

## **Committee on Educational Policy**

**May 12, 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; 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 April 28, 2021 and May 5, 2021.

### **New course**

The committee approved one additional course for the fall.

### **CEP chair, 2021-22**

Sandi confirmed that she will serve as chair next year, with support from Nicola for faculty meeting presentations and reports. The committee members were inclined to meet at either 8:30 or 9:00 a.m. on Wednesday mornings in the fall, and Nicola suggested the early meetings again take place via Zoom. Adam suggested that it would be better if the committee used a poll to determine when everyone was free. Edward said he will work in the coming weeks with Sandi to draft a report on the committee's thinking about changes to Latin honors. The committee thanked Edward for his leadership and praised their colleagues for their consistently respectful and thoughtful conversation, even when members were not in agreement on a topic.

### **January term**

Adam, referencing a request from the provost's office that every department contribute at least one January term course, said he did not remember making participation mandatory when the committee discussed offering another iteration of the January term. Catherine said last spring the faculty voted to offer another January term, but since then the faculty has not taken responsibility for mounting the courses. Since the faculty voted to offer a January term, she thought it reasonable to ask every department to participate in this iteration, knowing that some departments or programs might not be able to do so. Whether there will be future January terms will be discussed at another time. Adam said he found her explanation cogent and persuasive. Krupa asked how flexible the deadline would be for these decisions. Catherine said she would like this resolved in the next week.

Nicola said several members of her department will be able to mount courses. Catherine noted that she is particularly interested in having more 100-level courses—that is, introductory courses without prerequisites—that will introduce students to the curriculum. Edward said many faculty members find it intimidating to think about compressing their course into three weeks. Perhaps once they have done this one time, they will be willing to participate in the future. Catherine said this was the reason for offering it again this year since a number of faculty taught a January course last year. Several faculty members who have participated in the Liberal Arts Initiative Summer Seminars (LAISS), an Amherst summer program in China, are finding ways to adapt those courses as a January course. She added that

courses can be offered entirely on Zoom or entirely in person. No one will be required to offer a hybrid version.

Adam then asked whether she anticipated that enrollment numbers will remain high, as predicted for next year. Catherine said traditionally the fall has had higher enrollments than the spring. This fall, however, will be higher than normal. At this point, study abroad is looking like it might be a viable option, and this will likely remove some of the anticipated enrollments on campus. The registrar's office is working with departments to schedule introductory courses in a way that will maximize accessibility and avoid bottlenecks to studying in any particular field. Most classes can absorb a few extra students, and she hoped students would consider a broad range of classes. A number of students took a gap semester during COVID, and many of them will graduate as E-grads in January, reducing enrollments in the spring. In addition, study abroad in the spring is likely to return to normal, so she anticipated fewer students will be studying on campus in the spring semester.

Nicola mentioned that, as a consequence of a chairs' meeting, she created a spreadsheet for every instructor who is still welcoming enrollment to their courses to add their classes as a way to assist faculty who are advising students. She sent the link to department chairs, as well as to the Registrar. Edward said this list has been very helpful. Nancy noted that there have also been changes to the Course Scheduler, which now provides an easy way for students to learn about prerequisites for courses in any department.

Edward asked whether Five-College exchange courses will be allowed in the fall. Catherine said the college presidents have not decided whether students will be allowed to travel between campuses and take exchange courses. As a result, no Five-College registrations will be allowed until August. Most of the colleges are anticipating very healthy enrollments in the fall.

Sandi asked whether students will be allowed to reduce their course load in the spring if they enroll in a January course. Catherine said everyone will need to take four courses in the fall. If the January term has robust course offerings, students may be able to take four courses in the fall, one in January, and enroll in just three courses in the spring.

### **Meeting with representatives from the Black Student Union (BSU)**

At 11:30 a.m., Edward welcomed three representatives of the Black Student Union (BSU), Ayodele Lewis, senior chair of the BSU, Zulimah Sawab, junior chair of the BSU, and Sika Essegbey to the meeting. Edward noted that he had sent a copy of the committee's statement to the BSU prior to the meeting.

Ayodele thanked the committee for taking the time to think about the BSU demands and how to implement them. She was disappointed to learn that there could be no official change in policy, although she understood the reasoning behind that outcome. She noted that students sometimes find it hard to navigate individual instructors' policies. There is a similar absence policy for students who want religious exemptions, and as a Jewish student, she has sometimes found these difficult to negotiate. She nevertheless hopes students will find a way for this to work. Zulimah said she had similar thoughts.

Edward noted that the next CEP is committed to continuing to discuss this policy in the fall. The committee has discussed the BSU concerns over several meetings and is particularly reluctant to create a policy that might turn out to be more complicated than the problem it is intended to solve. Nicola added that the CEP has also consulted extensively with faculty members, including a number of Black faculty, about how to proceed, keeping what would be fair to students foremost. The faculty suggested

a variety of ways to look at the policy. The committee cannot dictate to the faculty but needs to make sure that there is a wide campus understanding for both faculty and students on how students learn the best.

Ayodele said students and faculty need to understand each other's needs. The BSU is concerned about students showing up in class when they are not in their best state. The BSU believes there is a need to increase transparency and clarify avenues of communication. Course syllabi should be clear about absence policies and whether these policies are rigid. She understood that pre-tenure faculty are particularly concerned about how students will interpret their policies and said students understand that the policy may be predicated on their need to encounter particular material, such as in a lab.

Krupa explained that pre-tenure faculty are under many pressures, including the need to publish their scholarship. They worry they will receive unfavorable student evaluations if students do not understand the reasons behind their policies. She said it is important to understand their concerns. Zulimah acknowledged that many pre-tenure faculty members are people of color who also need breaks at times. The complication is that when students are not mentally present, they do not feel that they can talk to faculty. She suggested faculty offer 30-minute office hour slots to make it easier for students to obtain help at these times.

Adam reviewed four points that he found concerning. First, while he recognized the experience of students not feeling mentally present, he did not know how to create a category that would accurately capture that experience. A policy needs to be clear and easy to interpret not just now, but some years from now, and he worried about the ways that an indeterminate category might play out in practice. Second, there is a process now, which requires students to negotiate absences with the faculty member, a process that is expected for religious exemptions and that also applies to other situations. He said that he would like to know more about this process before making changes to it. Third, he thought the committee needed to know how widespread the problem might be—the number of courses that are problematic and the number of students who are affected. Fourth, he was concerned about the tendency to characterize greater flexibility in moral terms. He suggested that some faculty sometimes feel they cannot remove material from their course without cutting to the bone. They believe they must supply students with essential information about the discipline, and this limits their ability to be flexible if they are committed to educating students. He suggested that these instructors should be understood to be acting in good faith, and that it would be undesirable to create a policy or even institutional norm that implied that they weren't. He finished by noting that it is hard to legislate for all cases. Some departments are dealing with massive numbers of students and for simple logistical reasons might struggle to offer the personal office hours that were being envisioned by the students.

Ayodele said she appreciated Adam's points. There is a huge diversity of classes and disciplines. Some seminars are offered only once a week, and a student who does not attend such a class will miss a significant portion of the material. Such an absence also means missing discussions with peers which cannot be made up. The hardest part is grappling with the range of diversity within the student body and across courses. For students, one of the biggest challenges is knowing how to interact with deans around attendance. She has taken a range of classes, and some follow a rigid pattern, especially if you miss a lab. Some are creative about this problem. CHEM 151 offers a lab at the end of the semester that allows students to make up a previously missed lab. It would be helpful if this sort of option were available for other coursework.

Zulimah said she thought faculty in STEM areas tend to be stricter about unexcused absences. One of the benefits of Zoom is that hybrid courses have been able to record lectures and post the recordings on their Moodle site. It would be great if this could occur regularly for STEM classes or if class notes in humanities seminars could be posted so students could respond to the class notes on Moodle. She recognized that making the language of a policy that will serve all courses is very difficult. She wondered if it might be helpful for the committee to reach out to the Counseling Center about how to refer to mental health issues.

Cole asked whether they could explain why there needed to be a more universal policy that would apply across all courses at the college and how such a policy would differ from the current policy. Ayodele said a universal policy would remove some of the uncertainty about the process—whether the students should approach the professor or the dean if they need to miss a class. Clarifying this would be helpful, especially since the process currently varies by course. Some courses require the class dean's approval. Some courses allow two classes to be missed, with no questions asked. Some have no policy. Students need to know how to navigate each class, especially when they are in a period of mental crisis. She said she sees now that a universal policy would be more complicated in practice.

Jalen said many course syllabi currently include no explicit attendance policy. Many peer institutions require faculty to include a statement about their attendance policy. One change to college policy would be to ask that all faculty include their attendance policy on their course syllabi. Zulimah said she initially wanted a more flexible universal policy. There are courses now that require proof of a person having died if the student is to be excused from a class. Some instructors seem very unapproachable.

Edward thanked everyone for their participation in the meeting, and the meeting adjourned at 12:04 p.m.