

**Committee on Educational Policy**  
**March 31, 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: Nicolas Graber-Mitchell '22; Robert Parker '21. 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.

**Meeting with the Board**

Edward shared the list of items that the CEP has discussed this past year and said he would present these to the Board.

**Courses**

The committee approved four new courses.

**Target-of-opportunity request**

Edward asked the committee to discuss a request for a target-of-opportunity (TO) appointment. The committee approved the hire, and Edward said he would write a letter to Catherine to that effect.

**The A+ grade**

Catherine next shared data with the committee on the frequency and distribution of A+ grades and mentioned that the Committee of Six strongly endorses ending the A+, based on its inequitable use and its skewing effect on Latin honors. The Committee of Six is now asking that the CEP reconsider its recommendation about the A+. Adam asked if the argument is that because the A+ is not used uniformly, no one should be able to use it. Catherine said the concern is that its inequitable use is skewing students' GPA in particular fields. The Committee of Six is wondering whether it might be preferable to make the A+ solely honorific, with no impact on the GPA. The majority of schools use a 4.0 grading system, so this would result in students having a more typical GPA when applying for fellowships.

Cole, noting that the same inequitable distribution occurs in the awarding of grades in general, asked why it would make sense to single out the A+ grade. He thought there were big grading differences across departments in general. Krupa disagreed. She said faculty reserve the use of the A+ for just a small number of students. Faculty members in all departments assign grades of A, but not all give A+ grades. Sandi said this proposal assumes the college will use the GPA for particular purposes. It appears from the data that A+ grades are awarded very differently across campus. For her, the key piece is how the GPA is to be used. If GPA ceased to be a factor in the calculation to determine Latin honors, faculty could have the option of continuing to use the A+ to reward truly excellent work and communicate that to an outside audience, without it having a distorting effect on Latin honors.

Adam worried that removing the A+ would remove an instructor's capacity to declare work to be extraordinary without necessarily correcting the inequities in how A+ grades are distributed. He thought this proposal was based on a misguided idea of standardization; it is a fantasy to think this act will

suddenly standardize grades across departments. The differences between fields make that goal impossible to realize.

Cole then asked how this would affect current students and students who have already graduated since it would change the relative rankings of students. Catherine said this change would not take effect until the next academic year, and the Committee of Six believes its effect on current students would be minimal; by a few years after graduation, a student's GPA post-graduation is largely irrelevant.

Adam returned to the question of what problem this is trying to solve. Is it the issue of different standards being used by different departments in assigning grades? Is it solely an outward facing issue for students? Internally, this matters mainly with respect to Latin honors. He suggested disaggregating the problem.

Edward concluded from the discussion that the committee is not in agreement with the Committee of Six. Should he write to the Committee of Six to this effect? Sandi said the issue of eliminating A+ grades is a substantive change which requires more thought. Changing from a 14-point scale to a 4.3-scale is just a rescaling of the GPA that is in current use by the college. Abandoning the A+ grade at this point would be forcing a substantive change without appropriate reflection. The college needs first to think seriously about two issues: the role of the A+ at the college and the role of GPA at the college.

Adam asked about the premise for the Committee of Six critique: What basis is there for standardization of grades across the college? Given the wide variety of departments, and given the heterogeneity in the ways that faculty think about the purpose and meaning of grades, we will discover discrepancies everywhere. But why call these discrepancies inequities? The term, which the college generally uses to describe social justice issues, is misapplied when used in a case of epistemological issues. What is the point of assigning a grade? Is it to incentivize students, to rank students, something else? It is not clear that inequity is the best term to describe the various responses faculty will have to these questions. Catherine said one member on the Committee of Six agreed with Sandi about the need to separate the argument about the role of the A+ grade from the role of GPA at the college.

Nicola said she was on the fence about this. She wanted Workday to work and understood that a decision would need to be made quickly, but the A+ grade has been cherished as a way to indicate truly outstanding work. Edward thought the computer program should not drive policy principles. Cole said the A+ could still signify excellent work even if it did not contribute to the GPA. Catherine noted that the Committee of Six is not opposed to retaining the A+ as an honorific on the transcript. Nicola said an A+ does signify something very special, more than just a symbolic grade. Adam pointed out that, as a symbolic grade, a student who received all A+s would then be at a disadvantage compared to a student who got all As. He thought inequity would be an appropriate concern if it reflected differences between racial or ethnic groups. He was unsure about its application to this issue.

Sandi asked how it would look from the outside if the college were not awarding a 4.3 for an A+ grade. Catherine said the 4.3 GPA could be construed to devalue grades in a way that a 4.0 does not. Sandi wondered how medical schools would interpret this, whether it would result in devaluing the grades of other students.

Cole suggested that not crediting an A+ with additional points would have the effect of lowering the ceiling for grade inflation. He also noted that the registrar's spreadsheet for converting the 14-point scale treats the A+ as a 4.0 for the outward-facing GPA. Catherine said there will be a faculty meeting on May 4<sup>th</sup>, and the college will need a proposal by that meeting. Determining the scale now while engaged in the programming for Workday is easier than it will be in the future. She was hearing heated disagreement about this but not about abandoning the 14-point scale. Sandi said that the committee

was initially just asked about moving away from the 14-point scale to facilitate the transition to Workday.

Edward asked whether he should invite Jesse to the next meeting. Adam suggested the committee communicate its opinion about the pros and cons of continuing to award the A+, while disaggregating this from other issues to the extent possible, as a way to inform a faculty discussion. Edward said he would be more comfortable with that than advocating for a position that not everyone on the committee could support. The committee could explain what is at stake without recommending one thing or another as a way to broaden the discussion.

Catherine said doing this would effectively leave it to the Committee of Six to make a motion. The Committee of Six is trying to seek consensus and trying not to undermine the CEP's role in making recommendations. If the CEP does not provide clear guidance, it leaves the Committee of Six to act on its own, which in this case will be to move to adopt a 4.0 scale. She thought there could be a real range of difference among the faculty and acknowledged that the college is operating on a short time frame for an important decision. Adam noted that these are substantive disagreements about a complex issue. He thought the Committee of Six should just inform the faculty and structure a faculty debate by providing the necessary background and as much clarity as possible about the pros and cons of each approach. The faculty can then decide for themselves. He hoped the Committee of Six would take this approach at the meeting on May 4, 2021. Edward said he would convey the committee's thoughts to the Committee of Six.

### **Latin honors**

Edward asked the committee whether it was ready to craft a possible proposal regarding the awarding of Latin honors. Adam said he was still rethinking his position. He no longer thought the committee should attempt to do something for just this year; to do so would be ad hoc and sloppy. Cole pointed out that everything this year has been sloppy and ad hoc. He continued to support eliminating the GPA requirement this year. Catherine clarified that nothing the committee does would affect this year's seniors. Any change will only go into effect in the next academic year. It is important for students entering in the fall to understand clear policies. Adam and Nicola said they will draft a proposal and will place the draft on shared drive for the committee to consider.

The meeting adjourned at noon.