

Committee on Educational Policy
October 16, 2019

In attendance: Faculty: Tekla Harms acting chair; Edward Melillo, by phone; Christian Rogowski; Adam Sitze. Provost and Dean of the Faculty: Catherine Epstein, ex officio. Students: Sterling Kee '23, Julia Ralph '21. Recorder: Nancy Ratner, Director of Academic Projects.

Tekla Harms, acting as chair of the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP), called the meeting to order at 8:45 a.m. in Clark House 100.

Update on Curricular Practical Training (CPT)

The committee continued its discussion about possible options for students under a Curricular Practical Training (CPT) program.

Courses

The committee next turned to course proposals, approved some courses and asked for revisions on others. The committee then reviewed the policy under which staff members may, on occasion, teach a course and asked Catherine to ensure that the required steps be followed.

Policy clarifications

Tekla next asked the committee to consider a series of questions sent to the committee from the class deans. In his letter on this topic, Rick López requested advice on how the deans should interpret policies recently passed by the faculty and asked that the committee add language to the Catalog, clarifying issues surrounding the Flexible Grading Option (FGO), the ability to drop a course, the timing for allowing students to study away, the rules surrounding minimum and maximum course loads (which has been complicated by the new half course lab policy), the rules on transferring back to Amherst, and the policy that allows students to graduate with 31 credits. Tekla said she is strongly disinclined to rewrite the language in the Catalog on many of these issues and recommended instead that the committee create guidelines. Adam agreed with her, although he noted clarity might be needed in cases in which the guidelines in the Catalog do not align with current practices or customs. The committee then turned to the questions.

Flexible Grading Option (FGO)—end date for converting a course under exceptional circumstances

The current FGO policy specifies that, under exceptional circumstances, students may convert a course to an FGO or pass/fail after the end of the add-drop period. The policy does not provide an end date for this request and does not rule out the possibility that students could request this option far into the future, while still technically falling after the end of add-drop. At least one student has already requested a retroactive pass for a course completed two years ago. The class deans recommended that the deadline be set as the last day of classes, which would be consistent with other practices, and that it be written into the policy in the Catalog.

Adam thought the policy should state “before the last day of class” and also be revised to say that students may do this “once while enrolled at Amherst College” (rather than “once during their academic career at Amherst College”). He will draft a substitute statement that could be added to the Catalog at some point. In the meantime, this deadline could serve as a guideline.

FGO—meaning of “exceptional circumstances”

The committee turned next to the new FGO rules that allow a student in “exceptional circumstances” to declare a course FGO after add/drop or to convert a course to Pass/Fail. The deans worried that weighing the circumstances of “exceptional” would inevitably lead to potentially arbitrary and inequitable outcomes. They were inclined to treat all requests as “exceptional.” They noted that an alternative might be to treat “exceptional” as a documented medical need and requested that the CEP provide specific guidance and clarify this in the Catalog.

Tekla said she was concerned that the phrase “extraordinary circumstances” might be interpreted quite broadly, as suggested by the class deans. That was not the intention of the committee when it recommended that language. Adam said he saw this as an unqualified loophole that needed more language, even as it was being passed.

Nancy pointed the committee to the CEP minutes of March 27, 2019, which suggested the original intention was a documented medical need or documented family emergency:

“... the CEP noted that there may be exceptional circumstances—the death of a family member, serious illness, etc.—when the college would want to allow more flexibility. In such cases, students who have the permission of the course instructor, their academic advisor, and their class dean, would be allowed to convert one course to pass/fail after the end of add/drop.”

The committee specified the level of exceptional circumstances a second time in that same meeting:

“A second motion would ask whether faculty wish to allow students who are encountering exceptional circumstances—serious illness, family emergencies, etc.—to convert a course to FGO—or in the case of second semester seniors, to pass/fail—at any point in the semester. This conversion would require the permission of the instructor, the student’s advisor, and the class dean and could, if thought necessary, exceed the four permitted FGOs.”

The committee decided to return to this conversation at its next meeting.

First-year drop

The next question from the deans was whether first-years, sophomores, and juniors could use their one excused drop (formerly known as the Freshman Drop, now informally known as the First-Year/Sophomore/Junior Drop) while on an approved study away program. The class deans said they recently have begun to allow students to use their one excused drop while enrolled in a study away program. They do not apply the strict guidelines they normally apply in such cases, because the students have not had access to the same resources that are available to them while they at Amherst. This practice began in 2018—2019. The deans asked that this practice be written into the formal guidelines for using a withdraw specified in the Catalog.

Tekla said she was inclined to allow this practice. Students on campus are required to have exhausted all available resources—e.g., to have met with professors during office hours, received tutoring, met with class deans, etc.—before being permitted to withdraw from a class. Students studying abroad do not have access to those same supports. The committee agreed that students could be allowed to use their one excused drop while studying away and thought this could be added to the set of guidelines and eventually added to the Catalog. Tekla offered to draft such language.

Expulsion policy

The deans next asked about the college’s “three strikes” policy under which students are permanently expelled after they are academically dismissed a third time. This practice has been carefully reviewed by

the legal department which has judged it acceptable, but it is not defined in Catalog language. Given the gravity of permanent expulsion, the deans would like a formal policy to be included in the Catalog.

If the CEP decides to also allow appeals, the class deans ask that the committee establish specific policies to guide the Committee on Academic Standing when reviewing such appeals.

Tekla said she would like the college lawyers to explain the legal ramifications of this policy to the committee. Adam added that the policy should not include the phrase “three strikes,” since this baseball analogy would only add confusion to the policy. He advocated for a written policy that would delegate discretion to the class deans. He also asked how this policy relates to disciplinary dismissals and whether a disciplinary dismissal would be included in the count. He suggested bringing the Committee on Adjudication into this conversation. Catherine said that committee concerns itself with individual disciplinary cases, not the bigger issue of expulsion that would be considered after a series of dismissals.

Study abroad

Rick’s letter also informed the committee that there are currently several cases pending from students seeking to study away during their final semester at Amherst. There is a mechanism for petitioning to study away during the first semester of the senior year but no path for second semester seniors. In the past, the college has considered the need for access to resources, timely submission of grades, and the need to develop a connection with their graduating class and with the college as some of the reasons for not allowing students to study away during their final semester. The deans do not wish to deny students this opportunity unless there is a strong reason against the practice and asked that the CEP clarify the college’s policy and add it to the Catalog.

Catherine said the college has allowed students to study away during the first semester of their final year. This year, two students seem to be interested in studying abroad during their final semester. She has implemented a process whereby students wishing to do so need to have a compelling educational rationale and to have the approval of their advisors, class deans, the provost and dean of the faculty, and the Committee on Global Education. Tekla said she wants students to have opportunities to integrate their experiences while away into their academic program when they return. She would be willing to consider exceptions for particularly strong cases but does not want this practice to become the norm. Permitting this on a regular basis would undervalue the integration that occurs when students are on campus for their final year. Adam said he would support this policy as long as there is a high bar for an individual who requests permission.

Edward said he will invite Rick to a future meeting to discuss these issues in more detail.

The meeting adjourned at 9:45 a.m.