

**Committee on Educational Policy  
November 4, 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 October 28, 2020.

**New Keyword**

Edward turned first to the Website Navigability Working Group's request to add a new keyword for "requires no prior experience." Last week, Adam Honig informed Edward that he had presented the keyword to department chairs who expressed a preference for either "no prerequisites necessary" or "no previous coursework required." He asked whether the committee was comfortable with either of these alternatives. The committee agreed that it found both alternatives acceptable but had a preference for shortening the wording to a less redundant phrase, recommending "no prerequisites." Nancy said she would inform Adam.

**Pass-Fail Policy**

Edward asked the committee whether it wished to recommend that the Committee of Six revise the Pass-Fail (P/F) grading option to give faculty the ability to make their courses ineligible to be taken P/F. The committee had been equally divided on this question at its previous meeting. Nicola said she wanted to retain the spirit of the Flexible Grading Option (FGO) and now thought all courses, apart from first-year seminars, should be eligible to be taken P/F. Edward asked whether the P/F policy, as proposed, would affect a department's ability to declare that the core courses that count towards the major could not be taken P/F. Catherine thought it was common for departments to have a policy governing how courses will be counted towards the major and did not think departments' control over their major would be altered by this policy.

Adam favored giving faculty the flexibility to declare a course ineligible to be taken P/F. He thought not providing this would signal that it would never be appropriate to give any faculty such flexibility, and that in order to pass such a policy the CEP first would have to assume knowledge about how every faculty member teaches every course in the catalog. Because the CEP doesn't have that knowledge, he said, it also shouldn't vote against this policy. He also noted that a 2015 study by Dartmouth College of its Non-Recording Option (NRO)—a policy which resembles the FGO—found that, rather than increasing course exploration, the NRO correlated with increased grade inflation and markedly decreased student effort.

Sandi noted that allowing P/F for all but first-year seminars would provide more options for class deans when they are faced with students in crisis; that option would be lost if a student were enrolled largely in courses that are ineligible. She thought there was a difference between not being able to take a course P/F and not being able to count a course taken P/F towards a major. Krupa agreed with her and said allowing this would be infantilizing for students who should have the ability to choose for themselves.

Cole said it was only common sense that some students would decrease their efforts in a P/F course, but he did not think they would do so in a way that would meaningfully affect other students when working

on a group project. He thought students should have the ability to decide for themselves which courses they would take P/F and worried that allowing faculty members to make their courses ineligible would effectively bifurcate the curriculum in ways that would not be helpful.

Nicola said the Amherst students' ethos differs from Dartmouth's and the Amherst P/F would not necessarily replicate Dartmouth's experience. While she thought unrestricted access to the P/F would allow students to flourish, she suggested the committee create a sunset clause and commit to analyzing the results of the policy after three years. It could then reconsider the policy, if necessary.

Adam advised against the idea of reducing coursework as a way to reduce stress; this prioritizes comfort over education and risks creating a consumer mentality. He argued that it was the responsibility of the faculty to determine how to structure the acquisition of knowledge, and that some faculty may want the flexibility to determine whether a course should be eligible for the P/F. He also noted that the proposed language allows for student choice, because it would allow students to choose not to take courses that faculty have declared ineligible for P/F.

Edward called for a vote on whether the CEP should recommend to the Committee of Six that it add a line allowing faculty to make courses ineligible for P/F. The committee opposed the idea by a vote of 3 in favor, 5 opposed.

### **Target-of-opportunity (TO) Request**

Edward turned the committee's attention next to the request for a target-of-opportunity (TO) hire.

### **GPA Calculation**

Edward next asked the committee to discuss how the college calculates GPA. He said some members of the faculty believe Amherst does not adequately acknowledge grades above a 4.0 and might need to add a new grade category to honor the work of its very best students. Krupa asked whether the college had statistics about the number of A and A- grades and which departments or programs were primarily responsible for grade inflation. She thought it would help to have a college discussion about norm setting. Catherine said some years ago the college studied creeping grade inflation, and grades have continued to compress since then. This was the reason for setting a GPA band for *summa* and *magna* honors grades. Edward said he would ask Jesse Barba for more information about grade inflation. He thought the question about A+ grades resulted from a combination of continued grade inflation and grade compression.

Cole asked how adding another grade category would help with grade inflation. He did not think this would provide a solution to the problem and spoke in favor of A and A+ being basically equivalent—both providing another indication to a student that their work had gone well.

Sandi expressed confusion, noting that Amherst grades are calculated on a 14-point scale, with 14 points equal to an A+. She wondered if the confusion emanated from the grade conversion worksheet on the registrar's webpage, which counts both an A+ and A as 4.0. The 4.0 is an unofficial GPA, so she thought it unclear what the issue was. The cutoff for honors is a separate issue, but she thought the A+ grade was a nonissue for GPA calculations.

Adam too expressed confusion and agreed with Cole that adding more grades would not be a good solution to the problem. The deeper question for him was the purpose of grades. Many faculty members use grades not to rank students but rather to convey information to students about their educational growth and to incentivize students to work harder. Because of these multiple motives, he thought that

grades were a source of great miscommunication between students and professors. He added that the prerequisite for any discussion of grade inflation is a clear understanding of the philosophic purpose of grading. Nicola agreed with him and said there is a whole movement in which students give themselves grades and the faculty member decides whether to assent to the grade. Grades meet different purposes in different classrooms. Edward said he would return to the faculty who had expressed concern.

Catherine urged the committee to continue to explore the issue around the honors calculation. Edward asked how the committee wanted to gather information about honors. Adam suggested looking at the rationale underlying the current honors system and look at the minutes from the faculty meeting discussions correlating honors to grades. Catherine said it was well within the committee's purview to consider the honors calculation and make a recommendation. Edward asked Nancy to find the discussions in the faculty meeting minutes before the next conversation about this question.

The meeting adjourned at 12:20 p.m.