

Committee on Educational Policy

November 10, 2022

In attendance: Faculty: Robert Benedetto, Chair; Sandra Burkett; Mekhola Gomes; Chris Kingston; Geoffrey Sanborn. Students: Isaiah Doble '25; Zane Khiry '25; Gent Malushaga '25. Recorder: Nancy Ratner, Director of Academic Projects.

Rob Benedetto, chair, called the meeting to order at 8:30 a.m. and the committee approved the minutes from the previous meeting.

Course Proposals

The committee approved one new course proposal for the spring semester.

Latin Honors Responses

Rob asked the committee to review a draft letter to the Faculty Executive Committee (FEC) to make sure it accurately reflected the committee's beliefs. The committee suggested a few revisions and approved the letter.

Faculty Meeting Time

Rob next asked the committee to return to its discussion of a daytime slot for faculty meetings. At the last meeting the committee had raised several possible times—Fridays at 2 or 3 p.m., Wednesdays at 1-3 p.m., or another weekday at 4 p.m. The committee thought the time would depend on whether the FEC is interested primarily in finding a suitable time during the day for faculty meetings or whether the FEC is hoping to identify a time that could serve both for faculty meetings and also for a community meeting hour, which is a far more complicated task. The committee noted that, since the faculty meetings occur only a few times a semester, a block set aside for those meetings could also serve other faculty purposes, such as department meetings. If the FEC says that the intersection with student schedules is not paramount, the committee suggested Rob try to ascertain the suitability of the afternoon times.

Rob said he would draft a letter to the FEC asking about the relative importance of finding a time that could also serve as a community meeting hour. If the FEC is primarily interested in identifying a faculty meeting time, he will then write to stakeholders, including the director of athletics, faculty in the performing arts, department chairs, and Jesse Barba, to get feedback about these options.

Pass/Fail Policy Revisions

Rob next asked the committee to return to its discussion of how to revise the pass/fail policy (p/f). At the last meeting, the committee was considering three possible deadlines for requiring p/f declarations: moving the deadline earlier, probably between the eighth and tenth week of the semester; retaining the current deadline of the final week of the semester; or delaying the deadline until after students know their grades. The committee also agreed at the last meeting that the declaration should require multiple written signatures, including that of the instructor.

Chris said requiring the instructor's signature would allow the instructor to state a p/f policy at the beginning of the semester, including requiring students to declare p/f during add/drop. Sandi thought the committee should ask the class deans how they would feel about allowing instructors to declare their own deadlines. Zane said add/drop is very early for such an important decision and did not support allowing instructors to impose their own deadlines. Rob agreed with Chris and Sandi that requiring instructor permission effectively allows instructors to impose their own rules. He thought both options should be considered by the committee. Sandi said the deans want flexibility and want it to be clear whether a student is eligible or not. She was not sure she would support requiring instructor permission, but thought that instructors should be informed.

Geoff asked about the motivation for changing the policy. Rob said he had received multiple complaints from faculty about large numbers of students asking for their current course grades just before the end of the term, an indication that they are using the p/f policy primarily to protect their GPA rather than to support curricular exploration, the goal of the program, as explained in a letter to the CEP. Geoff said, as an instructor, he would not want to judge whether the student needs p/f and would sign off if any student requested it. He said he would want to be notified that a student was taking a course p/f but did not need to be asked for permission. Sandi said she was concerned that an instructor might prevent a student from taking a course p/f despite the student having a good reason which the student did not want to reveal to the instructor. Chris said that under the previous system, because p/f courses do not count towards the economics major, the department had not allowed students to take the introductory course p/f until the second semester of their junior year, in case they decided to continue in the field. He supported requiring a conversation with the instructor. Sandi said that was effectively an argument against allowing students to declare p/f at the end of the semester.

Rob said the only stated reasons for having a p/f policy at all are to explore the curriculum (a decision that a student could reasonably make by the end of add/drop) or to allow a dean to assist a student who lands in trouble later in the semester. Gent argued that, for him, all courses are exploratory in the first two years. Many students arrive at college without knowing what they want to study. He urged the committee to avoid setting an early deadline.

Chris said there is no deadline needed if the decision requires the instructor's permission. This frees the instructor to decide on a case-by-case basis whether to approve the conversion to p/f. An instructor might, for example, feel differently about a struggling student who has been attending and working hard than one who has been absent and unengaged. The committee then discussed an alternative approach: require the permission of either the instructor or the class dean, and inform both the instructor and dean of the decision. Geoff argued for including the advisor in this decision, since the advisor is in a position to look at the student's transcript and discuss with the student possible repercussions of accumulating too many p/f courses. Sandi noted that the dean needs to be able to approve p/f for a student who is experiencing a crisis. She did not want to see an instructor stand in the way if the dean approves the decision.

Rob proposed a policy that would retain the current deadline (the last day of classes) but require two physical signatures on a paper form, one from the student's advisor and the other from either the course instructor or the class dean. The advisor, instructor, and class dean would all be informed of the p/f declaration. The committee supported this approach and suggested running this proposal by the deans.

The committee briefly returned to the question of whether p/f should be allowed after academic dishonesty, and, if not, whether the policy needed to state explicitly that a p/f declaration would not be allowed in such a case. Sandi said the impact of a transgression is usually decided at the time of the adjudication committee's decision. She did not favor a policy that required a particular outcome. Rob said that having the language in the College Handbook could remove pressure from the instructor but would still allow the professor to determine the penalty at times. The committee noted that the deans want faculty to report transgressions. Not all penalties should result in a student failing the class. The committee also noted that at times the adjudication process is not completed until after the semester ends. Rob said he would ask the class deans whether the policy should include an explicit line making a course ineligible for p/f if the student has engaged in academic dishonesty. The committee then further amended the policy language, and Rob said he would ask the deans their opinion about this amended policy:

The aim of the pass-fail (P/F) option is to encourage students to take intellectual risks, to explore the breadth of Amherst's open curriculum, and to reward students for engaging fully in all their courses. Under this option, students may elect to **TAKE AT MOST** one course per semester, ~~and no more than four courses over four years,~~ pass-fail. **TO DECLARE A COURSE PASS-FAIL, A STUDENT MUST OBTAIN A WRITTEN SIGNATURE FROM THEIR ADVISOR(S) AND FROM EITHER THE INSTRUCTOR OR THE CLASS DEAN AND SUBMIT THE A-COMPLETED** pass-fail **FORM TO THE REGISTRAR'S OFFICE** ~~requires the permission of the student's advisor(s) and must be made~~ before the first day of the exam period. **THE INSTRUCTOR, CLASS DEAN, AND ADVISOR(S) WILL BE NOTIFIED AFTER A P/F DECLARATION HAS BEEN FILED.**

If a student designates a course pass-fail, the student's transcript will have a "P" recorded in the case of passing grades ("D" or higher). No grade-point equivalent will be assigned to a "P." If the letter grade assigned by the instructor is an "F," an "F" will be recorded on the student's transcript and will count toward the student's GPA and class rank. Once students have declared a course pass-fail, they cannot later opt for the grade. Students admitted as first-year students may elect the pass-fail option four times during their Amherst College career. Transfer students admitted as sophomores shall have three pass-fail options, and those admitted as juniors shall have two.

Students may not take a first-year seminar pass-fail. **A STUDENT WHO HAS BEEN FOUND RESPONSIBLE FOR ACADEMIC DISHONESTY IS NOT ELIGIBLE TO USE THE PASS-FAIL OPTION IN THAT COURSE.** Departments and programs may decide not to accept courses taken on a pass-fail basis in fulfillment of major requirements. Each department's and program's policy on accepting pass-fail grades toward major requirements must be included in the Amherst College Catalog and in other departmental and program materials.

Course Policies

Rob turned next to the broad issue of course caps, course levels, and the course schedule. Should the committee provide some general guidelines with default caps for particular types of courses? Should there be a way to require departments to distribute their courses across levels? Should there be rules about course bunching?

Sandi said one place to start might be courses that meet for three hours, once a week. She asked the purpose of these courses, and whether the committee could provide guidelines with the appropriate uses for these time slots.

Chris said the biggest question for him is how departments distribute their courses across levels and enrollment levels relative to caps across their offerings. He thought the committee needed to have a better picture of the distribution of course caps, which currently seem very idiosyncratic and unsystematic, and how many and which of the caps are binding so that students are turned away. He asked that Jesse provide information on the distribution of course caps broken down by divisions and course levels, with both the caps and the average enrollment for those caps. For example, if many courses are being offered at the 400-level with small enrollments, while students are being cut from the rosters in lower-level courses—making it more difficult for the students to advance to eventually taking the upper-level courses—then being able to show and quantify the problem would be crucial to gain support for any proposed solution.

The meeting adjourned at 9:50.