

Committee on Educational Policy
March 4, 2020

In attendance: Faculty: Tekla Harms; Edward Melillo, chair; Christian Rogowski; Adam Sitze. Provost and Dean of the Faculty: Catherine Epstein, *ex officio*. Students: Cole Graber-Mitchell '22; Jae Yun Ham '22; Sterling Kee '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. in Beneski, Room 311. The committee approved the minutes of February 19 and 26, 2020. The committee also approved the letter to the president and provost recommending FTE allocations.

Minimum teaching load policy

Catherine shared with the committee a draft of a teaching policy that the Committee of Six had already said it would support. She noted that many faculty members have now received course reductions (for administrative work and for serving as department chairs) and said she wanted to clarify the expectation that all faculty would nevertheless teach at least one course each semester. Her proposal would add a paragraph to the Faculty Handbook, Teaching and Advising, underneath the following paragraph:

1. Teaching Load. Amherst tries to keep the teaching load at a level that permits the faculty to devote considerable time outside of class to students and to scholarly or creative work. Generally, faculty teach two courses each semester. Departments have historically adapted this norm to their individual circumstances. Faculty are encouraged to teach outside their own departments through participation in interdisciplinary and interdepartmental courses and seminars.

The paragraph she suggested adding would state:

Course Reduction and Teaching Load

All faculty members who are not on sabbatical, unpaid leave of absence, or phased retirement normally teach the equivalent of at least one course per semester. In most cases, course reductions may not be combined to effect a semester without teaching.

Tekla was concerned that, as written, it might set an expectation that *normally* it is acceptable for faculty to teach only one course per semester. The committee agreed with the principle behind this paragraph but thought the provost should make the expectation even clearer and make explicit reference that this refers to the teaching load of faculty who have received course release for administrative positions and for chairing duties. Tekla suggested, "Faculty are expected to teach the equivalent of not fewer than one course per semester."

New courses

The committee approved new courses.

Data Science initiative

The committee next returned to the proposal that would create a Catalog page that would make Data Science efforts at the college more transparent to students and advisors. The committee was generally receptive but thought the page could be improved. Cole suggested it show the course titles associated with data science in a bullet-point list format, not just course numbers. Adam thought that the proposers might be wise to drop the language on social media, which might not age well. He also

wondered whether the references to a humanistic perspective should be removed, since the faculty member who would be offering humanities courses intends to leave her position. Some wondered whether someone else in Film and Media Studies might want to participate. The committee also thought the page should clearly state that this is not a major, and that it has no independent courses.

In addition to the catalog page, the initiative proposed the formation of a Data Science Initiative Steering Committee, which would meet approximately three times per semester; identify affiliated faculty who would also be listed on the website and invited to participate and engage with the initiative; create an associated website with the same information as the catalog page with supporting links; and allow a modest budget and administrative support. The committee asked Nancy to discuss the more minor changes with Nick Horton and then review this again at its next meeting.

Sophomore seminar on climate change

Adam proposed that the group of faculty developing next year's sophomore seminars consider mounting a seminar with a clear and consistent focus on climate change, possibly coupled with invitations to thirteen guests—scientists, humanists, and social scientists—who the college would to campus in the spring semester for weekly lectures on different dimensions of climate change. As examples of potential invitees he suggested a political scientist to speak about the most likely paths for climate change legislation in the coming decades, a psychologist to speak about eco-despair or eco-anxiety, a fiction writer to speak about the current fashion of post-apocalyptic (and despairing) narrative in film, television, and graphic novels, an historian who could help put our current crisis in comparative perspective.

He suggested aiming at an effect that would be catalytic, multidimensional, deepening, intensifying, and galvanizing: classes and lectures would multiply one another. The college could say that it has marked its bicentennial with an act of coordinated curricular intent and will -- that it has mustered each of the different areas of the liberal arts curriculum (STEM, social sciences, arts and humanities) to offer a forthright and properly serious college-wide response to a question that concerns all of us, but especially students. The college could call this the Bicentennial Symposium (or something that more forcefully communicates the sense of an all-hands-on-deck moment). To ensure proper disciplinary and sectional distribution, and to avoid redundancy and overlap, the CEP could solicit proposals from interested faculty, who could in turn teach sophomore seminars as an overload or as a normal course.

He then stated the case negatively: despite everything we know about what is happening to our natural and social worlds, despite the anxiety and despair we know we suffer and that we know our students suffer, despite the clear capacity of the liberal arts model to provide a multidimensional response to a multidimensional problem like this, despite the fact of the bicentennial presenting us with the perfect occasion to ask ourselves who we are as an institution, despite the fact that institutions of higher learning are supposed to be incubators of futures, should we just sleepwalk through next year with the usual satisfactory mix of open curriculum and judicious advising? He urged the committee to instead be serious and ambitious.

Catherine noted that while there is a group working on a sophomore seminar pilot with a theme of immigration, those faculty are all on leave next year. She thought the spring of next year might be logistically impossible but still found this a very attractive idea and asked how the committee could mobilize enough faculty to do this. The college will have two new faculty teaching in this area next year, but this ambitious idea would require ten or more faculty members, all teaching the same course in clusters. The committee briefly considered doing this in the FYS program, but some thought it would be

more interesting to galvanize slightly more advanced students to have discussions together around a big idea. The committee encouraged Adam to gather interested faculty together to see if such a course or coordinated set of courses could be mounted. Catherine said she might have grants that could provide some money for planning and incentives to participate.

Changes to FGO policy

The committee agreed to discuss the questions from the class deans at its next meeting.

Education Studies

Edward next asked the committee to consider the proposal for a program in Education Studies—a proposal that the committee discussed a year ago. At that time, the committee suggested some changes, including a letter from each participating department stating its commitment to offer these courses, even if the faculty member teaching the course now were to leave the college.

Tekla said she would vote against this, despite its value as a field of study. Amherst is not a university and can never teach every topic, despite its appeal to students. For her, the issue is whether the college can commit resources to this in a viable way. Programs constructed in this way are hard to sustain, but once started, they are hard to abandon. She then noted the problems: First, after scrutinizing the list of existing courses, she noted that FYS do not count towards majors generally, so those courses should not be included in the potential courses. Second, the CEP had asked for letters from departments that would commit to sustaining these courses. Instead, some wrote that said they would be willing to house a new FTE in the area. Other departments that offer these courses did not write at all. Departments should state unequivocally that the field of education studies is sufficiently important to their discipline that they cannot envision their program without teaching these courses. In the absence of such letters, she could not in good conscience vote for this. Interdisciplinary programs have their legs knocked out when someone leaves.

Catherine noted that the faculty has grown quite substantially and said she thought it could accommodate such a program. Tekla said she agreed in part, but could not accept future growth as a solution to the problem. The college will keep getting bigger but it cannot sustain this indefinitely. Edward shared her concerns. One person who is listed is no longer at the college, another is teaching in other areas, and a third is a visitor. He wondered how sustainable this would be, noting that departments also committed in the abstract to teaching intensive writing but have not followed through with their commitments. Noting that the visitor in the field is sustained by a grant from an alum, Tekla added that the college should not put itself in the position of allowing alumni donations to dictate curricular directions. Catherine agreed. The CEP makes recommendations for allocating FTE lines to support the curriculum; donors can give money for visitors but cannot be allowed to dictate the curriculum. Edward wondered whether a resounding interest in this proposal would take money away from other programs. Catherine thought it would inevitably.

Adam said he agreed with Tekla, but he also thought that the CEP has an obligation to factor into its decision-making its sense about the challenges we face as a country and how the college's curriculum responds to those challenges. On these substantive terms, he thought this is something we should be offering. He also noted that the proposal has a good nucleus of administrative support, and that even if the vicissitudes of faculty involvement do make the proposal a bit messy he thought ultimately the proposal balanced that messiness out with an inventive energy that the CEP should honor. He agreed that the committee should pursue the letters from departments and clarify who would participate. He would be inclined to vote for approval, subject to receiving the letters from departments.

Tekla said she agreed with him, but the committee should either do this in an educationally robust way—with binding commitments from departments—or with a catalog page, as proposed for Data Science. She pointed out that Nick Horton—one of the proposers—is also committed to Data Science. The proposers are not asking for department status yet, but she predicted that eventually they will. Adam said that he believes this concern needs to be weighed against the substantive case for educational studies, and that he was convinced by the proposal that study of this sort is indispensable for the country. Catherine added that a large number of students go into education as a field.

Christian agreed but wondered whether it had to be under the rubric of a major. He saw a fundamental contradiction between the open curriculum that trusts in students' ability to find their way through a personally designed curricular path and the regulated paths required by majors. Such a program could create another silo in which students stay within a narrow area. At the moment, students can participate in the Mt. Holyoke certification program, take courses across the five colleges, etc. Why do they need a separate major? Why not a separate page in the catalog? Catherine said students want to display their credentials on their transcript. Without a major, they cannot do so. Christian did not favor this credential creep and professionalization of the curriculum. The point of the open curriculum is it does not foreclose other possibilities; it offers a fully rounded education. Arguing in favor of the proposal, Catherine said a program in Education Studies would provide a critical view of education. Some students are more advanced in the way they navigate the open curriculum than others. This provides a pathway through the curriculum for the less savvy students.

Cole pointed out that it is hard to take courses at the five colleges. The teaching license involves mostly classes that are not offered at Amherst. A program in Education Studies would allow other students (not just majors) to explore aspects of education. Adam said this provides a structured path through the major and avoids some of the weaknesses of other majors. He also admitted to being somewhat ambivalent, but he noted that AI is coming. Professions will be automated. Real education is a profession that cannot be automated. Christian said he was fully in favor of realizing this as a viable endeavor, but, looking at the number of thesis projects, he was concerned about the structural impact upon resources. Tekla thought this is evidence that students could work at the highest level without having an official major. Edward thought these theses succeeded because faculty were willing to stretch to make these things work.

Adam said he agreed with Tekla's concerns about infinite expansion. Departments should be willing to state, "This component is critical enough to my discipline that we cannot imagine a time without it." Christian too thought it behooved the CEP to be skeptical in the absence of such a letter. The department letters need to be updated and changed. Adam nevertheless thought messy innovation was preferable to stifling the effort.

Cole wondered why there was such a concern about faculty expansion. Tekla pointed to Amherst's amazing student-to-faculty ratio (7:1) which is an expensive proposition. It cannot be infinitely expanded. Amherst is a place with finite resources. Adam agreed, adding that a new major could draw students away from other departments, creating imbalances that change instruction and create sometimes significant inequities in workloads between divisions and departments. Christian said this is already happening in a larger context—the lab half courses, the Five College certificate programs, the changes to the FGO, the proliferation of majors—all have an impact. Tekla added that, for the moment the CEP does not look at enrollments when making FTE decisions. As positions are allocated to additional fields, the pressure to deny FTE requests will become greater, and enrollment patterns may

become part of the discussion around FTE allocations and even tenure decisions. The trickle-up growth has shielded the CEP from such decisions. She said she does not want to make decisions that then require future committees to scrutinize enrollments in this way. Christian said this is happening already with regard to European Studies. Adam thought that curricular decisions should be motivated by substantive concerns and not by notions of consumer demand, and suggested that concerns over inequities in workload are distinct from notions of consumer demand. Christian noted that the faculty came to the defense of Classics some years ago and decided that a minimum number of FTEs is necessary to run a department. There are structural constraints that are putting pressure on small departments. Edward said he would explain to Hilary that the CEP needs letters from the departments that are more explicit about their commitment to the program.

The meeting adjourned at 12:15 p.m.