

Committee on Educational Policy
September 25, 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.

Edward Melillo, chair of the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP), called the meeting to order at 8:45 a.m. in Clark House 100.

Alliance to Advance the Liberal Arts Colleges

Catherine mentioned that Amherst will participate in the meeting of the Alliance to Advance the Liberal Arts Colleges at Carleton College on November 1-3, 2019, and she asked if anyone on the CEP wished to represent the committee at that meeting. The topic of the assembly is "The Challenges of Balancing the Humanities, STEM, and Other Fields in the Liberal Arts." Catherine, Darryl Harper, Lyle McGeoch, and Sanan Nader-Esfahani plan to attend. Christian said he would let Catherine know if he could attend.

Minutes

The committee approved the minutes of the meetings of September 4th, September 11th, and September 18th. Adam asked about the percentage of the student body that has a disability and might be eligible for a reduced course load. Catherine said about a quarter of the student body is registered with the Office of Accessibility Services, but she only knew of one student who had qualified for a reduced course load in recent years.

Default form for tenured faculty course evaluations

Catherine next brought to the committee a question that had been raised by the Committee of Six. Now that the college has adopted a common course evaluation form that will be used to evaluate the teaching of all pre-tenure faculty, the Committee of Six thought it might be useful for that form to serve as the default evaluation form for tenured faculty. This might, for example, help inform tenured faculty as they read the evaluations of their pre-tenure colleagues, and students might find it beneficial to evaluate all of their courses using the same form. Catherine pointed out that the CEP is responsible for determining the default teaching evaluation form that will be used by tenured faculty, and at the moment, the default form offers a different set of questions. If the CEP decided to adopt the common form used by pre-tenure faculty, tenured faculty would still have the ability to edit questions or opt to use a different form.

Christian recalled that the idea of everyone, including tenured faculty, using the same form had been presented as a recommendation when the faculty discussed adopting the common form for pre-tenure faculty to ensure equity across the board. Adam asked whether faculty members would still have the freedom to design and use their own forms if the CEP adopted this form. Catherine said they would. Tekla pointed out that the common form also includes an optional question that could be altered, depending on the field. Adam said, for the record, that he still has serious concerns about end-of-semester teaching evaluations in general, among which are their promotion of short-term thinking and their commodification of teaching. Edward asked whether students would prefer to have a common form. Gabe thought students appreciated the opportunity to comment on courses and would like using the same form for all faculty. The committee approved adopting the common form as the default course evaluation form.

Flexible Grading Option (FGO)

Turning to another question that has been brought to her attention, Catherine said there may be some ambiguity about how to interpret the Flexible Grading Option (FGO) policy. Under this policy if students wish to opt for a “pass,” they must do so within the five-day period after the deadline for submitting grades. Noting that some faculty may submit grades late, she and Jesse Barba both believe this should be interpreted as requiring students to opt for the “pass” within five days *after the grade has been submitted*. Under this interpretation, the student would not be penalized if the faculty member were to submit grades late. Catherine said Nick Horton had raised this question. He thought it would be helpful if the CEP were to clarify the timing in case grades were submitted late. Adam supported the interpretation preferred by Catherine and Jesse, but asked that the language of the policy be changed when possible to explicitly reflect that interpretation. Tekla suggested the committee review the previous conversation it had about this policy before taking any action. Nancy said she would send the committee the minutes of that conversation and will place this on the agenda so the committee can return to this question at its next meeting.

Tekla added that one solution might be to allow students to appeal to the registrar if their instructor submits grades after the deadline. Adam agreed and suggested that an explicitly stated appeals policy might reduce student confusion and make it easier for Jesse to determine whether a student was abiding by the spirit of the FGO policy and allow more time in the case of a late grade submission. Catherine thought this was a sensible approach. Setting up an appeals process would also give the committee time to see what other issues arise before asking the faculty to vote changes to the FGO.

Conversion of course to Pass/Fail

Catherine next asked the committee to return briefly to the policy voted last spring that allows students, in exceptional circumstances, to “convert one course to Pass/Fail after the end of the add/drop period.” She and Jesse Barba both believe this conversion should only be permitted during the semester in which the student is enrolled in the course. She asked whether the CEP interpreted the language in this manner. The committee was in full agreement that the intention of this policy would not allow a course to be converted after the semester had ended. Catherine said she would convey this to Jesse who can inform the class deans. Students cannot convert a course without the class dean’s approval.

New courses

Edward next asked the committee to review a group of new courses. The committee recommended some minor edits before approving the courses.

Half courses

Edward asked the committee next to turn to the question of half courses. Nancy shared a list of 87 half courses that students have enrolled in this semester (and noted that the Catalog includes 150 possible half courses). Tekla said she was relieved to see that there had not been a flood of new half courses, and that those in the Catalog fall into predictable buckets. She also noted that no lab half courses exist independently of their associated science course. All other half courses stand alone, without an associated full-credit course.

Adam asked how many students were enrolled in half courses this semester. Nancy said she would get this information. Tekla said she was more interested in how many students would ultimately choose to use the half course as a way to reduce a course load in a subsequent semester. The number enrolling in half courses is less informative, since the science courses required for students interested in pre-med by

design enroll students in half course labs. This information will not be available until more time has passed.

Adam then suggested the committee use this year to think about the questions raised by faculty members during the debate. Will students use this policy as a way to reduce subsequent course loads, even if they have strong academic records? Will students who are enrolled in one-and-one-half-credit lab courses take fewer humanities courses than they did in the past? How will the CEP vet half courses?

The question of vetting half courses led to a number of other questions. The committee thought it should now vet all half courses, including those currently in the Catalog. Before doing so, however, the committee must determine what standard half courses should meet. Should the committee only vet the content of a half course that is not linked to a full course? For how much time must a half course meet? Should the amount of time be different if the half course involves one-on-one contact with the instructor? Some noted that combining half courses for credit towards the major remains at the discretion of the department, but a limited number of half courses can be combined towards graduation.

Tekla suggested the committee develop descriptive parameters for half courses, possibly detailing the length of time that a half course meets. Catherine pointed out that asking music instructors to meet for longer than the current 50-minute lesson would have monetary consequences. She thought courses in which the student meets one-on-one with the instructor provides a more intense and focused meeting than the experience a student would have in other courses. Special topics courses, tutorials, and thesis student meetings all function in similar ways. The committee members said they would be interested to hear Jesse's opinion on how the college's accreditors might interpret one-hour music instruction. Do the accreditors see this as a fundamentally different experience?

Tekla thought the committee should start by independently thinking about reasonable parameters for half courses. Adam suggested the committee begin with a working definition of a course, using federal or accreditor standards as guidelines. Instructors could treat these standards as a point of departure, tailoring them to fit their own disciplines. The CEP could then vet instructors' interpretations to make sure those interpretations are not arbitrary. Tekla said a half course ought to entail a combined six hours of independent work and contact time, but she said she worried about tying this definition to federal guidelines. Edward suggested the committee return to this question of what constitutes a half course at its next meeting.

The meeting adjourned at 9:45 a.m.