

**Committee on Educational Policy
November 18, 2020**

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: Cole 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 November 11, 2020.

Course solicitation letter

The committee reviewed possible drafts of a letter soliciting new courses and revisions to ongoing courses and suggested adding information about the origin and rationale for adding a required section on course expectations. This section was recommended by the ad hoc committee on student learning which had been charged with addressing issues of accessibility as concerns our curriculum for students with accommodations.

Cluster hiring proposal

Catherine next presented a proposal to the committee in which the CEP would invite departments to propose potential fields for cluster hires that might attract a more diverse pool of faculty. These could include topics such as Literature and Race, Law and Race, History and Race. The CEP would vet the proposals and select a few, with the goal of broadly advertising for as many as six to nine hires across all ranks. The FTE lines would come from the three remaining senior hires available for Black and LatinX faculty, as well as FTE lines that are or will become available in the coming years as a result of upcoming departures and retirements.

Catherine suggested this would provide both a recruiting and also a retention tool, since incoming professors would see themselves as part of a broader initiative on campus and would have a cohort for sharing intellectual interests. She noted that the college has done this in the past with some success in the areas of Native and LatinX studies and said it would likely play out over a number of years, beginning in the next hiring year, although it could be considered this year if the FTEs proposed are conducive to such a cluster hire.

In response to questions, Catherine said this would not be exclusively for senior hires, unlike the earlier senior faculty diversity hiring initiative and would provide some flexibility in hiring. The committee thought it was an attractive approach for bringing in a cohort of junior scholars. Catherine also clarified that this would neither commit the department to the cluster if the candidate declines the offer, nor close off opportunities for other hiring. If a department subsequently came forward with a strong candidate, she assured the committee that she and the president would work with the CEP to support the hire.

Asked whether this proposal could affect the historical balance of how FTEs are allocated across departments, Catherine said she did not expect that to happen. While some departments can be more flexible about their lines than others, she expected that the general balance of FTE lines across humanities and social science departments would remain intact.

Several members of the committee expressed concern about how this proposal might be utilized by the sciences, where enrollment pressures have been most acute. They pointed out that this initiative would likely expand humanities FTEs, an area in which enrollments are declining, and do so possibly at the expense of the sciences, which may need them more. The committee also wondered how departments would find partners with overlapping interests. Catherine said she would facilitate conversations between departments. As for concern about STEM areas, she explained that she expected at least six new FTEs to come online as a result of the current campaign, and some of these will be dedicated to the sciences or quantitative areas. The departures of two African American scholars are anticipated in the next year, and this would likely free up two FTEs in the humanities and social sciences, and this would help maintain the historical balance.

Committee members were confident that students of color who major in the humanities and social sciences would greatly appreciate having more faculty of color, and they predicted that white faculty and students would also benefit from hearing other world views. The idea of creating a larger cohort struck the committee as a powerful tool, whether the faculty are teaching together or just part of a larger community. One member noted that when departments add new faculty of color, the departments may change direction, and this can bring new life to a department.

Student members were sympathetic to the concerns about the sciences, especially given the disparate numbers of students of color majoring in science departments. Faculty of color can help shepherd students through a major. The students were supportive of finding ways for the college to bring more faculty of color to the sciences.

Members of the committee asked Catherine about the goal: is it to hire faculty who identify as people of color or faculty whose thematic area would address race? Catherine said the goal is to hire the best person for the college, and while this could, of course, result in hiring white faculty, since all eligible candidates will be considered, the department will be focusing on broader needs of the college. The senior diversity positions, since they were never advertised, were able to proceed by different rules, considering only faculty of color.

Asked whether this could bring in spousal hires, Catherine said it could include partner hires. Asked again how the college could hire a more diverse STEM faculty, Catherine said the college is pursuing as many strategies as possible. It tries to advertise in particular ways to attract faculty of color. The college has also been privileging science faculty when making offers to visitors through the Consortium for Faculty Diversity (CFD), and while the CFD hires have helped build a pipeline, hiring diverse faculty in the sciences remains challenging.

The committee noted that the cluster model is normal in higher education but worried that the benefits might not accrue to the sciences, since the college is limited by legal search requirements. Networking tends to be the most proactive way to attract people of color in some fields. Science departments can also target areas of scholarly interest that tend to be populated with more candidates of color, but departments will be reluctant to prioritize those areas if doing so will replace a more essential area of the curriculum. The committee noted that it is difficult to identify a research area in the sciences that will particularly attract faculty of color. The college will need to have available other positions in the FTE pool for addressing enrollment pressures and essential curricular areas. Catherine assured the committee that it is not the intention of this proposal to replace essential fields or deny departments needed faculty.

Turning to the time table, Catherine said she would like the CEP to send a letter to the faculty this fall to encourage departments to begin thinking about possible cluster hires. Her hope is to begin such hiring over the next couple of years. As the CEP begins to allocate FTEs next year, it will then be in a position to

consider suggestions for clusters. She said these could be advertised as open rank and could also include inviting senior faculty at other institutions to apply. Asked whether these thematic areas were intended to transcend departments, Catherine said they were. These could result in joint appointments or even hires being allocated to departments that were not the original proposers. The college would gain a diversity hire, but the original department might not receive the actual FTE.

The committee endorsed the idea, and Edward said he would draft a memo to departments. The committee thought the letter should clarify that this proposal emanates from the CEP and encourages a multi-year approach to diversifying faculty. The letter should also state that one of the highest priorities is to have a robust representation of faculty of color in the sciences. The committee was of two minds as to whether a successful cluster hire should be one that avoids duplication and overlap. Some thought this would make it harder to attract a robust pool. If the candidates specialize in fields already represented at the college, it is likely that they will cover different areas in their teaching once they are hired.

Grade inflation and honors

Jesse Barba, director of the office of institutional research and registrar services, joined the meeting at 11:30 a.m., to discuss grade inflation and Latin honors with the committee. Edward thanked him for the data he had provided to begin the conversation.

Jesse said the issue of grade inflation and honors comes up every two years or so and covers well-trodden ground. Most of the inflationary gain occurred in 2014. For a student to be in the top 25% over the last decade, the required GPA has jumped from 12.2 to 12.8. This is not a huge magnitude of change; a third of a letter grade separates the top 25% from the top 40%. Jesse also provided information about departments' recommended honors versus the awarded honors and pointed to the percentage of *rite* graduates as a proxy for calculating the percentage of students in the department who did not write a thesis. Most students who are recommended for a *summa* receive the *summa*, but those who do not have the requisite GPA tend to fall to a *cum*. The more common drop, however, is from *magna* to *cum*.

Jesse noted that the data show the strength of the students who write theses; the percentages also indicate that some departments may be more selective about who may complete a thesis. Biochemistry/Biophysics (BCBP), in particular, seems to encourage students to write theses, and 68% of its majors do so. Math, on the other hand, appears to be more selective; only 9% of its majors write a thesis.

Asked whether he would support the committee's inference that the higher grade inflation in humanities courses gives humanities majors a greater chance of receiving high honors, Jesse agreed that students in the humanities tend to have higher GPAs and therefore a slight edge for honors, but he said STEM majors are catching up. Bigger departments tend to pick their strongest students to write a thesis.

As for grade inflation, Jesse said grades across the college now cluster around the A- mark. B and B- grades are more unusual. Grades at Amherst work better as a signaling device than as an ordinal device. Spring 2020 grades were substantially higher than previous years. He thought this was both because grades have been rising over time and because the college instituted inflation-inducing supports, such as the FGO policy and the more generous course withdrawal policy.

Jesse was asked if he thought it a problem that grade inflation allows greater success for humanities students and therefore a better chance for higher honors. Because grade distribution is so compressed, the committee noted that this may especially penalize students who during their transition to college

may have received a few lower grades. Students who find the areas in which they excel earlier tend to be at an advantage for honors. The committee members were concerned that grade inflation might be problematic in the way it interacts with honors. This can even affect the way faculty members may decide to grade a thesis. If the faculty members try to game the system, that would be a problem.

The committee also noted that there had been interest at one point in providing alongside every grade on the transcript the average grade for the class, although in small classes, this might be pointless, and outsiders might take these out of context. Jesse said that if Amherst contextualizes its grades, but no other colleges follow suit, it will hurt Amherst College students relative to their peers at other institutions. Transcripts do include a cumulative grade distribution letter, but the letter is very complicated, and Jesse thought it might be unclear how it should be interpreted. He also noted that the registrar's office sends transcripts with both the average class grade and the student's grade for required pre-med courses to Dick Aaronson to help him with pre-med letters, but Jesse thought even this might be hard to interpret for classes that are composed of outstanding students. He thought it was unclear how an outsider would interpret this information and whether it might hurt students.

Catherine asked whether the committee believed that the college should draw distinctions around levels of honors. She said she was struck by the information on the percentage of *summa* and *magna* honors awarded by peer institutions and wondered what the appropriate percentage of honors should be at Amherst. She encouraged the committee to have this conversation.

Asked whether the college should move to a non-graded system or include a memo to contextualize grades, Jesse said he was unsure that others would know how to interpret the memo. The committee said it found the data Jesse had supplied very helpful and informative about the percentage of students writing a thesis. Sandi suggested creating a parallel document of thesis writers in each department, with the percentage of majors receiving each level of honors.

Adam asked whether Jesse saw any trend over time in the number of students dropped from one honors level to another. Did grade inflation correlate to an increase in lower honors awarded? Jesse said it did not. The number of students recommended for a *summa* tends to be consistent from year to year, in the low-to-mid 30s, with only one or two not competitive. Many students, on the other hand, receive *magna* recommendations, and a much higher percentage of those drop to *cum*. *Summas* were intended to be very rare and have remained so, but *magna* calibrations are all over the map. Some departments are far more generous with their *magna* recommendations than others. Some departments work together to calibrate recommendations; other recommendations are made by individual faculty, without much calibration within the department.

Asked by Cole whether departments will not recommend students who write an exceptional thesis for *summa* if the student has a lower GPA, Jesse said the incentive tends to be in the other direction. Adam asked about requiring a particular distribution of courses between divisions for students to qualify for honors. How would this affect the scarcity of honors? Jesse said the Curriculum Committee had investigated this question and found that most Amherst students are not as single-dimension as imagined. Most students now take courses across divisions, rarely avoiding humanities courses, and the majority now also take math, so most will meet these criteria. He also noted that Workday will allow for multiple GPA calculations. With a series of data points, the college could look at excellence within divisions at some point. Up until now, the college has taken no stance on an ideal distribution. Edward thanked Jesse, and Jesse left the meeting.

Catherine thought the wide variety in *magna* recommendations might be worth discussing further.

Edward said the committee would meet two more times this semester, on December 2 and 9, 2020.

The meeting adjourned at 12:20 p.m.