

Committee on Educational Policy

October 27, 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. and welcomed Jesse Barba, director of institutional research and registrar services, and three class deans—Charri Boykin-East, Rick López, and David Schneider—to the meeting.

Pass/fail policy

As background, Rob said the committee has been discussing several revisions to the pass/fail (p/f) policy, including requiring instructor permission and changing the deadline for the p/f declaration, and now wanted some input from the class deans. Possible deadlines under consideration include reverting to a p/f declaration before the end of add/drop, moving the deadline to a midpoint in the semester, or moving the deadline to a point after students have received their grade in the course. The committee is concerned that the stated goal to explore the curriculum and to provide a safety valve for students are not the goals of most of the students who are using it; most are employing the option to improve their GPA.

David said the deans see a lot of advantages to having the instructor know that a course is taken pass/fail. He thought the committee should eliminate the secrecy element of the current policy. That said, he urged the committee to restrict itself to incremental changes, not a full recall of the policy, noting that the policy has only been in place briefly, and primarily during the Covid pandemic. He said the deans see students in crisis on a daily basis and are now facing a mental health pandemic. This policy provides relief from terrible situations and helps students get through the semester. He thought it also encouraged some students to explore the curriculum. To limit some of the concerns that the committee has heard, he recommended reinstating instructor permission and using a paper form, not a webform, to p/f declarations, saying paper would require students and faculty to be in closer communication.

Rick said the current policy came about in part because the class deans had requested a lever to help with student crises and to decrease student anxiety. The current policy looks successful from their perspective, but it is missing the close colloquy. Faculty need to communicate consistently to students how some will interpret the “p” grade on the transcript, saying some may assume that a “p” on a transcript suggests it is masking a grade of C or lower.

David added that the class deans feel that four p/f options is most appropriate, but that he thought that the class deans would likely still be satisfied if there were a reduction to three options. First-years, sophomores, and juniors also have the additional option to withdraw from a course once in their career and graduate with 31 courses; the single-course withdrawal is not available during the senior year.

Rob said one problem that the committee wants to address is the large number of requests from students at the end of term asking about their grade. For those who teach large classes, this has been extremely burdensome. He also thought students should have a higher bar to clear to opt for p/f, so that

students seeking merely to manage their GPA would be discouraged, but it would still be worth struggling students' while.

David warned against unintentional consequences if the committee introduces changes that are not just incremental. While some students will always abuse the system, he cautioned against penalizing the students who really need this option. He urged the committee to involve the instructor in the decision and provide language to the faculty on how to handle this conversation.

Chris said he strongly favored the instructor knowing that the course is being taken p/f. He liked the idea of requiring a paper form, reducing the policy to three options, and requiring most students to declare by an earlier deadline, while allowing a later deadline "with permission of the class deans" as a lever for students in crisis. David said the class deans are not enthusiastic about having a special ability to allow a late deadline. The deans would need very clear guidance with such an option. Jesse agreed, expressing his long-standing discomfort with requiring students to demonstrate their pain to receive such an exception.

Catherine suggested that some of the problem might be alleviated by the new honors policy which, if approved by the faculty, would be more forgiving of a lower grade. Rick said the messaging is really important. With the current policy, neither the instructor nor class deans have knowledge of a student's decision to opt for p/f. The deans would benefit from a policy that would require their participation. He liked the idea of a paper form and said it should state that the purpose of the policy is to help students who are under stress. Faculty advisors receive no guidance and are the only ones brought into the conversation with the current policy.

Rob said instructor permission would have little effect on students trying to protect their GPA, as those students are already asking their instructors about their current grades, which is effectively notifying the instructor they want to take the course p/f. Students care about their GPA for more reasons than just Latin honors. He suggested changing the policy to allow for an early declaration which would require only the advisor's permission, and a late option requiring permission from the instructor, advisor, and class dean.

Jesse reported that students converted 659 courses to p/f last year. The top four were in the economics, math, computer science, and religion departments. He urged the committee not to make the policy overly complicated. Students are confused by multiple tiers of requirements. Rob noted that three of those departments are among the most heavily-enrolled departments, a likely factor in the high number of p/f declarations.

Sandi said she favored simplicity, liked the idea of involving the instructor, and supported the idea of requiring the paper form. She asked about allowing students to declare p/f after the grade is known. She also said the committee needs to address the issue of p/f in cases of academic dishonesty. Rick said he often encounters problems late in the semester. He did not want a system that encouraged students to opt for p/f as a way to remove their lowest grade, however, and he thought the conversion after the grade is known would simply encourage students to scrub lower grades from their transcripts.

David thought there would be logistical problems with such a late change, particularly for students who might need to take academic leave. Turning to Sandi's other question, he said, if the punishment for academic dishonesty is a failing grade on an exam or a paper, rather than a failing grade for the course, the student now has the ability to convert the course to p/f to remove that grade. Rick thought students should be disqualified from the option in a course in which they have engaged in academic dishonesty.

Geoff said he was not upset by students using p/f to obtain the best GPA. That is simply the logical thing for students to do in college.

Rob said, for faculty teaching large classes, a conversation about the consequences of p/f would require an immense amount of time. Sandi said she worries about untenured faculty who might refuse to tell students their likely grade and then receive an unfavorable review of their teaching. David said a lot of untenured faculty express such concerns, but he has never seen a repercussion from such a situation during a tenure conversation. He also noted that departments could develop policies about revealing grades prior to p/f decisions as a way to protect untenured faculty, and faculty could also include their p/f policies on their syllabi to limit such conversations. Sandi thought some faculty were in a better position than others to deny a student the grade. Rick asked why any faculty member would calculate the grade for the student and said the committee should tell faculty that they are not required to calculate a grade before the end of term. He said the policy could also require both the advisor and the faculty member's signature on the p/f form as a way to protect untenured faculty.

Jesse said students wanting to know their grade will always be a feature of the late p/f. He also noted that allowing such a decision to be made after the grade is known would present a major problem for the Committee on Academic Standing. David added that students need to know whether they will be academically dismissed as soon as possible.

Geoff thought instructors could address many of these concerns by stating on their course syllabi that grades will not be calculated before the end of the semester. Rob leaned towards requiring the instructor's, the advisor's, and the dean's signature. Jesse said his office records the grade that is submitted, even for courses taken p/f. He also noted some of the legal limits: conversion to p/f cannot occur after graduation, because grades cannot be changed after the faculty and the trustees have voted on degrees. He worried that allowing a p/f declaration after the end of the semester would run into some of the difficulties that doomed the Flexible Grading Option, which students found very confusing and problematic. The question is finding the right balance.

Gent said he thought students lacked an understanding of possible long-term consequences of p/f. A paper requirement which required a conversation with the instructor could help students understand additional factors to consider before moving forward with the p/f option. He also thought that requiring three signatures instead of one, requiring them on paper, and not obligating the faculty to reveal the grade would all help reduce the number of students opting for p/f. Then he suggested the committee give the policy time.

Rob said the real problem will be for faculty members who are teaching large classes. He thought most students don't read the fine details of the course syllabus to find subtleties like these. Gent said he definitely reads information about the instructor's grading policy in course syllabi.

Chris said he opposed pushing the deadline even later. He supported requiring the instructor's permission to take the course p/f and using a paper form for the conversion. Sandi said she just wanted to know the levers that the deans need and wanted to support students who need support. Geoff favored creating departmental policies that would prevent students from asking about grades.

Sandi asked again about cases of academic dishonesty. Should there be something in the policy that prevents students who have been found guilty from converting the course to p/f? David said it should not just be up to the instructor. The policy should forbid the conversion after academic dishonesty and not allow the instructor to approve a change to p/f. Chris noted that in economics, academic dishonesty

generally results in the student failing the whole course, not just the assignment, but that in other circumstances he could imagine a letter grade being converted to a pass as part of the penalty for dishonesty. Rob noted that there can be a case in which a student has been pressured to help another student cheat. He thought failure of the course in that case would be too harsh. David thought the policy could require the approval of the committee overseeing community standards in such a case.

Jesse said faculty members would need to know if any academic dishonesty would result in a student failing the course. He added that there is nothing to prevent a student from withdrawing from a course after academic dishonesty. Isaiah asked what would happen if the student had already declared the course as p/f. Jesse said the instructor can then fail the student if the instructor knows that the course is taken p/f. But the instructor currently does not have that information. Rob noted that the old policy required instructor permission so the instructor could factor that into the punishment for academic dishonesty. Rob thanked the class deans and they left the room.

Minutes

Turning to the minutes from the previous meeting, Catherine asked whether the policy limiting the number of thesis courses that seniors could count towards graduation needed a reference to “other comparable work.” Geoff said the English department no longer allowed portfolios to be submitted in place of a thesis, so he thought the phrase might no longer be necessary. Catherine asked Nancy to contact arts departments to make sure that they did not need the phrase to be included.

Sustainability terms

Rob turned next to a question from Wes Dripps, the director of the Office of Environmental Sustainability. Wes and a student, Sarah Zhu '24, have created an algorithm for scoring courses on sustainability themes, based on searching for keywords in course descriptions. Wes noted that sustainability subject areas like social justice, climate change, and gender equity span multiple departments, and students find it difficult to navigate the course catalog to find clusters of courses around interdisciplinary areas of interest. The tool provides 16 categories, with a dropdown menu from which students can select courses that have been identified as aligning with each category. They would like to pilot this with a group of students during advising week and preregistration to help students select courses. They would remind students that this is an imperfect tool and does not necessarily mean that a course with a lower score does not align with that sustainability goal.

Chris expressed appreciation for the worthy intent of this tool but strongly opposed allowing its use. He noted that the curriculum is the province of the faculty, and argued that this includes oversight of the ways in which the content of the curriculum is communicated to students through official College channels. Information about course content is currently conveyed through course descriptions and keywords, and its use to inform students' course choices is mediated through the advising process. What is being proposed here is that all Amherst courses would be “scored” and categorized according to sustainability criteria based on text included in the course description. The tool presents what seems like very detailed information on the content of courses, but this has been done without any input from the course professors (or any professors), and in some cases appears to be inaccurate or misleading. He felt it was important that any information about courses being provided by an official agency of the College should be accurate. Another concern is that this tool—essentially a parallel set of course keywords chosen by a search engine rather than by faculty—may nudge students interested in

sustainability into a subset of courses that adopt particular kinds of language, while discouraging them from taking courses that may provide diverse or alternative viewpoints on these issues.

Rob said he shared some of Chris's concerns. Keyword scraping already has serious issues for scoring long documents like research articles. Like Chris, he saw a lot of badly mischaracterized courses, some as false positives and some as false negatives. He also shared Chris's concern about what would happen if another office or department tried to do something like this. The Loeb Career Center could, for example, create a tool that rated the value-added-towards-employability of all courses. Sandi agreed that it is problematic to label a course without the instructor's input. Jesse said IT is very nervous about this.

J-term report

Catherine said she thought the CEP should have a longer conversation about the J-term report and consider the options for future January terms, both for the formal and for the informal curriculum. She noted that this January the College has decided to include only very limited options. The question is what should happen moving forward. She thought the report, which the CEP only discussed briefly last spring, leaves an opening for further decisions.

Sandi, noting that the report had arrived very late in the spring last year, said the CEP had acknowledged the problems in the report and did not believe it had been tasked at that time to do anything. Catherine said January term is a clear curricular issue, and for that reason, she thought the CEP should think about this. Many students are looking for something in January. The CEP tends to be reactive, but she thought in this case it had an opportunity to be more imaginative.

Geoff said the report did not make him feel like the College should offer a curriculum in January. The courses during the pandemic were too scattershot to present a full complement of options. He thought most people on campus benefitted from taking a break. For many with mental health issues, the extended break in January provides a critical time to refresh. Thesis writers depend enormously on the period in January when they can focus exclusively on their thesis projects. He also thought any decision to offer January term courses should include a discussion of what should count as a course.

Others agreed. Some asked whether January term courses were really equivalent to 13-week semester courses. Many felt strongly that the College should not offer J-term courses. Sandi said she thought this was consistent with what the CEP had decided last spring—that offering courses in January for credit was not a priority for the CEP and that the report offered nothing compelling to change their views. Rob agreed, adding that January term courses are logistically unfeasible, according to the report. He thought many January courses ended up covering noticeably less than what a regular semester -long course would cover, and it is problematic for faculty and students to receive full credit for what is effectively a half course. Catherine said the committee should state the policy. Rob said the committee would continue this discussion at its next meeting.

The meeting adjourned at 12:00 p.m.