

Committee on Educational Policy
October 28, 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 7, 2020.

Keyword for “requires no prior experience”

Edward asked the committee whether it wished to support adding the keyword, “requires no prior experience,” to indicate courses that are open to non-majors and to students who might be relatively new to the field. The committee voted to approve it, pending the Website Navigability Working Group’s decision to go forward with this new keyword.

Course approval

The committee approved a revision to one course for the spring.

Spring calendar

Edward next shared two calendar options for the spring semester. In both, the calendar would extend into the traditional senior week that precedes commencement and preserve the thirteen-week semester, regardless of the day the class meets. Catherine clarified that, due to the brief period between the end of finals and commencement, the production of degree cases, calculation of honors, and production of diplomas will not be completed until late May or early June, so the votes of both the faculty and trustees on degree cases will have to be scheduled later and diplomas mailed over the summer, as was done this past year.

The first calendar option would cancel five days of classes—each one on a different day of five different weeks; remove the make-up day; and trim the reading period by one day. The second option, which would cancel a Thursday in early March and create two three-day weekends—one in March and one in April—would maintain the four-day reading period and a more generous senior week.

The committee was concerned by the number of lost class days in the first option, its effect on science and math classes with multiple sections that meet across the week, and its intrusion into the final reading period. In most courses that are broken up into sections or labs, with each section meeting on a different day of the week, canceling class on one day would effectively require canceling the work that would have occurred for the entire week for everyone. In those classes, the regular structure and rhythm to the week is lost if one day is removed. To minimize the loss of single days, Sandi suggested clustering the days that would be canceled. She noted that, due to the way most courses are scheduled, canceling a Thursday and Friday will provide a break for the most students—those in classes that meet on Tuesdays and Thursdays, as well as those in classes that meet on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays; canceling a Wednesday will only provide a break for students with classes that meet that day.

Sandi said, in thinking about the best way to organize breaks during the spring semester, she believed the important principles were, first, to minimize the number of weeks that would be lost. This could be

reduced by creating two breaks, rather than five. Second, considering how courses are scheduled, she thought it would be less challenging to move Thursday classes to a Tuesday and rescheduling Fridays, especially given how few courses meet on Fridays. Third, a long weekend would likely be preferable to a midweek break.

Cole noted that breaks are important, and one-day breaks like Mammoth Day help students get back on track. He preferred the first proposal and particularly liked the Wednesday break that Mammoth Day provided, but when asked whether it was about the frequency of days off or the total number of days off over the semester that he preferred, he said he would actually prefer two slightly longer breaks, separated by a few weeks, preferably after the fifth week and not during the final two weeks of the semester. He suggested avoiding Wednesdays instead of planning breaks for every day of the week. Sandi said the first option would be problematic for lab courses, reducing the possible lab weeks to six over a thirteen-week semester. Others noted that the randomness of Mammoth Day was problematic.

Adam asked students whether it was simply a matter of having more time off or the quality of the days off that they preferred. Like most others, he preferred two-day breaks to single days, and wondered whether, rather than committing to so many days off at the beginning of the semester, it might be better to keep a few days in reserve in case of snow or other emergencies. Catherine said scheduling two breaks of two days each during the middle portion of the semester would not allow any days to remain in reserve. While four-day breaks might help students who are living off campus, she thought those on campus who are unable to leave might find them less helpful.

Robert said for him the quality of the break was more important than the frequency. In past years, he has found fall and spring break very helpful. He also preferred two consecutive days, agreeing with Cole. Jalen also preferred the idea of two-day breaks and maintaining a reading period. He did not find the randomness of Mammoth Day helpful.

Catherine asked about the possibility of one four-day weekend and one three-day weekend. Hearing this, Sandi produced a draft of a schedule, which would allow for just that by scheduling two breaks—one on a Thursday-Friday and one on a Friday (this maintains the thirteen-week semester, since the spring term begins on a Wednesday, and one Friday schedule could be swapped with a Wednesday schedule one week).

The committee thought Sandi's draft superior to the two options before them and turned to the timing—whether the three-day or four-day weekend should be first, and when the breaks should occur during the semester. The committee suggested scheduling the three-day weekend for week five or six, and the four-day weekend during week ten, perhaps moving advising week forward one week to accommodate the break. Most committee members agreed that scheduling the longer break later in the semester would allow students to deal with work that has accumulated. The committee thought this proposed schedule quite promising and discussed whether to spread the breaks further apart and whether to avoid advising week and preregistration week. Although some thought faculty could advise students during other days during that week or during the previous week, others disagreed and thought there should be no advising during a break. Advising has become more challenging for students who are remote, so reducing the days for advising week also seemed problematic. The committee also considered thesis timing and said some departments may need to reconsider due dates for theses. Catherine said she would share this draft with the registrar.

Pass/Fail policy

Edward next asked the committee to consider whether to add a line to the proposed pass/fail policy that would allow faculty to declare a course ineligible for pass/fail.

PASS-FAIL (P/F) GRADING OPTION

The aim of the Pass-Fail (P/F) option is to encourage students to take intellectual risks, to explore the breadth of Amherst's open curriculum, and to reward students for engaging fully in all their courses. Under this option, students may elect to declare one course per semester, and no more than four courses over four years, to be taken pass-fail. A declaration of pass-fail requires the permission of the student's advisor(s) and must be made before the final day of the exam period. If a student designates a course pass-fail, the student's transcript will have a "P" recorded in the case of passing grades ("D" or higher). No grade-point equivalent will be assigned to a "P." If the letter grade assigned by the instructor is an "F," an "F" will be recorded on the student's transcript and will count toward the student's GPA and class rank. Once students have declared a course pass-fail, they cannot later opt for the grade. Students admitted as first-year students may elect the pass-fail option four times during their Amherst College career. Transfer students admitted as sophomores shall have three pass-fail options, and those admitted as juniors shall have two. The first-year seminar is not eligible to be taken pass/fail. **OTHER COURSES THAT ARE NOT ELIGIBLE MUST INDICATE THAT THEY CANNOT BE TAKEN PASS/FAIL ON THE COURSE DESCRIPTION.**

While some thought this added line was an elegant solution to a problem that has vexed some faculty, others noted that faculty had not been able to make their courses ineligible for the Flexible Grading Option (FGO), and that should continue to be the case. This pass/fail policy replaces the FGO, and like the FGO, it creates an incentive for students to work hard all semester, unlike the historical pass/fail policy, which required a pass/fail declaration before the end of add/drop. The argument in favor of allowing faculty to determine whether their course was appropriate for pass/fail rested on curricular grounds—that is, that it might undermine group work. Procedurally, while the goal behind both the FGO and pass/fail was meant to decrease anxiety, some thought merging the FGO with pass/fail had resulted in a collision between the rationales behind the different policies.

Arguing against giving faculty the ability to make their courses ineligible were those who thought the newly proposed pass/fail, available for all but first-year seminars, provided the best of both worlds. Because the incentive structure is so different, it gives students an incentive to work hard until the end of the semester. Students argued that their peers would not necessarily work less hard in classes that were taken pass/fail—the greater flexibility would not translate to less participation—and were unlikely to sabotage others during group work. Some faculty agreed that this should be the student's decision, not the faculty's.

Those arguing in favor of allowing courses to be ineligible for the designation said the faculty has responsibility for the curriculum and should have the agency to control how their courses are taken. This change would retain the anonymous structure—students would not require the instructor's permission to take a course pass/fail—while balancing a number of competing principles. The committee divided evenly between adding the language allowing faculty to declare a course ineligible for pass/fail and leaving the policy without such a line. Catherine said the Committee of Six will be discussing this on November 6. Edward asked the committee to give this more thought over the next week and return to it at the next meeting.

Anti-Plagiarism software

Edward said there has recently been a rise in plagiarism cases. Some members of the Biology department have expressed interest in using anti-plagiarism software, such as Turn-it-in, and they have asked that the CEP approve a trial use of this software. Google searches have proved insufficient. The committee will return to this question at its next meeting when he will provide some more background to the question.

GPA calculation

Edward also mentioned that some departments are wondering whether students who obtain GPAs that are higher than 4.0 are adequately recognized. A number of students would have a GPA well over 4.0, and grade inflation has made grades too compressed over time. The Biology department has suggested looking at how other institutions calculate GPA. Adam said there is also growing discontent about how cutoffs are calculated and applied to honors at graduation. He asked that this also be part of the discussion. Honors recommendations are based on departmental recommendations and the student's GPA, which must be within a particular percentage (top 25% of the class for a *summa*, dropping to *magna* if only in the top 40%). Students are knocked out of *summa* or *magna* contention if their GPA falls just below those percentages.

Film and Media Studies

Edward also noted that the Film and Media Studies (FAMS) Steering Committee has asked to be invited to a meeting to discuss its proposal to convert FAMS to department status. Committee members thought this should not occur until the CEP has received all of the department letters. Catherine said generally the CEP has not allowed groups to advocate for their position in this way. Usually the CEP chair meets with the group and relays its concerns to the committee. Edward said he would meet with the steering committee but will ask for all of the letters first.

Target-of-opportunity (TO) Request

Catherine informed the committee of an upcoming Target-of-opportunity (TO) request.

The meeting adjourned at 12:15 p.m.