

Committee on Educational Policy
May 5, 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.

Tibetan Studies in India

Edward asked the committee to consider a proposal from Professor Maria Heim to allow Amherst students to receive credit for the Five College Tibetan Studies in India program, run by Smith College as an interterm course. The Religion department would pay the fees for the course to ensure that all students accepted into the program could participate. The course requires that students prepare by participating in six two-hour evening classes at Smith over the fall semester and by completing a substantial reading list. Amherst students have been able to participate in the past but have never been able to receive credit. Since Amherst students are able to take an interterm course for credit this year, Maria asked if they might be able to receive credit for participating in this year's program.

Catherine noted that there will still need to be decisions about whether Five College courses will run normally next year, but she did not think that would affect this decision. Sandi asked whether Amherst will be allowing January courses in the future. If not, she assumed that the CEP could only approve this as credit-bearing for the coming year. Catherine said decisions about future January iterations have not been made, but she was comfortable allowing the course to be taken as credit-bearing this year since the college will be granting credit for other January courses. Krupa added that the committee's approval will also have to be contingent on the state of Covid-19 infections in India next January. The committee expressed support for granting credit for the course for the coming year. Catherine said she would convey the committee's approval to Maria.

Courses

The committee reviewed and approved ten new courses.

Unexcused absences and extensions policy

Edward, noting the committee's philosophical disagreements about unexcused absences, suggested the committee not try to rewrite the policy. Instead, he suggested the committee consider responding to the Black Student Union (BSU) request by issuing a statement of support.

Nicola said she favored a strong exhortative statement asking faculty to take reasonable steps to accommodate students who miss class due to extreme psychological stress and urging students to communicate with their instructors about how to achieve the learning objectives of the course to make up for missed class or work.

Adam suggested a different approach. He thought the committee should explain to students that if professors appear to be strict in their attendance policies, it is not because they are cruel or punitive, but because their good faith dedication to their area of expertise has convinced them that such a policy is the best possible form of education, which in turn they are dedicated to providing. To faculty he suggested issuing a parallel statement reminding them that students may not care how much a faculty member knows until they know how much the faculty member cares, and that a period of great loss is very much a moment to discover or invent still deeper ways and means of expressing care. Perhaps words of this sort, gentler than injunctions and weaker than promises, might provoke thought in students and faculty alike, at a time in the semester when the accumulation of so many words had deadened many to the very idea that words still matter.

Adam and Nicola agreed to create a document combining both approaches. The committee will discuss the language before the next meeting, and Edward will invite the BSU to join the meeting to discuss the statement. Cole disagreed with this approach, saying he thought there needed to be a revised policy, not just a statement, and the policy should recognize the mental health epidemic that students are experiencing at startlingly high rates. While a review of the policies of peer institutions suggests that other schools also tend to deal in similar generalities, he noted that Amherst's current policy does not work for students who desire a more explicit policy allowing time off for mental health.

Adam noted that under current policy faculty members are expected to communicate regularly with the class deans about the mental health of their students. He thought the committee needed more evidence that the current system is not working before revising policy. Edward agreed that the committee needed to hear from the class deans before rushing to make a policy change on the basis of little substantive evidence. He was more inclined to make a statement of support than to propose a change in policy. Adam added that he had directed his thoughts towards the written demands of the BSU. If the issue is one of mental health, not the stress of state violence, he would want to rewrite his statement. Cole said he thought mental health, not state violence, was at the heart of the demands.

Nicola said the CEP could make a statement about mental health and acknowledge students' need to deal with issues of grief and loss. She thought the committee needed to address what is at the core of this with a statement, but not deliver a dictum. These discussions will almost certainly continue next year, and the committee may have more information and time for more thought when it next confronts these concerns. Edward said he would invite members of the BSU to next week's meeting to discuss a potential statement. Krupa encouraged the committee to treat the BSU as partners in addressing the issue.

Grading update

Edward mentioned that he sent a memo to the Committee of Six saying that the CEP strongly endorsed moving away from the 14-point GPA. In his memo he also noted that the CEP believes the faculty would benefit from engaging in a separate discussion about future use of the A+ grade.

Latin honors

Edward returned briefly to the conversation about Latin honors, noting that since the committee was not in agreement on how to move forward, he now thought it should not recommend changes to Latin honors. Adam wondered if it might be possible to communicate the CEP's divided vote on Latin honors to the Committee of Six and invite its opinion on the options that the CEP had considered. Cole, noting that the committee had worked on this all semester and identified changes that many members

supported, asked what would happen if these recommendations were not taken up until next year. Catherine explained that logistically further action on this topic is unlikely to occur before the final faculty meeting and will almost certainly be carried over to the next academic year. Any changes that the faculty votes in the coming year would probably apply to the next entering class rather than to current classes. Sandi said she was uncomfortable pushing this forward. She thought the faculty will want more time to think about this and will feel very rushed.

Anti-racism committee

At 11:30 a.m., the committee welcomed Professors Basu, Cobham-Sander, and Polk, members of the Faculty Leadership Committee for the Anti-Racism Plan. The Faculty Leadership Committee was charged with investigating ways to introduce students to historical issues of race in America; racism's complex legacy; the contributions of Black scholars, artists, and scientists; ways to engage intellectually with issues of race; and the intersection between race and other issues of critical importance in society. The group has now proposed a three-pronged approach: changes to the First-Year Seminar (FYS); adoption of an optional sophomore seminar; an expectation that all programs and departments will both expose their majors to the ways that racism and/or an anti-racist agenda has shaped their disciplines; and an expectation that all departments and programs will address access for students from all racial and ethnic backgrounds to their field or discipline.

Amrita then reviewed some of the questions that the Faculty Leadership Committee is still considering. She noted that the changes to the FYS are part of a pilot project, and the committee has plans to assess the program after its first iteration. The committee has not yet determined who should be charged with oversight for the sophomore seminar—whether it should be the FYS committee or another new committee. If the sophomore seminar were to become a required course, the committee is wondering whether the CEP will have a role in ensuring its success. The committee would also like a mechanism for circulating information.

Edward asked how the sophomore seminar would be staffed and what effect staffing the seminar might have on the open curriculum. Will there be a trial phase? Amrita said the Curriculum Committee also proposed a required sophomore seminar, which had raised issues of staffing. This version of the sophomore seminar, unlike the one proposed by the Curriculum Committee, would not be required of all students. Many courses on issues related to anti-racism are already offered, and these courses could be converted to sophomore seminars, while still qualifying for credit towards a major. She added that the sophomore seminar is envisaged as a pilot and will not be offered until Fall 2022 at the earliest. Rhonda noted that there is no reason not to move forward but there are reasons for not requiring students to enroll in the sophomore seminar.

Nicola praised the work of the committee, saying that she already sees the fruits of the conversation as she works to restructure her FYS to include issues related to anti-racism. She said, however, that she is not the only professor who would find it hard to add an anti-racist curriculum to her other courses to create a sophomore seminar.

Amrita said the committee is imagining that the sophomore seminar topics would be very broad. They could include a focus on the pre-modern as well as the modern and epistemologies that emerge from these ways of thinking, and she expected the courses to be global in perspective, covering the intersections of various forms of structural inequality, defined very broadly. The committee's intention is to bring people together to talk about these issues. For the FYS, faculty will add three modules on anti-

racism— a round table discussion by CHI scholars at the beginning of the semester, a module based on archival work from Mike Kelly in the middle, and a module at the end focused on building community and the racism of the past, with students participating together in a solidarity book project organized by Sonya Clark. Faculty are participating in FYS workshops to help them teach these modules in their seminars.

Cole asked whether the sophomore seminar is envisioned as a class only for sophomores or whether other students might be allowed to participate. Rhonda said it would be just for sophomores. She acknowledged that this would raise an issue for older students if courses of central importance suddenly became unavailable. She regretted that sophomores would miss hearing the perspective of older students, noting that students often bring different stages of development to their thinking about these issues. That said, she noted that the committee still has many decisions ahead, and it is unclear what the courses will look like, but she thought the need for a seminar for sophomores would outweigh some other concerns.

Adam recalled that at some point the faculty had discussed first year seminars and had been concerned about the predominance within these seminars of the humanities and social sciences. He asked how the committee was thinking about this for the sophomore seminar. He supported charging the FYS committee with oversight of the sophomore seminar, if that committee has the bandwidth to do so. Considering the work involved in thesis advising, he said he could not imagine how departments could support all students who want to take on senior honors thesis projects and asked about the thinking behind the recommendation to expand access to thesis work.

Amrita noted that only two faculty members from the sciences are teaching FYS next fall, and they are nervous about including these issues. One suggestion that was made at a meeting of FYS faculty was for faculty who had experience teaching about race to collaborate with them when teaching. This issue needs more thought because curricular questions concerning race and racism are more integral to the humanities and social sciences than to the natural sciences. As for senior thesis work, students are concerned that there are big disparities across departments in the extent of support they provide for honors students and the flexibility they offer for students who would like to work with faculty in other departments. Departments and programs will need to address a range of questions about expanding access to thesis work and other capstone projects. Rhonda said one group that is working with the Center for Teaching and Learning will think about how students learn in an interdisciplinary course, and this could perhaps lead to new ways to work across divisions around a common aspiration.

Edward asked if the committee has thought about how these proposals will affect FTE requests. He noted that this year's cluster hiring begins to address the ability of departments and programs to teach about these topics and asked if the committee had other thoughts. Rhonda said there are clearly departments that do not have the capacity to take on anything new, a consequence of how FTEs have been structured in the past. If the CEP could find a way to honor FTEs for these kinds of projects and allow other departments to participate—similar to what had been done to promote writing instruction under the Committee on Academic Priorities—that could help support the changes. Amrita agreed that these proposals all have important implications for staffing. She also pointed out that the anti-racism committee is an ad hoc committee that will terminate its work at the end of the semester. Someone will need to ensure the continuity of these initiatives and assume oversight, and there will need to be a mechanism for sharing information in the future. She welcomed guidance.

Nicola said she had participated in the Mellon seminars for sophomores. Those research seminars were very successful. She thought the sophomore experience needed nourishing and supported the case for a sophomore seminar, noting that sophomores and juniors are developmentally quite different. Amrita noted that the college has some high enrollment courses on these topics, and these might not be appropriate to restrict to sophomores, but there are also a number of courses that address these topics that are frequently under-enrolled. Converting these to sophomore seminars could boost their enrollment and attract students who might not otherwise find them.

Adam thought the notion of speaking across difference was of particular importance and said there is a great demand for this skill. He would love to see all Amherst students graduate with the skills of rhetoric and persuasion, capable of speaking across racial and other forms of division, a goal that could be obtained with a couple of good courses on public speaking and the Introduction to Black Studies course that emphasized these skills. He could imagine a public speaking requirement that might be the sophomore seminar's equivalent to the emphasis on writing in the first year seminar. Khary said he liked the shared goal that would be embedded in this idea and said the committee is hoping to find a way for these conversations to continue.

Amrita mentioned that in the first iteration the committee had suggested a point-counterpoint model. Some faculty did not like that idea. When asked what skills faculty would like students to acquire, some noted the importance of public speaking as a skill. The FYS, initially tasked with teaching writing, has become overburdened. The sophomore seminar could focus on analytical skills through public speaking. Rhonda said she thought the faculty was embracing the challenge of integrating these ideas.

Edward thanked the visitors who departed at 12:06 p.m.

Latin honors, continued

Returning to the issue of Latin honors, Adam said there were good reasons to be concerned about grade compression becoming more acute as a result of recent policy changes. He wondered how much more needed to be said about Latin honors and urged the committee to send its recommendation, divided as it was, to the Committee of Six. He noted that the faculty may still need to grapple with honors inflation if this recommendation is to be adopted, but he thought this issue might be ready for debate by a larger body.

Catherine said she too thought the CEP might be ready to complete its work on Latin honors and send a recommendation to the Committee of Six. Before sending it on, however, the committee will need to write a full report, including a well-argued justification for why Latin honors requires changes. She did not think the faculty would have time to look at this before its final meeting on June 8, 2021, but she thought it reasonable to bring the CEP discussion of Latin honors to a conclusion.

Edward said he would create a document on the shared drive for others to edit but admitted that he was reluctant to bring even more issues to the faculty at this point, since the committee is already asking the faculty to address changes to the GPA and the use of the A+ grade. He did not think the commencement faculty meeting provided a good forum for debating substantive issues like a change to Latin honors. He said he was stuck on the mechanics of Latin honors and shared Sandi's concern about the timing. Catherine said the decision should not be dictated by the timing. If the CEP is ready to write a good justification, it should send it to the Committee of Six. She agreed with Edward that it would be unrealistic to think the issue will be finished this year but she did not think that was a reason for not sending the committee's recommendation forward.

Upcoming work

Edward said he would work with the next CEP chair to ensure that this work on Latin honors gets out of the committee in a reasonable form that contains all the information needed for a full debate and will write to the Committee of Six after the committee has discussed the draft. He will consult with Cole and Jalen about members of the BSU who should be invited to the final CEP meeting on May 12th. Adam and Nicola will discuss whether their statements can be married into a single statement and post the final document for the committee to discuss at that meeting.

The meeting adjourned at 12:15 p.m.