cutoff?

The meeting adjourned at 11:40 a.m.