

Committee on Educational Policy (CEP)

November 17, 2015

In attendance: Faculty: David S. Hall, chair; Alexander George; Caroline Goutte; Klára Móricz; Sean Redding. Catherine Epstein, dean. Students: Samuel Keaser '16, Rashid (Chico) Kosber '17; Steven Ryu '16. Recorder: Nancy Ratner, Associate Dean of Admission and Researcher for Academic Projects.

David Hall, Chair of the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP), called to order the CEP meeting at 3:00 p.m. in the Physics and Astronomy Meeting Room (Merrill Science Center 222) and the committee approved the minutes of the meeting of November 10, 2015.

Updates

David suggested the committee begin with a discussion of the events of the past week. Sam thanked the committee members who had participated in the recent student-faculty conversations and reported that he is serving on the academic policy working group of Amherst Uprising. The working group is very interested in having a program or department in Latin American, Caribbean, and Latinx Studies, and wants it to be established outside the American Studies department, with its own distinct group of faculty and curricular requirements. The group also wants to expand the Asian Languages and Civilizations (ASLC) major to include tracks for Korean Studies and Middle Eastern Studies. The working group believes that the current ASLC focus on East Asian Studies is not sufficiently broad and would like to see the department's offerings modeled after the Classics department, which offers separate streams for Latin and Greek, in addition to Classics. The working group also wants more faculty to be involved with affinity groups—Asian Student Association, Black Students Union, La Causa, etc.—and wants the groups to have staff to manage the minutiae involved in event organizing. These are roles that Mariana Cruz had previously taken on, and the groups miss her support.

David noted that, as related to the faculty, the students also said they want a reconsideration of the four-year model to graduation, with more time to finish their degrees, and a first-year seminar (FYS) program that will include components on cultural competency. David also noted the students' opinion that diversity should not be viewed as an added measure but instead should be central to the academic program.

Klára said it will be really important to hear from students at the evening forum. Catherine said she was hoping that students would discuss what is contributing to student stress at the forum. Is it academics? Other things? Are there practices that might help students succeed that the faculty should consider? She is planning this as a listening session.

Chico wondered whether the structure of science, technology, and math (STEM) courses could be altered so the courses could more effectively meet the needs of all students. In helping students in introductory chemistry courses, it appeared to him that they reward students from the highest performing high schools and disadvantage those from high schools with fewer college preparatory courses; he wondered if there could be different tracks for students who had not had previous exposure to the material. He also thought the college should assign tutors earlier in the semester, preferably

before students were failing a course. David said that physics offers two tracks at the introductory level but has no mechanism for excluding students who are over-qualified from the lower level course.

Steven observed that STEM courses that are offered above the introductory level often include few underrepresented minorities. Catherine said it was her impression that the number of underrepresented minority students who are taking courses in STEM fields aren't actually that different from those in the college as a whole. Sean suggested gathering the statistics on how many students of color change their minds about as a STEM major. Klára said students changing their interests may simply reflect a natural progression when they arrive at college. Steven noted that science courses require the greatest time commitment. Low income students often have jobs on campus, so the additional time required for advanced lab courses represents a real burden to them.

The committee expressed an interest in seeing statistics on underrepresented minorities in the STEM fields, aggregated by demographic group. What are the students' goals when they arrive? How many of those who state an interest in STEM fields persist in the STEM fields? Sean cautioned that there is a limit to what the CEP can do vis-à-vis departments and how they structure their individual major requirements. Catherine said it was her impression that the percentage of underrepresented minority students who take courses in STEM fields is not much lower than it is for those in the college as a whole. The committee agreed that sharing this type of data with students might be useful for the students. Caroline said she thought a broad range of students are interested in medicine, often with considerable success, which is again something students should know. Klára thought one problem for students is that their perception of how they are doing is often flawed. Many would be helped if they understood that they are not alone in their struggles. Sam thought students were very interested in the statistics about students in STEM, and wondered if they could meet with IR to get a better grasp of the situation.

David tentatively raised the issue of college advising and said that he regretted that the recommendations of the Ad Hoc Advising Committee had received such brief consideration. Sam observed that some faculty have much heavier advising burdens than others. Steven thought this was because students of color tended to seek out mentors who were like them. He wondered whether first-year students could request someone of their own background. Catherine pointed out that the college does not have enough faculty of color to satisfy those requests.

Catherine reported that the Curriculum Committee is also examining advising and has discussed whether advising should be considered during tenure and promotion conversations. Klára wondered how advising could be evaluated, since no one observes a faculty member's advising. Catherine said the college could solicit letters from students on their advising experience with a faculty member. Alex wondered why this wasn't already done at tenure time. Student advisees could be invited to write about their experience with a faculty member; many students might otherwise have no voice in the assessment of a faculty member who has provided considerable assistance.

Klára worried that it would be unfair to compare advisors who have heavy advising loads with those with fewer advisees. She agreed with Sam that some faculty—especially women faculty—are sought out for advice often more than others, and faculty women of color are sought out at an even higher rate.

She noted that there was no practical way for faculty members with high advising loads to have conversations that are meaningful and pointed out that some large universities, like Columbia, use professional staff to advise their students, though she conceded that they might not be as effective as faculty. David recalled that the faculty had voted overwhelmingly in a survey a few years ago to retain control over pre-major advising. Caroline thought it might be useful to separate out two goals: first to think about ways to acknowledge advising efforts and loads, and then secondly to think about evaluating them; she felt that evaluating advising would be very difficult, but that this should not delay developing a practice of recognizing advising loads, something she thought would be easier to develop and would send the message to faculty that advising is important and recognized. The CEP asked to see the advising report that was written by the ad hoc committee.

Senior faculty evaluations

Committee members reported a few problems with the software for collecting senior faculty course evaluations and recommended the faculty be advised that there may be some glitches initially with the software. Alex also suggested creating a feedback button so faculty can report any glitches they experience and include buttons both on the web page where faculty customize questions and also on the web page where faculty read the students' comments. David said he would share these suggestions with Howie Hanna in IT.

Proposal to allow early participation in commencement exercises

David next shared a revised proposal for allowing students to participate in graduation if the student is within four courses of completing the requirements and said this revision has received the support of the registrar. Klára suggested he soften the language about "no exceptions," given the need for flexibility with disability issues. She thought that language was probably unnecessary since a committee will review every case.

David asked for alternative ways to state who would be eligible to participate. The criteria specify that it will be limited to students who are scheduled to graduate one semester after their original graduation date, who are four or fewer courses from completing the degree and have no disciplinary violations in their academic record. Several suggested he provide an example. The committee approved the substance of the policy and recommended forwarding the proposal, with the recommended changes, to the Committee of Six. Sean suggested including the demographic data about students who graduate as E students as compared to the whole student body in the cover letter, and Alex suggested, in the interests of inclusiveness, changing the language about "walking" at commencement to "participation."

College Calendar

David next turned to the issue of assignments that occur over reading period. Those assignments are governed by inconsistent language that needs to be aligned. According to the Faculty Handbook, section IV.F, instructors may choose to hold no examination, a take-home examination "to be taken at any time during the examination period," a self-scheduled exam, or a scheduled exam. In IV.G, the Handbook

declares that “all course work in a given semester must be submitted by the last day of classes at 5:00 p.m.”

In contrast, the Catalog language, which was updated in 2006 without faculty vote in the belief that it was just a clarification of current policy, states that “no extension of time is allowed for papers, examinations and laboratory or any other course work other than final examinations, papers, and projects beyond the date of the last scheduled class period of the semester unless an extension is granted in writing by both the instructor and Class Dean.” This suggests that papers and projects can be assigned before, and continue through, the reading period. David pointed out that the faculty handbook language suggested that the intent of the reading period was to establish a brief window without assignments for the purpose of preparing for exams; and he proposed that the college should preserve that time for its intended purpose.

Catherine said that would mean that final papers could be assigned only on the first day of the exam period and would be due on the last day of the exam period. In practice, this would prevent faculty from assigning a paper near the end of the classes with a due date sometime during the exam period. Papers thus could not be written over the reading period, a typical practice for humanities classes. Sean noted that in her field, final papers are often written in lieu of exams, so it is common for faculty to assign those during that period. Catherine added that the policy in the Faculty Handbook was written for a different era when assigning final papers was not as ubiquitous as it is now.

Caroline and David thought the change in practice might be linked to the proposal to shorten the semester. In particular, perhaps the pressure on the length of the semester is a result of the need for a longer reading period to accommodate papers and projects, whereas a shorter reading period might serve if it were actually a brief pause in academic activities. David also wondered if permitting assignments to continue during the reading period was an example of something that has ratcheted up student workload over time. Catherine thought it might be more reflective of changing patterns of assignments. Final exams in the humanities are very unusual now. Sean agreed. They thought it worth having a broader faculty discussion about this, noting that these issues are related to issues of stress. Moreover, no matter how the matter is settled, the policy should be matched to practice and the two policies reconciled.

Caroline said the spring semester is the thesis semester, so she worried that shortening the semester will increase stress for a large proportion of students. Given the dramatic differences between courses that use exams and those that have final research papers, she wondered if the 14th week could be used for writing final papers -- for the courses that have them -- while courses that don't do final papers could hold classes through the 14th week. Klára said she liked the idea of a having flexible approach with a swing week, but student members thought that if students were faced with 13-week courses and 14-week courses, over time students would choose to avoid the 14-week courses (which would probably mean avoiding science courses). Sean thought the College Council might be considering allowing the final week to be used for thesis presentations and other final projects. Chico wondered why it would be necessary to shorten the college calendar for that purpose since faculty members can already use the time in the reading period to write papers. He then asked whether a variable length semester would

violate issues of fairness if science faculty were typically teaching for more weeks than other faculty. Caroline said the structure of science courses is already so different from that of other fields that this would not represent a major change, but she agreed that students might resent the sciences for holding class longer. Sam worried that asking that papers be due on the last day of class would further exacerbate the differences between science courses and other courses.

The meeting adjourned at 4:33 pm.