

Committee on Educational Policy

October 20, 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; Zane Khiry '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.

Academic calendar

Rob presented a new version of the calendar, which aligns with the calendars of the other institutions in the consortium but would not end exams until December 21, 2023. The committee, noting that this calendar begins final December exams on a Saturday but then skips Sunday, recommended including a Sunday exam. This would allow students to finish one day earlier and reduce the cost of their travel home for the holidays. The committee then turned to the spring calendar, and in particular, the late spring break which on the proposed calendar would occur seven weeks into the semester, rather than the usual six weeks. Since this later break would align well with the other schools in the consortium, the committee decided it would be best to accept the late spring break. The committee did think the reading period could be reduced from five to four days, including the weekend. This would still allow one make-up day on Wednesday, May 8, 2024, and exams could then begin on Monday, May 13, 2024, and end on Friday, May 17, 2024. This would shorten the gap to Commencement, which the committee thought advisable. The committee agreed to support this revised schedule and asked Rob to forward a revised version to the Faculty Executive Committee (FEC), adding the Sunday exam in December, finishing fall exams on December 20, 2023, including the weekend as part of a four-day reading period in May, and finishing spring exams on May 17, 2024.

Latin honors

The committee briefly discussed the faculty's discussion about the Latin honors proposal at the recent faculty meeting. Members noted some faculty were unhappy with what they saw as a de facto distribution requirement, which they thought would undermine the open curriculum. Several at the faculty meeting had noted the importance of the open curriculum in attracting strong students. Catherine pointed out that Smith College, which also claims an open curriculum, has a distribution requirement for Latin honors, and Wesleyan, another open curriculum school, has distribution expectations. She did not think this would change how students viewed the open curriculum.

At the faculty meeting, several faculty members had also raised concern about lowering the threshold for *magna*, with some suggesting it would lead to a flood of thesis students and also cheapen the honor if, as expected, the majority of thesis students would now meet the college-wide distribution requirement and the threshold for *magna*. CEP members wondered if these two concerns—a de facto distribution requirement and an increase in students earning *magna*—would doom the proposal.

Geoff said thesis advisors could just be asked to review the academic record of their thesis students and make broader exploration an explicit part of the advising process. He thought this would still be a meaningful step, without a requirement. Others said most students would resist this, and with add/drop, faculty advisors have no control over a student's actual course registration. Some also observed that some faculty members would resist encouraging exploration if the students expressed real passion about exploring a particular subject in depth. Sandi noted that this proposal only asks students to make different choices about one or two courses—and only students who want to graduate with *magna* or *summa*, not all students. Others noted that all students must take a first-year seminar, and some departments are also discussing anti-racism course requirements, both de facto distribution requirements. Catherine noted that it is now up to the FEC, not the CEP, to determine the next steps.

Revisions to policy on course credits

Following up on a decision a previous meeting to codify the policy that students can receive credit for no more than three courses in the senior year for thesis work or other comparable work, the committee recommended that the faculty revise the Course Requirements in the Catalog as follows:

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

All students except Independent Scholars are normally required to elect four full courses each semester. Students may elect one or two half courses in addition to four full courses at their discretion and without special permission. Half courses are not normally included in the requirement of thirty-two courses for the degree; however, with the permission of the academic advisor and the class dean, a student may combine two half courses to be counted as equivalent to a full course if (1) the student completes the 4.5 courses in one semester and 3.5 courses in a subsequent semester, or (2) the two halves match within the same semester in a manner designated by the offering department, with the approval of the offering department (in this case, the student's program will be three or four full courses and two half courses). No more than four half courses may be so combined for credit toward the degree.

In exceptional cases a student may, with the permission of both the student's academic advisor and class dean, take five full courses for credit during a given semester. Such permission is normally granted only to students of demonstrated superior academic ability, responsibility, and will. Fifth courses cannot be used to accelerate graduation. On occasion, a student who has failed a course may be permitted to take a fifth course in a given semester if, in the judgment of the Committee on Academic Standing, this additional work can be undertaken without jeopardizing the successful completion of all courses taken in that semester. Students may only retake a course for which they have received a failing grade or from which they have withdrawn in a prior semester.

STUDENTS CAN RECEIVE CREDIT FOR A MAXIMUM OF THREE COURSES DURING THEIR SENIOR YEAR FOR THESIS WORK.

A student who by failing a course incurs a deficiency in the number of courses required for normal progress toward graduation is usually expected to make up that course deficiency by taking a three- or four-semester hour course at another approved institution during the summer

prior to the first semester of the next academic year and no later than the semester prior to the student's last semester at Amherst.

Students may not add courses after the last day of add/drop at the beginning of each semester or drop courses after this date except as follows:

In any semester prior to the final year, a student who experiences severe academic difficulty and has exhausted all academic resources (e.g., met with professors during office hours, received tutoring, met with class deans, etc.), may be allowed to withdraw from a course without penalty and graduate with 31 courses. This exception may be invoked only once, and requires permission of the instructor, advisor and class dean. The deadline for withdrawal requests is the end of the tenth week of the semester.

Further exceptions shall be made for disabling medical reasons or for reason of grave personal emergencies, and shall be made by the class dean.

All course deficiencies must normally be made up prior to the first semester of the final year, except those arising in the final year, in which case they must be made up prior to graduation. All make-up courses must be approved in advance by the registrar.

Courses taken by a student after withdrawing from Amherst College, as part of a graduate or professional program in which that student is enrolled, are not applicable toward an Amherst College undergraduate degree.

Rob said he would write a letter to the FEC recommending that the faculty approve this revision to the Catalog.

Revisions to the pass/fail policy

Rob next asked the committee to revisit the pass/fail (p/f) policy, including the number of courses that could be taken p/f; whether the instructor should approve use of the p/f option (or at least be made aware that the course is being taken p/f); and whether the date for converting a course to p/f should be altered.

Sandi said the committee needs to consult with the class deans about any change, since they had urged the CEP a few years ago to have a late decision date as a tool they could use to support struggling students. Chris said the deans always have the ability to deal with special cases by approving a withdrawal from a course. He noted that students are using the p/f options to improve their GPA, not to explore the curriculum. Rob said he had informally discussed this phenomenon with Rick López last May, and Rick indicated he was not a fan of this policy. Rob also got the impression from the same conversation with Rick that students who use the medical leave have to withdraw from all their courses, so he thought the class deans would avoid using that lever to rescue a student who was struggling in a single course. He said the p/f option is intended to support two purposes—students can use p/f to explore the curriculum, and as a last resort, class deans can use it to rescue students who are struggling—but it appears that it is far more frequently used for a different purpose: for students to protect their GPA. Given these uses, he said the committee could still support the intended purpose of the policy if it recommended moving the deadline to earlier in the semester and also added language that would allow a class dean to approve a later deadline if warranted by special circumstances.

Geoff said this is a victimless crime, harming no one. The grading system is set up so students will compete for higher grades. He did not see it as a problem that students were strategizing for how to obtain the best grades. Rob disagreed, saying GPA management is undermining the role of grades, and the College is complicit in allowing students to hide their bad grades. Geoff said graduate schools are able to draw their own conclusions if they encounter a transcript with a large number of “p” grades. Rob said students are not aware of this pitfall. Gent asked whether advisors would know the implications of opting for multiple “p” grades. Rob then asked rhetorically why the College has a p/f system. The standard answer to this question is to support exploration of the curriculum, but the students use it to protect their GPA, not to explore the curriculum.

Gent said he did not think exploring the curriculum and GPA management were necessarily incompatible. He didn’t think the fact that students often declared p/f late in the semester could be used as evidence that they aren’t exploring the curriculum, saying it wouldn’t make sense for students to declare early in the semester when given the option to do so later on. Geoff urged the committee to get more data on how the students are using p/f before proposing any changes to the policy.

Sandi then suggested allowing a limited number of p/f courses and moving the p/f declaration deadline to some fixed time after the student’s grade is submitted. She said students will game the system no matter what. This would at least reduce the emails asking for their projected grade. It also might serve the intended purpose of encouraging exploration of the curriculum and staying engaged. Rob said he could support this. Isaiah also supported it, saying the pressure for good grades will overcome any attempt to deal with how p/f is used. Sandi said she would still want the student’s advisor to sign off on the declaration as a way to ward off decisions that could have bad consequences for the student.

Chris said he still thinks the instructor should be informed if a course is being taken p/f. Under the current policy he has no way to know whether a student who appears to be struggling needs help or has decided to take the course p/f and is simply directing their efforts elsewhere. Rob said he would support an even more liberal approach—allowing p/f after the course is completely done, with permission of the advisor, and he would even allow a student to revert to a grade late (again with advisor permission), although this could get messy for the registrar. Chris suggested asking for the FEC to schedule a Committee of the Whole conversation on this topic as a way to obtain more feedback. Geoff said it could be helpful to have a draft proposal to focus the faculty’s discussion. Catherine suggested consulting with class deans first and then structure the conversation. Rob agreed that the committee should meet with some class deans, then ask the FEC to schedule a faculty discussion. Another option might be to survey the faculty about the current policy. This might produce a better picture of faculty concerns about the policy and what changes might be supported. Catherine said the committee could also use a chairs’ meeting to obtain more feedback. Nancy will invite class deans for next week. Then the committee will draft possible options and possibly survey the faculty about its preferences.

Clarification of course policy (including enrollment caps, courses at various levels)

Rob then returned to the CEP’s policy on enrollment caps and course levels and asked if the committee wanted to clarify the guidelines before soliciting courses for the next academic year. Catherine suggested it might be productive now to invite a broader group to this conversation, perhaps presenting the committee’s concerns at the next chairs’ meeting on December 2, 2022. The committee thought this was a good idea, and Geoff agreed to lead a conversation, armed with data demonstrating the disparities in offerings across departments and the recent proliferation of 300- and 400-level courses. Nancy said she would ask Jesse Barba to provide additional data to focus the conversation, and Chris

said he would be willing to assist in the discussion, if Geoff so desired. Catherine suggested the committee use the next few meetings to devise some principles to guide enrollment caps before that meeting and assemble arguments, buttressed by data, to support the CEP's interest in increasing the percentage of entry-level courses. Chris thought the committee could establish an expectation that all faculty would teach courses across a range of levels each year, such as half at the lower level and half at the upper level. Nancy urged the committee to settle on guidelines prior to its December letter soliciting courses for the next academic year.

The meeting adjourned at 9:47 a.m.