

Committee on Educational Policy

September 29, 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, called the meeting to order at 8:30 a.m., and the committee approved the minutes from the previous meeting.

FTE letter

The committee approved the final draft of the letter and asked that it be sent as soon as the provost's office calculates the approximate number of available FTEs.

Course caps policy

Rob asked the committee to consider whether there should be particular guidelines to help faculty establish reasonable course caps. Chris thought it might be helpful to have default enrollment caps, based on the type of course; defaults might reduce the potential for inequity that can arise from idiosyncratic caps, which may fall particularly hard on untenured faculty. Rob noted another inequity: faculty teaching continuing courses approved under an earlier regime are not asked to raise the caps when the CEP changes its expectations, but faculty teaching new courses are required to abide by the new system. He also noted that there is a related issue—the increasing tendency to propose very small upper-level courses, skewing the curriculum away from a more robust offering of introductory courses. He wondered what steps the committee might take to encourage departments to offer more courses at the introductory level that would be open to a wide swath of interested students.

Nancy informed the committee that Jesse is preparing a summary of how departments distribute their courses across levels so the committee can think about how this distribution may have changed over the last five years. Sandi asked that the table include actual course enrollment numbers, not just the proposed caps, since the two can diverge significantly.

Chris said Amherst has had a perennial issue with enrollment caps, resulting in inequities across and within departments, and caps are just a piece of this. A more mechanical approach, with guidelines for each type of course, might help. He pointed to Hamilton College which seems to have default categories such that, for example, standard courses cap enrollment at 40 students while writing-intensive courses have a cap of 18 and advanced seminars are allowed to cap at 12 students. While not proposing that the committee adopt those numbers, he thought this standardized approach was worth considering. Rob agreed that the CEP should consider adopting this more standardized system for capping courses, but only if the committee also revisits all existing caps to ensure equity.

Rob also supported examining the curricular offerings to ensure that departments maintain an appropriate balance between their introductory and upper-level courses. He noted that this is in departments' self-interest, since there is a strong correlation between programs that offer a large number of seats in 100-level courses and the number of majors they attract. Students new to a field need a pipeline that lets them gain familiarity with the discipline. Chris thought it was reasonable to

require departments to balance their upper-level courses with 100- and 200-level offerings. Sandi agreed, noting that her advisees sometimes find it hard to identify courses that are truly open to students who want to explore a new field. Isaiah mentioned that students find the numbering system very confusing. Many introductory courses are not routinely labeled as 100-level.

Catherine said the more fundamental issues revolve around the class schedule. Rob said a scheduling solution could be made fairly easily if courses met at different times on different days of the week. Catherine said the resulting schedule would not be compatible with Five College courses. She noted that the Math department's decision to stop offering a fourth hour has made some other scheduling changes easier. Among other options, she noted that departments could be asked to use each time slot before being permitted to use the slot for a second course. The course slots could also breach the 4:00 p.m. barrier, and faculty could make better use of the 8:30 a.m. slot. Sandi pointed out that some departments schedule courses in overlapping slots intentionally and for good reasons. Rob agreed and added that small departments could still focus their courses on the most congested times, under a required scheduling scheme. Chris suggested instead allowing departments to submit preferred times but not give them total autonomy for the actual scheduling. Instead of trying to get a department to voluntarily agree on times, it might be preferable to create constraints. Rob said the registrar could require a small department to rotate through time slots over the course of multiple semesters; that is, a given time slot could not be re-used in a subsequent semester until all other time slots had been used in the interim, an idea that some thought could have an impact.

Catherine said some of these ideas would be compatible with a move by the Faculty Executive Committee to create a daytime faculty meeting slot. Chris said Friday afternoons are very problematic for courses—students have athletic events, Loeb trips, job interviews, trips home—but it might be a good time for faculty meetings. Rob agreed, adding that for this reason Friday afternoons were the only daytime slot he could foresee working for daytime faculty meetings. If that proved impossible, he wondered whether evening faculty meetings would be more palatable, especially if it were made clear to staff that they were not required to attend the meetings. Catherine thought most staff viewed their attendance at faculty meetings as a privilege. She asked whether the committee wanted to take this on. Sandi thought the committee might as well if the faculty meeting time is changing. She noted that her department schedules labs every day and uses every time slot, so she thought this would not be simple. The committee will need to begin by thinking about how many slots are needed for courses that meet three times a week and how many are needed for courses that meet twice a week.

Chris said the College also should create space within the schedule for a community hour. Rob noted that reserving an hour might require more classrooms, since the displacement of the courses at that hour would force the College's courses to be crammed into a smaller number of remaining weekly hours. In his experience, students will not voluntarily take courses at 4:00 p.m., even with popular instructors, and the preferred classrooms are fully scheduled during the most popular time slots. He thought this might require changes in campus culture, something which is not easy to do. Catherine suggested bringing Jesse into the conversation at some point.

Pass/fail (p/f) policy

Rob turned next to the pass/fail (p/f) policy and pointed in particular to a letter from Andrew Dole, raising issues with the current policy. Faculty have been inundated with students asking what grade they will get and then basing their p/f decision on how best to protect their GPA. The letter recommended requiring students to declare p/f earlier in the semester. Rob also mentioned a problem raised last year

by Rick López. In an unanticipated loophole, current policy allowed students guilty of academic dishonesty to convert their courses to p/f, masking their “D” grade penalty. Rob said he has also heard that students in group assignments can feel undermined by a student who, taking the course p/f, does not fully engage in joint projects. He thought the instructor should know who is taking the course p/f. Chris agreed. Currently, it can be hard for an instructor to know whether a student who appears to be struggling in a course is truly making an effort or simply taking the course p/f. In the previous system, the professor had to sign the form, and this allowed departments to protect students from making unfortunate decisions. Chris also noted that the current system creates incentives for students to use pass/fail primarily to manage GPA, and this is adding to grade inflation while undermining the purpose of encouraging exploration of the curriculum.

Sandi thought the committee should definitely close the loophole that allowed the students involved in academic dishonesty to convert their grade to p/f. She also mentioned that the current policy went through several iterations. The late deadline was requested by class deans who wanted a way to rescue struggling students.

Gent noted that professors have the ability to refuse to reveal a grade to a student. Rob said this raises an issue for untenured faculty who may not feel so empowered. Catherine wondered whether students should have fewer p/f options, perhaps two courses instead of four, and she also wondered if it would help to change the deadline to the end of the semester when students would know their grades. Rob said the purpose of p/f is to encourage exploration and to save a student who is in academic trouble, neither of which provides a justification for a flexible p/f policy. Sandi thought students should be required to have a conversation with someone before changing a class to p/f; declaring p/f in particular courses could potentially close off opportunities, like applying to medical school; students need to be apprised of the ramifications of their decisions. Rob suggested an earlier deadline and a late option requiring the approval of the student’s advisor, instructor, and class dean for a late change to p/f.

Isaiah was concerned about an early declaration. In his experience, GPA drives class participation. If students declare p/f early on, they might stop participating in the class. Gent worried that professors might make the course harder to pass if they know students are taking the course p/f. Chris said students taking a class p/f generally will pass unless they totally disengage from the course. Rob said the previous p/f deadline system had an early deadline, and students generally used p/f for the right reasons. He agreed with Chris that the current system does not work well. Sandi asked whether allowing students to change their grade after knowing it would change course exploration. Should students have this option twice over four years? Would it still serve the same purposes? Gent thought it might be helpful to allow first-year students to have longer to decide, since they would have less knowledge about courses when they enroll.

The meeting adjourned at 9:50 a.m.