

Committee on Educational Policy

September 8, 2022

In attendance: Faculty: Robert Benedetto, Chair; Sandra Burkett; Mekhola Gomes; Chris Kingston; Geoffrey Sanborn. Provost and Dean of the Faculty: Catherine Epstein, ex officio. Recorder: Nancy Ratner, Director of Academic Projects.

Rob Benedetto, chair of the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP), called the meeting to order at 8:30 a.m. in Porter Lounge and welcomed the committee to a new year.

Latin honors

Rob asked the committee to begin by reviewing a Latin honors proposal which had been developed by the previous year's committee. If approved by the faculty, Rob noted that this new policy would normally become effective for all students beginning with the class of 2027, with current students grandfathered into the old policy. Last year's committee noted that many current students might prefer to have their Latin honors calculated under this new policy, while others might not have had sufficient time to fulfill the breadth requirement and might therefore prefer to use the current policy. He asked if this committee supported allowing currently enrolled students to receive Latin honors under whichever method would result in the higher level of honors. The committee supported that approach and agreed that the proposal was now ready to be sent to the Faculty Executive Committee (FEC).

Course proposals spring 2023, letter to faculty

Rob welcomed Jesse Barba to the meeting. The committee approved the draft letter soliciting additional spring course proposals, but asked Jesse to verify the average class size before finalizing the letter.

Academic calendar, 2023-24

Rob moved next to issues related to an academic calendar for 2023-24. Two issues, in particular, need to be settled before Jesse can draft a calendar—whether next year's fall semester should again start before Labor Day and whether the academic calendar should include a January term.

Catherine noted that, while ideally the committee would propose a three-year calendar, there are still too many undecided issues at this point for such a conversation. Regarding a January term, Catherine said the committee has now received a report from the ad hoc committee that evaluated the two J-terms held during the pandemic. That committee pointed to problems with offering academic courses during J-term and questioned whether future J-term models should include courses for formal course credit. Catherine added that the UMass schedule for next year is still under discussion. The faculty union at UMass opposes beginning its semester before Labor Day.

Jesse explained that UMass's late decision to finalize its calendar for this academic year has placed its spring term out of sync with the start to the spring term at the other four colleges, creating a situation that is very problematic. The university's spring semester begins one day before Amherst's add-drop period ends, and the university's final exams end on May 25, too late for graduating seniors to receive grades in time for commencement and resulting in both Amherst and UMass graduations occurring on the same weekend. He believes the registrar's office may decide to advise Amherst seniors not to take UMass classes in the spring semester due to the late end to finals. He also worries that the late UMass start to the spring semester will result in many dropped seats on the final day of Amherst's add-drop. Asked how many Amherst students typically take courses at UMass in the spring semester, Jesse estimated about 100, many of them seniors. His office always requests UMass professors to issue grades early but this year's gap between the end of finals for UMass and Amherst's commencement exercises will be insurmountable.

Turning to the need to synchronize future schedules, Jesse said some parts of the curriculum—for example, the Five College certificate programs—depend upon the interchange. If Amherst wants to adjust to the UMass schedule (which now includes a winter term), Amherst would need to end the semester after Memorial Day weekend in future years. This would delay reunion weekend and would be extremely unpopular with many Amherst staff members. Rob and Sandi both noted that summer jobs and internships depend on an earlier graduation date and an earlier end to the semester. They opposed scheduling such a late end to the semester while noting that students would also feel inconvenienced if they could no longer take classes in the spring at UMass.

Jesse said Amherst could alternatively move commencement earlier, holding it before Memorial Day weekend, to avoid both institutions holding graduation on the same weekend. To achieve an earlier graduation date, Amherst has a number of options, including starting the spring semester earlier, scheduling fewer make-up days, shortening the spring reading period, eliminating senior week, and deciding not to provide real diplomas at graduation. An earlier schedule would better align Amherst College with Hampshire, Mount Holyoke, and Smith College.

Geoff asked why the reading period had been extended. Jesse and Rob explained that this was a recent change from the 14-week schedule to a 13-week schedule that allowed make-up days and a longer reading period, but it also created a long gap between the end of instruction and the beginning of exams, a change that was not popular with everyone. Jesse also mentioned that UMass intersperses its exam schedule with single-day breaks for reading, an approach that Jesse thought might be worth emulating.

Rob asked Jesse to construct three calendars—one with an early commencement, one aligning with the UMass schedule, and one with a different January break. All would need to start the fall semester before Labor Day. Jesse said he could do this and would try to identify the Amherst faculty who are closely associated with Five-College certificate programs so the committee could discuss the repercussions of this calendar with them. He acknowledged that the UMass calendar is not desirable for Amherst College, but he also noted that abandoning the easy interchange with UMass would have a cost. Starting the

spring semester earlier would effectively reduce the consortium to an interchange of four closely aligned institutions. The consortium can be out of sync by a few days without causing problems, but the current eight-day gap with UMass is very problematic. Asked how many seniors enroll in Five-College certificate programs, Jesse said about a dozen students in a popular year will do so; people value the consortium and will be unhappy about this change.

Chris said Amherst is already out of alignment with UMass. He thought there would be faculty sentiment in favor of this earlier calendar. Jesse thought delaying the reunion until two weeks after graduation would also improve staff morale. The College has already changed the rules to allow students to walk at graduation whether they have completed their degree or not, so the move away from giving an actual diploma might not be that difficult.

Catherine asked about the possibility of starting the spring semester two weeks earlier, holding graduation exercises immediately following the end of exams. This would not affect the academic calendar, just the social calendar, and it would be good for internships, jobs, and faculty research. Chris noted that starting on January 23 would effectively eliminate J-term. Catherine said the proposal assumes a less academic J-term so she thought this would be acceptable. Rob said it had been challenging to create enough hours during the three-week J-term required for an academic course, given accreditors' expectations for the number of hours a student should devote to a standard course. UMass has avoided this problem by creating a winter term that starts in mid-December.

Jesse said he would draft three spring calendars, one that would begin the semester one week earlier, one that begins two weeks earlier, and a third calendar that would align with the UMass schedule. These all assume that real diplomas would be mailed later. He noted that Amherst is in the habit of approving one-year calendars, but it would be preferable to return to three-year cycles since many offices depend on knowing the dates, and the college also needs to signal graduation dates to families.

Room allocations

Jesse noted that the faculty used to be able to upgrade to larger rooms if they had high registration numbers. The registrar now selects rooms to match the enrollment cap or the size needed for a previous iteration of an uncapped course, but a shortage of rooms of a particular size now means that faculty are unable to move to larger rooms to accommodate high interest in a course. He wanted the committee to be aware of this practice which is intended to limit the harm to students who might otherwise be surprised to be dropped due to inadequate space in the room, despite the lack of an enrollment cap. Nancy said this is noted in the next letter soliciting course proposals.

The meeting adjourned at 10:50 a.m.