

**Committee on Educational Policy
October 23, 2019**

In attendance: Faculty: Tekla Harms; Edward Melillo, chair; Christian Rogowski; Adam Sitze. Provost and Dean of the Faculty: Catherine Epstein, ex officio. Students: Gabriel Echarte '22; Sterling Kee '23; Julia Ralph '21. Recorder: Nancy Ratner, Director of Academic Projects.

Edward Melillo, chair of the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP), called the meeting to order at 8:45 a.m. in Clark House 100. The committee approved the minutes of September 25, October 2, and October 16, 2019.

Course proposals

The committee began with a discussion of three new courses. The committee objected to an instructor's plan to reserve half of the course slots for Five College students pursuing a related certificate program. Noting that Amherst has not yet approved that particular certificate, the committee said Amherst students must have first priority for all of the seats in the course; the faculty member cannot save half of the seats for students from other institutions. Committee members also objected to a confusing title and recommended changes to a course description.

The committee then discussed its policy governing courses taught by staff members. That policy requires that courses taught by staff may be offered only one time. They noted that staff members are hired to do particular jobs at the college, and the considerable time required for teaching a course interferes with the staff members' ability to do the job for which they were hired. They also pointed out that while many staff members hold doctorates and would like to teach, courses should not arise from a staff member's desire to teach but rather from a department's curricular need for the course. Edward said he would discuss these concerns with the departments offering the course.

Lecturer position

Catherine then mentioned her interest in creating another lecturer position. Hiring a lecturer would alleviate some of the extreme pressures STEM departments are experiencing. A lecturer's course evaluations are reviewed regularly, and formal reappointment reviews occur at three-year intervals. After two reappointments, the person is eligible to be promoted to senior lecturer, at which time the rotation reverts to a five-year reappointment schedule. Catherine noted that lecturers carry a slightly higher course load, which usually means teaching three courses each semester. This load is adjusted to five courses if the lecturer is expected to absorb time-consuming administrative tasks and is also adjusted if the teaching involves an onerous lab course schedule.

Adam asked how many lecturers were currently at the college. Catherine said the college now has two math lecturers, one statistics lecturer, a number of language lecturers, and one or two lecturers in a number of other departments. Tekla said she wanted to avoid a disparity between the work of lecturers and the work of other faculty members. Catherine said lecturers have different responsibilities and receive lower compensation than tenure-track faculty; they do not generally maintain research programs. Adam asked Catherine whether she has concerns that she may be creating a separate class of instructors. Catherine said she does, but less so when the appointment is time-limited, based on the person's career path. Adam asked whether she has concerns about inadvertently creating an informal path for existing lecturers to become tenure-line faculty. Catherine said these positions will help alleviate the pressures in STEM departments. She did not foresee their conversion to tenure-line

positions. The committee supported an additional lecturer position, provided that it would not lead to exploitation.

Policy issues

Edward suggested the committee continue responding to the questions from the class deans.

Flexible Grading Option (FGO)

Returning to the conversation begun at the last meeting, Adam offered language he had drafted to clarify the deadline for declaring a course FGO if a student encounters exceptional circumstances:

In exceptional circumstances, and only once ~~during their career~~ **WHILE ENROLLED** at Amherst College, students who have not previously exhausted their FGOs and have not elected an FGO in that semester may, with the permission of their instructor, academic advisor, and class dean, convert one course to an FGO after the end of the add/drop period. **THE DEADLINE FOR CONVERTING A COURSE TO AN FGO IS THE LAST DAY OF CLASSES IN THE SEMESTER IN WHICH THE FGO WILL APPLY.**

In exceptional circumstances and only once ~~during their career~~ **WHILE ENROLLED** at Amherst College, students may, with the permission of their instructor, academic advisor, and class dean, convert one course to Pass/Fail after the end of the add/drop period.

Adam explained that he chose the “last day of classes” because this would extend to the final day classes are held. The committee approved his drafted language and recommended that this new language be shared with the class deans. Edward said he would share it with the class deans but wait to forward the new language to the Committee of Six until the committee has had a chance to review all of the new policies.

What constitutes “exceptional circumstances” in the FGO rules?

The committee next attempted to clarify what is intended by the phrase “exceptional circumstances,” allowing a student to declare an FGO after add/drop or to convert a course to a Pass/Fail after add/drop. The class deans worried that weighing the circumstances of what is exceptional could lead to potentially arbitrary and inequitable outcomes and asked for greater specificity. Tekla thought the class deans should exercise their discretion, but hearing that the class deans felt they would then need to approve all requests, she said she was willing to limit “exceptional circumstances” to non-curricular emergencies that can be documented and that place into question a student’s ability to study. The circumstances justifying the change should not include the normal challenges associated with studying inside the curriculum. Christian said he would draft some guidelines for the committee.

Withdrawal from a course while studying abroad

The committee next returned to the question of whether students could exercise the ability to drop a course without penalty while studying abroad if they had not already withdrawn from a course. Tekla wondered whether Amherst had the right to remove the grade from a course taken while studying at another institution. Catherine pointed out that grades from courses taken while on a study-away program are not counted in a student’s GPA and do not appear on the student’s transcript, which just lists the titles of courses taken at other institutions. If a course is dropped, the transcript would just show three courses rather than the usual four for that semester. The committee was inclined to allow students to drop a course while studying away. There would need to be a record of the withdrawal, with

supporting documentation, which would be retained in the registrar's office. Students could still graduate with 31 credits, as already permitted. Tekla suggested the following change to the policy:

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.

STUDENTS STUDYING OFF-CAMPUS IN AN APPROVED STUDY ABROAD OR DOMESTIC STUDY PROGRAM MAY EXERCISE THIS ALLOWANCE WITH THE APPROVAL OF THEIR ACADEMIC ADVISOR AND THEIR CLASS DEAN, PROVIDED THEY HAVE EXHAUSTED THOSE ACADEMIC RESOURCES THAT ARE AVAILABLE LOCALLY AND PROVIDED THEIR REQUEST IS MADE TO THEIR CLASS DEAN PRIOR TO THE FINAL THREE WEEKS OF THE OFF-CAMPUS PROGRAM.

The committee will return to this language at its next meeting.

Half courses and reduced course loads

The committee next turned to a question from Rick López about half courses. The College Catalog specifies that, "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" (p. 67). A student may exercise this option twice in their time at Amherst. In 2017-2018 the CEP offered the class deans guidance that they should not permit a course reduction using half credits unless the student had accumulated an additional half credit since the time of the last course reduction. That is, a student cannot bank multiple semesters of 4.5 courses and then take several semesters of only 3.5 credits. Nor can they take a semester of only 3.5 courses prior to first accumulating a semester of at least 4.5 courses. However, the Catalog does not give guidance as to whether students may use this reduction two semesters in a row. The lack of clarity in the Catalog language has caused confusion for students and advisors, which has been exacerbated by the new rules regarding lab credits. The class deans now would like this prohibition to be added to the policy in the Catalog or removed.

Catherine said that, while not ideal, she saw no reason why students should not be permitted to take a lighter load during two semesters in a row. That said, she suggested adding some language to explain that this lighter load is not intended to be a convenience to the student; it should instead be exercised during a semester when a student needs to have fewer courses. The committee thought it might be helpful to add a layer of approval to this process, and Adam said he would draft some language.

Maximum course load

The class deans also asked whether students may enroll in more than five courses, with the consent of their class dean and advisor. The Catalog provides no upper limit on the number of registrations, except during the student's first semester. If a limit is desired, the class deans said they thought the CEP should add specific language to the Catalog. The committee was inclined to agree that there should be an upper limit, requiring approval before a student could enroll in more than 5 ½ courses, but the committee did not want to amend the Catalog to address this. Tekla volunteered to write guidelines for the class deans (not Catalog language). The committee will return to her language at its next meeting.

Transferring back to Amherst

Until last year, students who matriculated at another college were barred from returning to Amherst. Last year's change in the policy simply removed the prohibition on returning to Amherst without taking up the details of what this change would imply. This change has already encountered numerous practical problems and a challenge from a student and the student's family. Currently, students who wish to return after transferring out are offered two options:

Students can return to the college through the regular OSA readmission process. This is essentially treated as a return from a voluntary leave. The student is not permitted to transfer back any credits from the other institution. The Catalog language governing the transfer of credit from other institutions prohibits the student from applying toward the Amherst degree any credits that are not part of an approved study away program, used to fulfill a credit deficiency, or part of a transfer admission application.

Students may apply to be re-accepted to the college as a transfer applicant. This requires that they become part of the regular pool of transfer applicants, which has a much lower acceptance rate than regular admission and a different set of criteria. When a transfer student is accepted to the college, the admissions office and the registrar evaluate which of their credits count towards the Amherst degree. Students who transfer away from Amherst and seek to return have been warned that acceptance rate of transfer students is very low and they are very likely to be denied readmission.

This has raised several questions: Can students who transferred out of Amherst to another college, but who want to return, apply as transfer students AND petition to return as though on a leave? If so, can they do so simultaneously, or must it be sequentially? In the case of students returning to Amherst, should the college request a letter of good conduct from the prior institution? The deans think a formal transfer back policy should be approved by the faculty and included in the College Catalog.

The committee members noted that they had voted to change the policy last year because they thought there was no compelling reason for not allowing students to transfer back. It now appears that there may be reasons and that some students may try to abuse the right to transfer back—either to transfer to a less expensive school and then transfer back for their senior year, or to try out another school, while leaving open the option to transfer back. Tekla said the change in this policy may not be worth the complications it is causing. Students can use the 12-college exchange or study abroad options if they wish to experience a different type of school. She suggested asking the class deans if they would advise returning to the old policy. Alternatively, if the faculty instead believes there should be exceptions to the no-transfer-back rule, the faculty can advise the Admissions Office to allow a small number of particular exceptions and make any readmission contingent on a student applying as a transfer. Edward will ask the class deans if they would advise returning to the old policy.

Academic dismissal after a third dismissal

Last week the committee discussed codifying the policy that requires expulsion after the third academic dismissal. In light of the gravity of permanent dismissal, the committee agreed that this policy should appear in the College Catalog. Tekla said she would attempt to write language clarifying this policy.

The meeting adjourned at 9:52.