

Committee on Educational Policy
September 18, 2019

In attendance: Faculty: Tekla Harms; Edward Melillo, chair; Christian Rogowski; Krupa Shandilya; Adam Sitze. Provost/Dean of the Faculty: Catherine Epstein, ex officio. Students: Gabriel Echarte '22. Recorder: Nancy Ratner, Director of Academic Projects.

Tekla Harms, acting briefly as chair of the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP), called the meeting to order at 8:45 a.m. in Clark House 100.

Reduced Course Load

Catherine noted that the college has a minimum course load of three courses, which applies to all students, not including those who for Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) purposes are permitted a reduced course load (RCL). The question has now arisen whether a student with an RCL may register for just two courses if both are science courses with half-course labs associated with them. The class deans believe this does not meet the minimum requirement, but Catherine said she and the registrar both believe it should, since a student taking two science courses with half-course labs would be permitted to drop a third course if they encountered insurmountable academic difficulty, under the new rules.

Tekla pointed out that would be the case only if they had not already exhausted their limit of four half-courses. Catherine suggested that two science courses with labs would still meet the minimum course load but would leave a student who had already counted four half courses with a deficiency to be made up the following summer.

This led to a wider discussion of the implications of the role of half courses. Tekla also noted that there are no rules about the vetting of half courses. Now that the faculty has approved the new half-course lab policy, she thought the CEP should begin vetting all half courses, including those that have been eligible to be combined to count towards graduation in the past. Adam also thought the CEP should have authority over half courses and could require that all half courses (including those that historically have been eligible for graduation credit) be submitted to the CEP for approval. This would allow the CEP to take a fresh look at the policy. Tekla also noted that some department pages reference the possibility of half special topics courses. Although the committee has not previously vetted special topics, she thought these should also be included. Adam suggested Nancy obtain a list of all half courses, assemble the legislative history of the half-course policy, and find catalog language that currently references half courses so the committee can discuss this further at its next meeting.

Update from the Provost

Catherine mentioned that 215 students have opted for the Flexible Grading Option (FGO) this semester. She also noted that this semester there have been very few courses with low enrollments (courses with fewer than five students) and said she hoped that these would only require an occasional adjustment in the future. This information did not include upper level language courses and courses taught by visitors and new faculty members in this calculation.

Travel Policy, continued

Returning to the travel policy, committee members thought the next step would be for Nancy to send Director of Global Education Janna Behrens their questions and suggestions so she could clarify a few points. Their concerns focused on two issues: how these rules would affect field trips and course-related trips; and whether the policy, in potentially limiting freedom of inquiry, is appropriate for an educational

institution. On the first issue, Tekla noted that this policy provides a process that students follow for study abroad but no such process for faculty members who plan to take students on a field trip. She asked that the process be clarified for faculty-led trips.

Turning to the second issue, Adam pointed out the qualitative distinction between giving advice and penalizing students afterwards if they do not follow the advice; he particularly objected to penalizing a student who might choose to travel abroad, despite the risk, with a retroactive penalty. Catherine said the policy is designed to limit liability for the college by preventing students from going to dangerous places. Denying credit for the course prevents students with greater financial means from using personal funds to circumvent the policy and applies the policy equally to all students, regardless of the students' finances. Adam questioned whether the college had the right to prevent a student from studying in a dangerous country. Catherine argued that the college did have that right. While students with the financial funds are free to travel to risky places, under this policy the college will not reward them with college credit for doing so.

Further formulating his concerns, Adam asked on what grounds travel would be considered so unsafe that a student would learn nothing by undertaking it. He thought the right to engage in such travel fell squarely under the right to free inquiry. Tekla suggested the appropriate standard would consider whether the travel was likely to expose the student to excessive danger. Christian agreed that denying credit for study away is acceptable if it avoids exposing students to excessive physical dangers; students retain the ability to engage in free inquiry from a safe distance without raising the same concerns. Adam considered safety a legitimate concern, but he thought denying course credit raised other concerns. Catherine said this would affect a very small number of cases, and in each case the risks involved would outweigh the reason for the student to travel to study in particular places. While this policy denies the student academic credit, it would not prevent the student from pursuing research, including a thesis on the topic, afterwards.

Adam asked why it would not be sufficient to warn students that it might be risky to study in a particular country. Tekla pointed out that in so far as Amherst funds are used for study abroad it would make Amherst responsible for the experience, exposing the college to liability. Catherine added that the college recently changed its study abroad policy to require students to pay tuition to Amherst College while studying abroad, and this changes the college's responsibility to students when they study away.

Adam asked what would happen if the student provided a cogent argument for studying abroad in a possibly risky place. Catherine said the college vets all study abroad programs and would weigh the student's arguments against the possible risks. The committee asked whether there are clear criteria for the approval of study abroad programs that could be shared with the committee. Adam then raised a different question: if students can receive credit for studying in vacuous programs abroad, why not allow them credit for studying in risky places? The committee agreed to examine the criteria for study abroad and asked that Nancy share their concerns about this policy with Janna.

Curricular Practical Training (CPT)

The committee next returned to its general discussion of how other institutions interpret the rules around CPT.

The meeting adjourned at 9:45 a.m.