

Academic Affairs Committee—November 7, 2017

Present: Sandy Maisel, David Freidenreich, Steve Saunders, Dale Kocevski, Sam Scott, Beth Schiller, Karlene Burrell-McRae, Russ Johnson, Loren McClenahan

I. Minutes from the October 31, 2017 meeting were approved.

II. Grading practices across departments

The committee examined data on grading patterns across departments and programs. These data showed (in a nutshell) that grading at Colby is high overall (55% of all grades awarded are As), and that there is substantial variation between departments and programs. The percentage of A grades within the 33 departments and programs examined ranged from 22% to 75%.

Discussion centered around whether one or both of these phenomena are a problem, and if so is there any possible solution(s) that would not create other substantial problems.

Potential problems resulting from very high grades overall could be 1) that tight compression of grades into a very small part of the possible range make it more difficult for the very best students to stand out, 2) that grades may stop being a meaningful reflection of student achievement, and 3) that it sends the wrong signal to students and others – one that is inconsistent with the goal of maintaining high academic standards and achievement.

Potential problems resulting from the large variation between departments could be 1) that students from lower grading departments are disadvantaged for Latin honors, PBK and other such recognitions, and 2) that faculty members in such departments may be disadvantaged in their course evaluations.

Potential solutions to grade inflation (either across the board or in specific departments) might include more clear communication within departments (especially with new faculty members) about grading expectations and standards, and the possibility of college-wide conversations about such standards. Some concerns were raised that “deflating” grades unilaterally at Colby could disadvantage our graduates (relative to those from other schools) when applying for jobs or graduate school. Concerns was also expressed that efforts to reduce grade inflation might limit academic freedom or prevent the use of certain pedagogies that are felt to be effective for student learning (but which result in very high grades).

Before deciding whether to take any specific action, the committee wished to see more data on a few aspects of grade distribution. For example, are the grading differences between departments substantially driven by differences in the percentage of grades that come from 100-level courses (in which grades are typically lower). The committee also wished to know whether there is a correlation between higher grades and writing-intensive courses, and whether there are any other specific category of class in which grading is consistently higher than average. A request was made to see how grading varies across academic divisions.