

Amended December 18, 2007

The fourteenth meeting of the Committee of Six for the academic year 2007-2008 was called to order by President Marx in his office at 2:30 P.M. on Monday, December 3, 2007. Present were Professors Frank, S. George, Jagannathan, O'Hara, Servos, and Sinos, Dean Call, President Marx, and Assistant Dean Tobin, Recorder.

The Committee turned to personnel matters.

Under "Questions to the Administration," Professor Frank asked about the search committee that she understood was currently being formed for a new Director of the Writing Center. She noted that, at present, there are various unresolved and ongoing conversations taking place at the College about writing and said that it was her understanding that the President wished the Committee of Six to continue this spring last year's discussion of this topic. She pointed out that the English department is conducting a series of conversations in preparation for a departmental external review in the spring, and that one of their topics of consideration will be their role in the teaching of writing at the College. She also commented that the Ad Hoc Committee on Academic Support is working to integrate writing into an overarching structure of academic support. Professor Frank said that her question was similar to the one that the Committee had asked in regard to the search for a new Registrar, that is how to search for a Registrar while simultaneously considering the structure of the Registrar's office. In terms of the Writing Center, she wondered whether these two processes (searching for the position and considering possible changes for the center) were best done concurrently, or whether the search committee should consider the structure of the Writing Center/position before the search begins. Given that some of the Faculty's conversations about writing are likely to have an impact on the kind of Writing Center Director that the College may want to hire, she wondered whether it would make sense to consider an interim appointment for the position.

In response, the Dean noted that considering the structure of the Writing Center and/or the Director position could be a lengthy process. He noted that there are many interested colleagues to be consulted, and a number of issues to be thought through and discussed. While this process takes place, the support that the Writing Center provides to Amherst's students must not be compromised, Dean Call said. A search for an interim Director, whose term would not be known at this time, would be unlikely to produce as strong a field of candidates as a search for a Director would.

Some members argued that it might be difficult to attract candidates for the position if things are not clearly defined in terms of roles and structures, including reporting lines. Others felt that some candidates might find the opportunity to help mold the center, bringing new ideas and energy, to be attractive. It was noted that many faculty feel that the Writing Center should be under the umbrella of the Dean of the Faculty's office. Dean Call said that he feels very strongly that the center must also have ties to the Dean of Students office. He said that a double reporting line for the Writing Center—to him and Ben Lieber, Dean of Students—is under consideration, and that he and Dean Lieber will be meeting with the Committee on Academic Support to discuss this possibility.

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Continuing the conversation, Professor George reiterated a concern expressed previously by Professor O'Hara, that candidates for the Director's position might be reluctant to accept the job if the duties of an assistant or associate dean of students remain a part of the position. Professor Frank agreed and said that most faculty members who would be considering whether to apply—who would most likely be from other institutions—would view these duties as less relevant to the writing issues. She feels that it would be desirable to find a person, with a faculty background if possible, who has been highly trained in the practices and philosophies of teaching writing and who might come out of a rhetoric background, for example. She commented that the teaching of writing has become a respected field of scholarship. Such a person could offer workshops for faculty on the teaching of writing and could also oversee writing services for students. She feels that the Writing Center would garner more prestige among the Faculty if it were positioned as an extension of the Faculty's pedagogy, within the Dean of the Faculty's office, rather than as a part of student life. The Dean asked if a member of the English department might wish to become the Director of the Writing Center. Professor Frank said that this was a possibility the department was mulling over. She noted that the department feels that it may take a leading position, but should not be the only locus of writing instruction at Amherst, since the teaching of writing should be a part of all departmental curricula. President Marx said that the department's taking a leading position does not in any way imply that it would bear sole responsibility for teaching writing.

The Dean asked if the English department would consider adding a new colleague to their department who would hold a part-time tenure-track appointment dedicated to writing instruction that would be coupled with an administrative appointment as the Director of the Writing Center. Professor Frank said that she believes that the department might be open to the possibility. The President also said that he is open to exploring such options, but asked if there might be faculty concern about someone joining their ranks without going through regular procedures, and that such an appointment might not meet the needs of the department. Professor George noted that the scholarly work of a tenure candidate in this field would be unlike that of other tenure candidates at Amherst, if the scholarship focused on, for example, outcomes of different methods of writing instruction. Professor Servos urged the Dean to consider having the Writing Center become a part of the Dean of the Faculty's office, while noting that such a move would not be a reflection in any way on the leadership of the Dean of Students office. Professor Frank agreed and commented that Dean Lieber has been a leader in the effort to improve the writing of Amherst students, particularly those who are less well prepared. Professor O'Hara agreed, noting that, in her new role next year as Senior Advisor to the Dean for Academic Life, she hopes to serve as a touchstone for the Faculty for many of these issues. The Dean noted that it is his hope that Professors Gentzler and Barale will soon have an official role within his office to support writing instruction. Professor Frank said that it would indeed be desirable to meld the curriculum and teaching to an issue (writing instruction) that has been viewed as an issue of academic support. Dean Call agreed.

President Marx wondered if there might be models other than tenured or tenure-track for establishing a position that would allow the Director of the Writing Center to have faculty status.

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The Committee briefly considered whether the model of a Resident Artist/Director might be a workable one. The members then once again turned to personnel matters.

The meeting adjourned at 5:45 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Gregory S. Call  
Dean of the Faculty