

**Committee on Educational Policy**  
**October 7, 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 September 30, 2020.

**Question from Biology**

Edward said Professor Trapani has asked whether Biology can offer a half credit lab course that would run exclusively in person, as he thought was the case for a course in Theater and Dance. This would allow biology majors to meet the lab requirement without having to take a lecture and lab combined course. He noted that the course would be offered at a level intended for juniors and seniors, most of whom will be on campus in the spring semester. Catherine said the question is whether faculty can offer courses that are in-person only. The institution has not allowed this, given the likelihood that some students may need to be remote. The college cannot limit access to the curriculum in this way. She said Biology could offer a lab that allowed some students to take the course in person and some remote, but not solely remote.

Nicola said she has been teaching a first-year seminar this year that she expected to be solely in person, but she had a back-up plan to offer a second, different class, if necessary, for those who were remote. She felt there were real benefits for those taking the class in person. The biology course would not have a second section for anyone needing to be remote, and she found this problematic.

Adam wondered if the department was providing a convenience argument, namely that the students would need to take a full lecture plus a lab if the department is unable to offer this half-course. Nicola asked whether there was a profound reason for making this course solely in person. Sandi said in-person labs, which are not possible for larger classes right now, function very differently from remote labs. She also explained that generally students who place out of a lab have to make up the lab subsequently for the major, which students do by taking upper level lab courses. This could serve that purpose. However, if this is an in-person lab that is solely available to on-campus students and not available to all majors, Sandi thought it should not be allowed. There needs either to be a second option for students who cannot be on campus, or the department needs to offer concurrently an equivalent, analogous course for those who are remote. Although the argument justifying this was based on a theater and dance course, Sandi said she did not interpret that course as being offered solely in-person. Edward said he too had read the course description differently.

Cole, noting that he is currently off-campus, said it is really nice to be able to think about all courses and not only those that are available in remote format. Not all juniors and seniors will choose to be on campus in the spring, so this would not even target all the students the department is intending to target. Sandi added that students who could not take Nicola's in-person FYS had the choice of taking another remote FYS. This is different because there is no equivalent option. Edward said that in light of the general opposition on the campus, this violation of policy would be unacceptable. He asked Catherine to inform the department that this would violate college rules. She said she will do so and copy Edward when she does.

## Questions about Policy Revisions

Catherine reported that the Committee of Six will ask the faculty to consider the CEP's recommendation that the college abandon the FGO and substitute a Pass/Fail option. It will also send the faculty the CEP's recommendation revising the policy on readmission to the college after a voluntary withdrawal.

Catherine said the Committee of Six still had several questions about changes to the third policy, Course Requirements for graduation. Referring to the paragraph on making up course credits that were struck from the policy, the Committee of Six asked whether students would be allowed to take two half courses to make up course credits toward graduation if the failed course is not a requirement of the major. They also wondered if such half courses are sufficiently available across the curriculum to provide all students with this option, or whether some students would be advantaged, depending on their major. The section of concern was as follows:

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.~~

The CEP noted that all students have the option of taking half courses and combining them to make up a limited number of deficiencies. This is well-documented on the registrar's website. Some thought the equity question more complicated, but concluded that the question wrongly made the assumption that some students might not be capable of taking courses across divisions. Half courses are available in both humanities and STEM subjects. Catherine said she will take this discussion back to the Committee of Six.

## Course Caps for the Spring Semester

Catherine asked the committee whether it wished to maintain the same course caps in the spring that were being used this semester: 100- and 200-level courses can be capped at 18 students; 300- and 400-level courses can be capped at 15 students. Courses to be split into two sections to provide relief to faculty would have to result in at least 15 students in each half. The committee decided to maintain those caps for the coming semester and said lowering a cap will continue to be a major revision. If only the cap has changed, Nancy will approve the change and not require further review by the committee.

## Website Navigability

Edward next asked the committee to return to questions raised by Professor Honig on behalf of the Website Navigability Working Group:

One of Adam H.'s questions concerned the creation of a dynamic list of courses for non-majors. He invited suggestions for how to refer to courses for non-majors, possibly "courses suggested for non-majors." Departments will provide some text describing how to interpret the label for their field. He noted the existing keyword, "Science and Math for non-majors." is inconsistent in its application. Some of the courses give major credit; others do not. Some of the courses have prerequisites; others do not. He noted that the new label could include courses with or without prerequisites. There could be

courses with no prerequisites that aren't suitable for non-majors. He said it could be a course that doesn't give major credit (like some Biology courses), but not necessarily (Econ would suggest our 100 and 200 level courses for non-majors, but with one exception all those courses count for the major). It also could be a course that is designed and intended just for non-majors (like the course Adam Sitze was describing), but not necessarily. In fact, most of the courses probably would not be designed for non-majors but instead suitable for non-majors. It could be an introductory course, but not necessarily. For example, Econ 200 level courses attract lots of majors but are not introductory courses. Or there could be introductory courses that are not suggested for non-majors.

Once a label is selected for courses for non-majors, there will need to be a keyword for it (dropping "Fine Arts for non-majors" and "Science and Math for non-majors"), and departments will need to decide how to interpret the label, explain their thinking on their website, and then tag all existing and new courses with the appropriate keyword. For now, he wanted suggestions for what to call the rubrics. The committee had no further suggestions.

Adam H.'s second question had to do with allowing students to search for courses by division as a way to assist students and advisors in achieving a well-balanced schedule. Many faculty members advise with divisions in mind, pushing students to explore different divisions. He noted that departments that bridge multiple divisions would have the option of selecting more than one, with its courses showing up in a search for each division. If a department had a default designation, individual faculty could change the default departmental designation if the default one was inappropriate for their courses.

Nicola said the essence of the Amherst education is to be very interdisciplinary, so she had mixed feelings about this. Nevertheless, some courses genuinely fall more in one division than another. Allowing faculty to indicate more than one division would allow faculty to self-identify, and this would help students figure out the intellectual divisions in a meta way. Cole said he liked allowing students to figure out how to spread their courses across the curriculum and thought this would help that search. Adam S. said it's often not hard to figure out what divisions courses fall in. But in cases where it is difficult, he continued, it was not clear whether multiple descriptors would be adequate. He therefore thought it would be unclear what utility the divisions would serve. In addition, he worried that the need to assign descriptors would oblige interdisciplinary departments to have to have potentially divisive discussions, and that this would lead to a score-keeping mentality, with no added clarity. He was not strongly opposed, but he thought it was unclear that these labels would be used.

Krupa said she did not want there to be a cap to the number of categories, since some courses would fall into more than one division. Nicola argued for real flexibility and openness. Students pick courses because they find the subject matter entrancing or the faculty member interesting. They do not often look at the meta level. This would make it easier to alert students to a broader range of courses, which she thought students were willing to search for with an aid like this.

Edward thought it could help with advising, but advisors already have the chart at the bottom of the AC Data page, so he was unclear about the gain. Nicola said faculty who have many advisees do not have time to advise each student in such a personal way and need an easier way to encourage greater breadth. Adam S. said he was on the fence, leaning against this because he wants to exercise caution about what becomes automated. He would prefer to explain what the liberal arts education should be to his advisees. He did not think it was hard to see when a student was limiting course selection to a narrow area. Cole suggested bypassing departments and asking faculty to make the divisional decision for their courses independent of the department. He said he did not know about the divisions until joining the CEP. This would have been very helpful to him. Edward said he will summarize the stances in favor and opposed.

**New business**

Edward said the CEP needs to send a student representative to the Student Workday Committee, and he asked for volunteers.

The meeting adjourned at 11:45 a.m.