

Committee on Educational Policy

November 17, 2022

In attendance: Faculty: Robert Benedetto, Chair; Sandra Burkett; Mekhola Gomes; Chris Kingston; Geoffrey Sanborn. Provost and Dean of the Faculty: Catherine Epstein, ex officio. Students: Isaiah Doble '25; Gent Malushaga '25. Recorder: Nancy Ratner, Director of Academic Projects.

Rob Benedetto, chair, called the meeting to order at 8:30 a.m. The committee approved the minutes from the previous meeting. Catherine said the committee will need an additional faculty member for the spring semester. The Faculty Executive Committee (FEC) has nominated one, but that individual is scheduled to teach next semester during the committee's regular meeting time. The committee agreed to meet next semester on Thursdays from 2:30-4:00 p.m. to accommodate the new member's schedule.

Updates

Rob reported that, in accordance with the committee's wishes, he had informed the two faculty members who had asked to reduce the cap on their sophomore seminar that the committee had denied the request since students had already pre-registered for the course; imposing a cap at this juncture would have violated policy.

Pass/fail proposal

Rob welcomed Jesse Barba to the meeting and turned to the committee's proposed revisions to the pass/fail (P/F) policy. Rob said he had shared the committee's proposed revisions with the class deans and drawn their attention, in particular, to the change in who would be required to sign the P/F declaration and the sentence in the final paragraph that would bar students found guilty of academic dishonesty from using the P/F option for that course. The class deans said they would prefer requiring signatures from the instructor and the advisor, removing the class dean's signature from this process. They thought the sentence about academic dishonesty would be problematic since many academic dishonesty cases are not resolved until after the end of the semester. They suggested instead that the P/F declaration form state the following:

This option is available to students who either took the opportunity to explore the curriculum, but whose expectation was not as successful as they might have hoped (meaning they expect to end the course with a grade of C or D, or students who have encountered unanticipated personal or health challenges. **It is not normally meant to be instituted by students in a class in which they have been involved in cases related to academic dishonesty.**

The deans included "not normally" because they did not think the prohibition should apply if a student were found not guilty and thought this would help students, advisors, and the instructor understand the intentions of the policy. The committee thought the deans' suggestion of including the words "not normally" would just create problems and preferred a form with a simple declaration of P/F without further explanation.

The committee agreed that class deans were not worried about intransigent faculty and trusted that faculty would listen to their concerns if a student were facing a crisis. It now appeared that the class deans preferred to be removed from the process at other times. Geoff, returning to the original reason

for changing the policy, said the goal was to reduce the burden on faculty of being asked to calculate grades shortly before the end of the semester. He thought it surprising that students were unable to calculate their standing in the course themselves and wondered if this change would reduce these demands. He said he preferred just informing instructors that they had the right to refuse to calculate grades for this purpose. Rob thought the paper signature would create an obstacle that might reduce students' requests for grade calculations. Gent explained that grades in many classes are based on a curve, and this is why students cannot calculate their grades on their own. Jesse added that class deans are often unaware of academic dishonesty cases and believe instructors are in a better position to know about such cases.

Gent asked why the committee had reduced the requirement from three signatures to two. Sandi explained that students select P/F for two reasons—they have academic concerns and/or they are experiencing a crisis. She had been concerned that the faculty member might be unaware of a student's particular story, but she was satisfied that while the class deans would not override the instructor, they would be aware of a crisis and would attempt to influence the instructor's decision.

Geoff said the complication with academic dishonesty is that it is not easy to prove and instructors are often uncertain about the likely outcome. He said he would prefer having those involved in investigating the case be the ones who would decide the penalty, which could include that the course could not be completed under the P/F option. Jesse imagined a case in which the penalty was failing the assignment; he did not think the student should then not be allowed to use the P/F option. If the case is sufficiently egregious, he said the penalty should be that the student fails the course. Rob said he thought the policy (and the form) should be simple and straightforward. He did not support stating the purpose of P/F and its unacceptable use in cases of academic dishonesty on the form and suggested addressing those aspects in future years if it becomes clear that there is a problem. For now, he recommended changing only two aspects of the policy—adding the instructor to the required signatures on the P/F declaration and requiring that those signatures be on paper. Others agreed. He suggested that the following policy revision was now ready to be sent to the FEC:

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, STUDENTS MUST OBTAIN WRITTEN SIGNATURES FROM THEIR ADVISOR(S) AND FROM THE COURSE INSTRUCTOR 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.

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. 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.

Homework policy

Catherine said she thought faculty should not be assigning graded work over break and asked the committee if it wished to propose legislation on this topic. Rob said he could see reasonable arguments for barring due dates during breaks but asked when the break officially ended, noting that restrictions on when homework can be due could potentially obstruct the ability of instructors to teach appropriately. The committee agreed that work could be due after the final Sunday of break, but should not generally be due before then. The committee thought it should be cautious about legislating this issue. Instead, members asked Catherine to send a message encouraging faculty to avoid due dates during breaks when planning their syllabi and send reminders to faculty closer to the breaks themselves.

Time slot for faculty meetings

Returning to a daytime faculty meeting schedule, Rob reported that he had asked the FEC for greater clarity on whether the community hour was intended as a more peripheral feature, making good use of the time in weeks when no faculty meeting is scheduled, or a more central aspect of the charge. The FEC indicated that it was primarily interested in finding a suitable time slot when faculty meetings could be held during the workday. Rob said this means that the committee should now focus on Fridays at either 2:00 p.m. or 3:00 p.m. Catherine said the 2:00-4:00 p.m. slot would be preferable.

Sandi said her department would lose one lab section but could schedule its Friday afternoon labs so they would be taught by instructors who do not attend faculty meetings. Catherine said those could include both instructional staff and also visitors, since neither generally attend faculty meetings. Sandi added that her department's seminar series, known as "Cheminars," are currently scheduled for 3:30 p.m. on Fridays, and rescheduling these would be more problematic. Catherine noted that the College might move to a more formalized calendar. If the College agreed on a daytime schedule for faculty meetings and moved to a more formalized calendar, departments would be expected not to schedule other commitments on those Friday afternoons, but departments could schedule events on the other Friday afternoons.

Rob, noting that the charge had asked for a block of time, asked whether the committee wished to consider other times; besides Friday afternoons, some peer institutions use late afternoon meetings (i.e., starting after 4:00 p.m., running until almost 6:00 p.m.), and others use lunch meetings limited to one hour. Catherine noted that the FEC did not consider after 4:00 p.m. to be a daytime slot. Several committee members thought that lunch time would be too confining, since the meeting would be boxed in between classes on either end. Jesse said a lunch time meeting would be very problematic for the dining hall, compressing everyone into a tight time period. Blocking out Fridays at 2:00 p.m. would result in a denser schedule, with a non-trivial impact on available classrooms, and would impact arts classes. In general, he said faculty either need to teach in more time slots (including later in the afternoon) or the College will need to build more classrooms. Geoff asked about piloting some other blocks. Fridays offer the fewest options, but they tend to be underutilized.

Jesse said there was at one time a late afternoon block, but it created a lot of problems. Even a 15-minute overlap between classes removes possible rooms. He was reluctant to fix Fridays at the expense of Mondays and Wednesdays or to make students choose between curricular and extracurricular activities. Scheduling faculty meetings at 2:00-4:00 p.m. on Fridays would have an impact on courses taught on Fridays at 2:00-3:50 p.m., although that slot could be used for courses taught by visitors and instructional staff.

The committee noted the significant growth in the use of 80-minute slots and asked about additional 80-minute slots. Jesse said over 50% of courses are now scheduled in 80-minute slots. Any further changes, however, would create problems for courses taught in the 50-minute slots. Rob said the committee seemed to be leaning towards Friday afternoons for faculty meetings.

Guidelines for course proposals

Rob then turned to how departments cap courses and distribute courses across levels. Jesse provided data on the last five years, noting that 66% of all courses now cap enrollment, but the practice varies significantly across divisions. While 67% of math and science courses and 90% of social science courses have enrollment caps and just 59% of courses in the humanities have caps, the caps themselves differ. Course caps at the 100-level in STEM fields average 34.6 students and those in the social sciences average 29.5, while caps for humanities courses at the 100-level average 23 students. These differences continue across each course level. And while humanities courses rarely meet their cap, and enrollments in STEM and social science courses more frequently meet the caps, the reality is that just under a quarter of all courses have enrollments at or close to their cap. Jesse also pointed to unofficial caps. After pre-registration, the registrar assigns a room to the course, and this effectively caps enrollment. Instructor permission can also serve as a cap. He cautioned, however, that caps may not be the operative question since increasing the cap will not necessarily increase the enrollment.

Catherine said the committee is particularly interested in the number of 100- and 200-level courses versus 300- and 400-level courses. Jesse agreed with this focus, saying that the proliferation of upper-level courses is a more critical issue. He noted that 80% of majors took a course in their major field during their first year. If departments fail to provide enough courses at the introductory level, they will not attract majors.

Geoff noted that the average enrollment across all courses—capped and uncapped—is 17.8 students (13.4 in the humanities, 25.6 in science and math, and 22.8 in social sciences). He wondered if the letter inviting proposals for new courses for the next academic year should adjust its average class size accordingly, stating that classes need to accommodate on average 18 students, not 20. Jesse said the reason for asking faculty to cap their courses at 20 is to accommodate the late-breaking changes made during add/drop. Geoff thought the committee should revisit the paragraphs on caps and on levels. The pressure of student demand is the greater pressure. Jesse said he thought it was important for departments to meet the demand for introductory class work with interesting and accessible classes. Departments need to be strategic about the openness of their curriculum.

The meeting adjourned at 9:50 a.m.