

Committee on Educational Policy
September 9, 2020

In attendance: Faculty: Sandra Burkett; Edward Melillo, chair; Krupa Shandilya; Adam Sitze. Provost and Dean of the Faculty: Catherine Epstein, *ex officio*. Students: Cole Graber-Mitchell '22. Recorder: Nancy Ratner, Director of Academic Projects.

Edward Melillo, chair of the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP), called the meeting to order at 11:00 a.m. via Zoom, and the committee approved the minutes of the meeting on September 2, 2020.

Class meeting schedule, spring semester

The committee turned first to a draft class schedule, which would extend the amount of time between teaching blocks and expand the hours available for teaching for the spring semester, continuing the approach to class scheduling that has been in use for this fall's semester. This schedule assumes that the need for social distancing and reduced classroom capacities is likely to continue during the spring semester. Noting that the Tuesday evening slot overlaps with potential faculty meetings, the committee suggested moving the evening classes to Monday and Wednesday evenings, perhaps starting at 8:10 p.m., or at 8:00 p.m. if the 6:40 p.m. slot can be scheduled slightly earlier. Catherine said she would investigate these possibilities with Jesse Barba, the director of registrar services and institutional research.

Letter soliciting course proposals

The committee next approved a letter soliciting additional course proposals for the spring semester. Edward said he would now forward the letter to the faculty.

Flexible Grading Option, readmission, degree requirements

Last spring the class deans requested revisions to three policies: The Flexible Grading Option (FGO); the acceptance of credits from other institutions for students who have voluntarily withdrawn and then subsequently returned to Amherst College; and degree requirements for graduation. Edward asked the committee to return to the revisions proposed by the deans.

Flexible Grading Option (FGO)

Edward explained that the committee had worked extensively to clarify this policy last year. As the complications of the FGO became clearer, the class deans recommended that the committee consider a number of revisions to the policy and also offered an alternative, simpler approach. In the simpler version, students would have the option of waiting until the end of the semester to declare a course pass-fail. Students would be allowed four such courses, with no more than one per semester and would require their advisor's permission before making the pass-fail declaration. The committee preferred the alternative, noting its simplicity. The FGO had become a complex legislative instrument that required so many exceptions that it had become unmanageable. The committee thought the deadline of the last day of classes would have advantages, since this would allow seniors to have the same option as everyone else, and wondered whether the deadline could perhaps be set even later, extending it to the last day of finals.

The committee suggested several additional revisions to the alternative, clarifying that the first-year seminar would not be eligible for this option, a policy that has long been in place, and dropping the FGO

designation and referring to this instead as a “pass-fail” option. There were some initial concerns that this pass-fail option would serve more as a GPA-protection policy than a policy to encourage curricular exploration. Under the FGO, students are not allowed to make changes after add-drop (although in practice many students seek exceptions to allow a late FGO declaration); this would move that decision much later for all students.

The committee thought it particularly important to clarify the importance of students first discussing this pass-fail decision with their advisor before making the declaration. Students may not be able to process the implications of pass-fail at the beginning of the semester and should be afforded a moment when they must discuss the decision with their advisor. The goal is to respect students’ autonomy while providing checks and balances that will support students’ needs. The committee thought this could be done by making the need to obtain the advisor’s approval more explicit.

The committee discussed whether the FGO, in which students know their grade before deciding whether to opt for a “pass,” functions more to protect their GPA than this policy, in which the student would not actually know the grade. Ultimately, the committee was mostly satisfied that, like the FGO, this still encourages students to continue working hard all semester. The more important difference between the policies seemed to concern its timing. Students under the proposed pass-fail system could choose the option much later—presumably after the semester is well underway—than under the FGO, decreasing students’ stress. To reduce the possibility that students might decide to act cautiously and choose the “pass” earlier in the semester, thereby removing the incentive to work through the exam period, the committee suggested moving the deadline to the end of the exam period. The other important difference concerned the timing of the students’ consultation with their advisor about declaring a course pass-fail. If students delayed their decision until the end of the exam period, a serious conversation might be more challenging to arrange.

In the end, the committee agreed that it preferred the pass-fail policy, noting that it would decrease students’ need to predict which courses they would find most difficult, would be easier to understand, and would be much simpler to implement. The committee recommended that Edward send a revised version of the simpler pass-fail policy to the class deans, for their review, and explain that the committee now recommends replacing the current FGO policy with the following pass-fail policy:

PASS-FAIL (P/F) GRADING OPTION

The aim of the Pass-Fail (P/F) option is to encourage students to take intellectual risks, to explore the breadth of Amherst’s open curriculum, and to reward students for engaging fully in all their courses. Under this option, students may elect to declare one course per semester, and no more than four courses over four years, to be taken pass-fail. A declaration of pass-fail requires the permission of the student’s advisor(s) and must be made before the final day of the exam period. If a student designates a course pass-fail, the student’s transcript will have a “P” recorded in the case of passing grades (“D” or higher). No grade-point equivalent will be assigned to a “P.” If the letter grade assigned by the instructor is an “F,” an “F” will be recorded on the student’s transcript and will count toward the student’s GPA and class rank. Once students have declared a course pass-fail, they cannot later opt for the grade. Students admitted as first-year students may elect the pass-fail option four times during their Amherst College career. Transfer students admitted as sophomores shall have three pass-fail options, and those admitted as juniors shall have two. The First-year Seminar is not eligible to be taken pass-fail.

Readmission

The committee next discussed the class deans' recommendations regarding the policy on readmission and approved the policy after making a few wording changes. The purpose of this change is to clarify that students cannot receive credits towards graduation from other institutions if they have voluntarily withdrawn from the college and later opted to return to the college. The policy approved by the committee is as follows:

READMISSION

All students requesting readmission after voluntary withdrawals, involuntary withdrawals, medical leaves, and academic dismissals and all students on educational leaves who wish to return for the fall semester should write to their class deans as early as possible, but before March 15. For students planning to return for the spring semester, the letters should be received by the College before November 1.

Provisional Administrative Readmission following leave may be offered by the Office of Student Affairs to facilitate processes such as pre-registration and housing where appropriate. However, students must complete all readmission requirements by August 15 for fall and January 5 for spring.

In some cases, additional information, such as an interview on-campus, may be requested. Readmission requests from students seeking to return from academic dismissals and, in some cases from medical leaves, voluntary and involuntary withdrawals, will be referred to the Committee on Academic Standing or the Office of Student Affairs. In these cases, detailed letters requesting readmission, accompanied by grade reports of courses taken at an approved college or university, letters from employers, medical documentation, and other documents supporting the readmission requests should be sent to the Office of Student Affairs. Students on educational leaves should simply confirm their intention of returning to the campus before the above stated dates. Failure to meet these deadlines will jeopardize students' opportunities to participate in the student residence room selection.

THE COLLEGE DOES NOT PERMIT READMISSION FOLLOWING A THIRD ACADEMIC DISMISSAL.

ACADEMIC CREDIT FROM OTHER INSTITUTIONS (Transfer Credit)

Amherst College does not grant academic credit for work completed at other institutions of higher education unless it meets one of the following criteria: (1) each course offered as part of a transfer record has been completed and accepted by the college prior to matriculation at Amherst; (2) the work is part of an exchange program of study in the United States or abroad [approved](#) in advance by a class dean and the Registrar; or (3) the work has been [approved](#) by the Registrar as appropriate to make up a deficiency deriving from work not completed or failed at Amherst College (see [Deficiencies](#)); ~~(4) The work has been approved by the Registrar as appropriate to meet conditions of involuntary leave or medical withdrawal.~~

STUDENTS WHO ARE READMITTED TO AMHERST COLLEGE AFTER VOLUNTARILY TRANSFERRING TO ANOTHER INSTITUTION WILL RECEIVE NO CREDITS TOWARD GRADUATION FOR WORK COMPLETED WHILE ATTENDING OTHER INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION.

Degree Requirements – Course Requirements

The committee next turned to the class deans' recommended revisions to the policy on degree requirements. This policy now allows students to take multiple half courses without having to obtain

special permission. The policy is intended to give struggling students a way to balance their course load during a particularly onerous semester. The committee recommended getting some data from Jesse Barba on how this policy is working and suggested the following changes to clarify the policy:

All students except Independent Scholars are **NORMALLY** required to elect four full courses each semester. The election of a half course in addition to the normal program is at the discretion of the student and without special permission. **IF A COURSE AND LAB COMPONENT HAVE THE SAME NUMBER, THE DEPARTMENT MAY AWARD AN ADDITIONAL HALF COURSE CREDIT FOR THE LAB. HALF CREDITS FOR THOSE LABS DO NOT REQUIRE ADDITIONAL PERMISSIONS FROM THE CLASS DEAN.** A student may not elect more than one half course in any semester except by consent of the class dean and the departments concerned. In such cases, the student's program will be three full courses and two half courses. ~~Half courses are not normally included in the requirement of thirty two course requirement for graduation; however, with the permission of the academic advisor and the class dean, a student may combine two half courses to be counted as equivalent to a full course if (1) the student completes the 4.5 courses in one semester and 3.5 courses in a subsequent semester, or (2) the two halves match within the same semester in a manner designated by the offering department, with the approval of the offering department (in this case, the student's program will be three or four full courses and two half courses). No more than four half courses may be so combined for credit toward the degree.~~

In exceptional cases a student may, with the permission of both the student's academic advisor and class dean, take five full courses for credit during a given semester. Such permission is normally granted only to students of demonstrated superior academic ability, responsibility, and will. Fifth courses cannot be used to accelerate graduation. ~~On occasion, a student who has failed a course may be permitted to take a fifth course in a given semester if, in the judgment of the Committee on Academic Standing, this additional work can be undertaken without jeopardizing the successful completion of all courses taken in that semester. Students may only retake a course for which they have received a failing grade or from which they have withdrawn in a prior semester.~~

WITH THE PERMISSION OF THE ACADEMIC ADVISOR AND THE CLASS DEAN, A STUDENT MAY COMBINE TWO HALF COURSES TO BE COUNTED AS EQUIVALENT TO A FULL COURSE, PROVIDED THE HALF COURSES MATCH IN A MANNER APPROVED BY THE OFFERING DEPARTMENT(S). NO MORE THAN FOUR HALF COURSES MAY BE SO COMBINED FOR CREDIT TOWARD THE DEGREE. IN THIS CASE, THE STUDENT EITHER (1) COMPLETES 4.5 COURSES IN ONE SEMESTER AND 3.5 COURSES IN A SUBSEQUENT SEMESTER, OR (2) TAKES TWO HALF COURSES WITHIN THE SAME SEMESTER (IN THIS CASE, THE STUDENT'S PROGRAM WILL BE THREE OR FOUR FULL COURSES AND TWO HALF COURSES).

A student who by failing a course incurs a deficiency in the number of courses required for normal progress toward graduation is usually expected to make up that course deficiency by taking a three- or four-semester hour **(AS DETERMINED BY THE REGISTRAR)** course at another approved institution during the summer prior to the first semester of the next academic year and no later than the semester prior to the student's last semester at Amherst. **ALL COURSE DEFICIENCIES MUST NORMALLY BE MADE UP PRIOR TO THE FIRST SEMESTER OF THE FINAL YEAR, EXCEPT THOSE ARISING IN THE FINAL YEAR, IN WHICH CASE THEY MUST BE MADE UP PRIOR TO GRADUATION. ALL MAKE-UP COURSES MUST BE APPROVED IN ADVANCE BY THE REGISTRAR. COURSES TAKEN AT ANOTHER INSTITUTION BY A STUDENT AFTER WITHDRAWING**

FROM AMHERST COLLEGE ARE NOT APPLICABLE TOWARD THE AMHERST COLLEGE UNDERGRADUATE DEGREE.

STUDENTS MAY ONLY RETAKE A COURSE FOR WHICH THEY HAVE RECEIVED A FAILING GRADE OR FROM WHICH THEY HAVE WITHDRAWN IN A PRIOR SEMESTER.

Students may not add courses after the last day of add/drop at the beginning of each semester or drop courses after this date except as follows:

In any semester prior to the final year, a student who experiences severe academic difficulty and has exhausted all academic resources (e.g., met with professors during office hours, received tutoring, met with class deans, etc.), may be allowed to withdraw from a course without penalty and graduate with 31 courses. This ~~exception~~ AMHERST COLLEGE ACADEMIC COURSE DROP may be invoked only once, and requires permission of the instructor, advisor and class dean. The deadline for withdrawal requests is the end of the tenth week of the semester.

STUDENTS STUDYING OFF-CAMPUS IN AN APPROVED PROGRAM MAY EXERCISE THEIR SINGLE AMHERST COLLEGE ACADEMIC COURSE DROP WITH THE APPROVAL OF THEIR ACADEMIC ADVISOR AND THEIR CLASS DEAN, PROVIDED THEY HAVE EXHAUSTED THOSE ACADEMIC RESOURCES THAT ARE AVAILABLE THROUGH THE OFF-CAMPUS PROGRAM AND PROVIDED THEIR REQUEST IS MADE TO THEIR CLASS DEAN PRIOR TO THE LAST DAY OF THE COURSE AND AS PER THE RULES OF THE OFF-CAMPUS STUDY PROGRAM.

STUDENTS WHO ARE APPROVED FOR A REDUCED COURSE LOAD OF THREE FULL COURSES IN A GIVEN SEMESTER, THROUGH PROCEDURES OVERSEEN BY THE OFFICE OF ACCESSIBILITY SERVICES, MAY GRADUATE WITH A TOTAL OF 31 COURSES.

Further exceptions shall be made for DOCUMENTED EMERGENCIES (HERE UNDERSTOOD AS ~~disabling~~ medical reasons or ~~for reason of~~ grave personal emergencies, RATHER THAN ACADEMIC DIFFICULTIES), and shall be made by the class dean.

~~All course deficiencies must normally be made up prior to the first semester of the final year, except those arising in the final year, in which case they must be made up prior to graduation. All make-up courses must be approved in advance by the registrar.~~

~~Courses taken by a student after withdrawing from Amherst College, as part of a graduate or professional program in which that student is enrolled, are not applicable toward an Amherst College undergraduate degree.~~

Education Studies

Edward next asked the committee to consider the proposal for a new major in Education Studies, reminding the committee of the extensive conversation that last year's committee had on this topic last year. While committee members expressed some concern about the effect on existing majors that new majors present, most thought this a well-developed proposal for a cohesive program, with participation planned by a substantial number and unusually large range of faculty members. Some initial concerns about staffing the new major were alleviated by departments' letters of support. This still left some unease about the robustness of the major if the participating faculty were to leave or retire, always a concern with an interdisciplinary major, but the commitment of newly hired faculty to the major suggests that this will not be a concern for quite some time. The most worrisome implications of adding yet another program centered around the need for a few core members. Ultimately, the major will require dedicating one or two of the college's 189 FTEs to the program. Committee members noted that the college has rarely been successful at removing a program, and some departments find the

diminishing number of their majors to be a concern, a problem that will only increase as programs continue to proliferate. The committee agreed to continue its discussion at its next meeting.

FTE solicitation letter

Edward asked the committee to turn finally to the draft of a letter soliciting FTE requests for the coming year. The committee approved the letter, as drafted.

The meeting adjourned at 12:30 p.m.