

Committee on Educational Policy

September 15, 2022

In attendance: Faculty: Robert Benedetto, Chair; Sandra Burkett; Mekhola Gomes; Chris Kingston. 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, welcomed the new student members to the committee, and the committee then approved the minutes from the previous meeting.

Course proposal letter

The committee approved a letter to all faculty soliciting new course proposals for the spring semester.

Calendar

Rob provided a draft 2023-2024 calendar from Jesse Barba. Catherine said she had met with others in the consortium, and it appears that UMass is genuinely concerned about changing its commencement date in future years and will probably alter its 30-day winter term to align its schedule more closely with the schedules of the other colleges. She said she values the consortium and now feels it would be worth waiting to propose a calendar for Amherst's spring semester until mid-October when she expected to have a clearer sense of the UMass calendar. Catherine also noted that the proposed calendar begins the semester the day after Labor Day. Once UMass develops a longer calendar cycle, Amherst may be able to return to developing three-year calendars, and some years the College will need to begin the semester earlier, depending on when Labor Day falls. Related to the calendar, Catherine mentioned that the registrar would like to add additional time slots for final exams and is strongly considering an early evening exam time.

Sandi said she would like to end the fall semester as early in December as possible. Looking at the draft calendar for next year, she suggested one way to achieve this would be to make the final Thursday and Friday in the fall semester reading days and start exams on the Saturday. The student members supported this idea.

Sandi also suggested that with exams starting on the weekend it might be helpful if there were a way for faculty to express a preference for either scheduling their exams early in the exam period (e.g., in a weekend slot), if they think students will need very little time to prepare, or requesting a later exam slot (e.g., after the weekend), if they think students will need more days to digest the course material. Rob liked this idea, noting that some faculty might prefer not scheduling an exam on a weekend.

Rob then posed the question to the committee: would members support a two-day reading period (Thursday and Friday) in the fall semester and beginning exams on that Saturday? The committee supported these changes. Rob next asked the committee about expanding the exam period to include additional exam slots, including early evening slots (exams would begin at 5:30 p.m.). He noted that he would support an evening exam period so long as no student would be expected to take more than two exams in a single day. The registrar's office tries to avoid double booking students for exams in a single day already, and he suggested students could be authorized to reschedule one exam to avoid three exams on a single day. The committee supported adding a third exam period for a total of 15 exam slots

and liked his idea of allowing faculty to state a single preference (e.g., faculty could opt for not having an exam on a weekend, but could not also opt not to have an evening exam). He said he would share these ideas with Jesse Barba.

FTE Letter

Rob next asked the committee to consider a draft of a letter to department chairs inviting proposals for FTEs for the coming year. Catherine reported that a donor has given funds to establish an FTE line for a position in the area of Race and American Law. Although it is unusual to accept money dedicated to a particular field in this way, she said this area represents an important gap in the curriculum and could appeal to as many as ten departments. She asked the committee whether it would want to add this as an area of interest. Alternatively, she said she could announce this new line at a meeting of department chairs. Committee members preferred that she announce this FTE line at a chairs' meeting so she could respond to questions about it.

Asked about the status of cluster hires, Catherine said cluster requests have proved an effective tool for recruiting faculty of color and proved especially effective in attracting senior faculty for the trustee-allocated special diversity FTEs. Since the College has now filled those positions and also used replacement positions for several other cluster hires, the CEP will need to decide how it wants to allocate the available positions and who will receive the new line in Race and American Law.

Chris agreed that the cluster hires can be beneficial in some instances; however, they force departments to package a position for an area that may not reflect the department's greatest needs. He was not opposed to inviting cluster requests this year but felt that many departments might be better served by requesting FTEs individually unless there are very compelling synergies. Catherine said cluster hires have been helpful in filling the College's needs, while not always focused on a department's greatest area of need, and the themes have been effective in attracting strong faculty and retaining faculty by making the College a more attractive place to work.

Rob was skeptical of including clusters this year. While cluster themes have been very effective for hiring "colleagues of diverse backgrounds" in the humanities, these are generally unavailable to departments facing the highest student-to-faculty ratios and hence have not been and can never be successful for those departments. He noted that STEM fields typically suffer from a lack of diversity in the talent pool. Catherine suggested the clusters did not necessarily have to be focused on identity politics. The committee could revise the description and allow clusters for other purposes. She noted that the College has new faculty lines which are largely in STEM areas, broadly conceived, and a cluster of positions in a particular area might prove to be an attractive recruiting tool. She agreed that the College clearly needs more faculty in STEM fields, whether or not it decides to include them as cluster hires. The College will still do all it can to attract faculty of color.

Rob did not believe that the departments in question would be able to attract a better pool of candidates, and certainly not a more diverse pool of candidates, by focusing on a subfield. In these departments, a single senior colleague in one's field, already on the permanent faculty at Amherst, would be far more attractive to a prospective hire than would the promise of other as-yet-unknown hires in that field. Based both on this philosophy and in the actual experience of hiring at the college, he believed that for an optimal applicant pool, in terms of both demographic diversity and academic strength, traditional single hires would be more effective in these departments. Sandi said she did not favor privileging cluster requests in the FTE request letter, even if the committee could still consider cluster requests.

The meeting adjourned at 9:50 a.m.