FACULTY MEETING MINUTES
March 21, 2018

I. Minutes for the February faculty meeting were accepted.

II. Reports from College Officers
Provost Margaret McFadden
• Her office is working on the requests for additional 2018-19 positions to support the transition to a 4.5 course teaching load. Information on which new positions can be supported will be sent out to chairs and directors soon.
• The search for a new Director of Libraries is reaching the final stage. Faculty are encouraged to attend the public sessions for the four finalists who will be visiting campus in late March and early April.

III. New Business
Condon Medal
• The recipient of this award was chosen by vote of the senior class, and requires ratification by the faculty.
• The faculty unanimously approved the students’ choice, and vowed to maintain absolute secrecy until the winner is announced at the May student awards ceremony.

Academic Affairs Committee
• Russ Johnson and Steve Saunders (representing the AAC) presented a report on grading, with two accompanying motions. The AAC has been reviewing grading policies and trends at Colby, and a few areas of concern have emerged. A major goal of the AAC in presenting this information is to spark thoughtful discussion among the faculty.
• Grades have risen substantially over the past few decades and are now compressed into a very small part of the alphabet.
• There is substantial variation in grading across departments and programs.
• A few additional trends noted are that temporary and newer faculty tend to give higher grades, 100-level courses have somewhat lower grades, and that Jan Plan grades tend to be higher than those from the regular semesters.
• The AAC is concerned that students may not always be getting a realistic assessment of their work, nor a consistent incentive to do their best work. Also, there is concern that there may be inequities for students because of the grading disparities across departments.
• Motion 1 presents a set of grading guidelines to be published in the Course Catalog, the Faculty Handbook, and the Student Handbook.
• Motion 2 calls for departments/programs to be provided annually with information about grading within their unit and across campus.
• The spirit of these motions is not critical or accusatory, but instead is meant to be a generous prod to think about issues around grading.
Questions and Comments:

**Raffael Scheck (History):** Do we have any data on 2016, 2017?
  AAC: Yes, the trend continues.

**Whitney King (Chemistry):** Students are judged based on their grades all the time, for graduate school and job applications, etc. We’re using a grading rubric that is all over the place. Your solution seems rather modest. Did you consider more aggressive solutions?
  AAC: Yes, we considered several possibilities, such as those adopted by Princeton (a quota of no more than 35% A’s) and Wellesley (median grade no higher than B+). We talked about them and then chose not to bring them forward.

**Jeff Katz (Chemistry):** Is a 4.3 still awarded for an A+? Was there consideration of giving 4.0 for an A+.
  AAC: Yes, an A+ counts for 4.3. A change was considered, but the sense of the committee was that an A+ should count differently than an A.

**Jeff Katz (Chemistry):** Will this change the trend or not?
  AAC: We are concerned about the trend, because it makes it harder to distinguish students. We hope that a conversation and guidelines will have a moderating effect.

**Bill Sullivan (Geology):** I am concerned about the trend. I don’t think the motions are bad, but I don’t think they’ll do anything to change the trend. There are powerful incentives to grade higher. It’s easier and there is a correlation with positive student evaluations. There is no incentive beyond my conscience to grade more rigorously. If we really want to make change, a quota system is a terrible way to do it. If we want to change grades, we should look at the incentive structures.
  AAC: The committee talked about this at length. Dartmouth includes grading distribution in tenure considerations.

**Martha Arterberry (Psychology):** I previously worked in a department with a prescribed B-average for 100- and 200-level courses. The expectation was that grades would increase later in the curriculum. Students knew the policy.

**Carol Hurney (Center for Teaching and Learning):** My job is to help faculty improve teaching so that students are learning more. We want to balance the conversation by considering what our grade structure rewards with the learning outcomes. If our goal is about student learning, then our grades need to reflect the learning that our students are doing.

**Aaron Hanlon (English):** How much do we really know about the causal factors?

**Joe Reisert (Government):** A former dean at Harvard (Excellence Without a Soul) wrote a long chapter on grade inflation. Harvard introduced ordinal grades in the 1800s. After WWII, that was changed to a letter scale. Grades started in middle and then moved up. It looks like there’s a natural rate of inflation. If compression is what we’re worried about, we could have a grade above A, or we could recalibrate.

**Mary Beth Mills (Anthropology):** I’m concerned about the implication that there’s a natural bell curve to our students’ performance. This is a troubling implication. I’m also concerned about the implication that our students are in competition in our classes. I am concerned about Motion 2 and the implication that grade distributions might be used for monitoring and assessing each other (tenure, promotion, review).

**Cheryl Townsend Gilkes (Sociology):** Did you look at the grade inflation problem across the comparable NESCAC schools?
AAC: Yes, the same thing is happening at other institutions.

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes (Sociology): We call ourselves highly selective. The starting point for our students is very high compared to other schools. That may influence the perception of the work that we get, and its quality.

AAC: This very often happens with visiting Jan Plan instructors, who initially underestimate the academic ability of Colby students, and end up awarding very high grades. A set of guidelines would be very useful to help them calibrate.

Dan Cohen (Philosophy): Would it be possible to get grade distributions by class size?

AAC: The class size roughly follows the 100-level to 400-level continuum.

Travis Reynolds (Environmental Studies): In France, if you get a 14/20, you’re rocking. 9/20 is passing. Everybody knows that. Is there an outside concern that we’re trying to respond to—that the value of a Colby grade is not accurately related.

AAC: Less the external considerations than the internal considerations (Latin honors). One concern is about rigor, and grading may be a subset of rigor.

Raffael Scheck (History): Thank you for this work. I want to introduce a new letter to be able to go higher. Now the distinction is the non-A, rather than the A. I get the pedagogy of revising to better work, but I don’t get that this needs to be an A.

AAC: The two motions will lie over until the April meeting.

IV. Committee Report

Environmental Advisory Group: Philip Nyhus

- Introduced EAG – Nyhus, Raffael Scheck, Doug Terp, Mina Amundsen, Dale DeBlois
- We circulated a PowerPoint slide deck summarizing EAG activities.
- Notable accomplishments include: Campus climate plan, purchases of electricity, LEED building, solar array, biomass plant, carbon neutrality.
- The EAG’s efforts are closely integrated with students’ work in classes and research. The initial climate plan came from an honors thesis. Carbon offsets came from an honors thesis.
- There are opportunities to help the college with these environmental sustainable initiatives. If you would like to contribute courses, please contact Nyhus, Scheck, Terp, Beauregard (Sustainability Coordinator).

V. Announcements

- Stacey Sherrif (Writing Program): The deadline for $5000 department Writing Enriched Curriculum Grants is Friday, April 6. Feel free to reach out to Stacey or other members of WACAC.
- Walter Hatch (Oak Institute): Just read what is written at the bottom of the agenda.
- Adrian Blevins (Creative Writing): Two Cent Talks tomorrow at 5:30 p.m at the Reddington Museum.
• Travis Reynolds (Phi Beta Kappa): PBK will be sponsoring the David H. Mills Speech Contest. A call for students to participate has gone out. The topic of the speeches will be “What are the roles of the liberal arts in our communities?” The final round will take place at CLAS. Please encourage your students to participate. All Colby faculty are invited to serve as judges for preliminary rounds. There will be a formal call for judges immediately after break.

• Philip Nyhus (Environmental Studies): Author Kim Stanley Robinson will be speaking this evening at 7:00.

Meeting adjourned 4:46pm.

Respectfully submitted,
Russell Johnson
(not the legitimate Faculty Secretary)