

Amended January 31, 2008

The seventeenth meeting of the Committee of Six for the academic year 2007-2008 was called to order by President Marx in his office at 3:30 P.M. on Friday, December 14, 2007. Present were Professors Frank, S. George, Jagannathan, O'Hara, Servos, and Sinos, Dean Call, President Marx, and Assistant Dean Tobin, Recorder.

Dean Call informed the members that Professor Townsend, who will be retiring at the end of this academic year, has told him that he feels uncomfortable with the practice, which started in the late-1990s, of having citations read at Commencement about retiring faculty members. After seeking the opinion of others who will be retiring this year, Professor Townsend found that they shared his view and would prefer not to have citations read about them. The Committee agreed that this tradition need not be continued, while expressing support that the citations continue to be included in the *Alumni Magazine*. The President and the Dean agreed.

This discussion about a change to Commencement led the members to discuss briefly changes in format that had been implemented at Senior Assembly last year. Efforts had been made to redistribute among other celebratory ceremonies the activities and presentations that have typically taken place at Senior Class Exercises during Class Day (the Saturday of Commencement Weekend). The President said that these changes were prompted by sparse attendance at Senior Class Exercises. The changes included having two students, the runners-up for Student Commencement Speaker, speak at Senior Assembly, rather than at Senior Class Exercises. The tradition of a student speaker at Commencement was continued, the President said. The Woods-Travis Prize, the award to the graduating senior who has the highest overall grade average, was given at Commencement last year, as was the Obed Finch Slingerland Memorial Prize, which is awarded to the senior who has "shown by his/her own determination and accomplishment the greatest appreciation of and desire for a college education." In addition, Phebe and Zephaniah Swift Moore Teaching Award recipients were acknowledged at Commencement, rather than at Senior Class Exercises, the President said. The award recognizes secondary school teachers and counselors who have been important in the lives of Amherst students. The presentations of the Thomas H. Wyman 1951 Medal, the Howard Hill Mossman Trophy, and the Psi Upsilon Prize were shifted from Senior Class Exercises to Senior Assembly. President Marx noted that the announcement of honorary class members, a tradition that he said he particularly admires, was shifted from Senior Class Exercises to the Senior Dinner, which seemed to be much appreciated. The President said that the decision was also made that, at Senior Assembly, the Dean would announce the name of each award recipient and the name of the award, but that he would not read descriptions of the awards. In this way, time was made for the presentation of additional awards and for the two student speakers.

A member of last year's Committee of Six had suggested that reading some brief description about the prizes given at Senior Assembly would be appreciated. The Dean had agreed that a happy medium should be found in this regard. Concern was raised by some members last year, and was now echoed by Professors Sinos, Servos, and George, about students being singled out for special recognition through awards that are presented during

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Commencement. They expressed support for the College's efforts in past years to move away from special recognitions in favor of making Commencement a day during which everyone celebrates the achievement of earning an Amherst College degree.

Taking some issue with the characterization of the Woods-Travis Prize as the chief academic award, as he did last year as well, Professor George noted that the award is strictly numerical (raw GPA), and he said that the winner is not necessarily the most accomplished or well-rounded student, academically. The President noted, as he did last year, that, since the Faculty has been concerned about the level of intellectual engagement among students, he had thought that celebrating the winner of the top academic prize in a more prominent way might focus more attention on academic achievement. He agreed that a purely numeric calculation of academic performance may not be the best measure of academic excellence and suggested that the Faculty might want to consider the criteria for the award in the future. Other members and the Dean agreed. In discussing alternative times for presenting the award, Professor Sinos noted that the prize could not be awarded at Senior Assembly because the Faculty votes on the winner at the Commencement Faculty Meeting, which does not take place until after Senior Assembly. It was suggested that the Woods-Travis Prize be awarded at the Phi Beta Kappa ceremony, and the President said that he would be open to considering this idea.

The Committee next discussed a letter (appended) from Professor Guttman regarding the library's policy that faculty submit lists of required texts for their courses so that the library can purchase additional copies to place on reserve for students from economically disadvantaged families. Professor Guttman expressed the view that all students should have their own copies of every assigned book. He suggested that the College's financial aid policy should make it possible to do so. Professor Servos asked the Dean what the current College policy is in this regard. Dean Call explained that students who receive grant aid from the College are asked to inform the Office of Financial Aid of any book costs that exceed the current \$1,000 allowance in their student expense budgets, so that the office can adjust their aid awards. The office informs students of the practice in several ways, including a presentation during Orientation, notes concerning their aid awards, and newsletters. Faculty members use several bookstores, and many students buy their books online or through the student-run Option. Professors Sinos and Frank said that they agreed with Professor Guttman about the importance of all students working from texts that are their own, particularly so that they can do close readings, bring their books to class, and annotate the texts. Professor George noted that open-book exams also necessitate that students have books in class. Professor O'Hara said that many students are uncomfortable asking for additional funds, even though they are entitled to them. The Dean said that he has observed that this is indeed the case. The President and the Dean noted that they and last year's Committee of Six had discussed developing a voucher or credit system at a local bookstore. The Dean said that he would inquire as whether a program of this sort has been implemented.

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The Committee turned to personnel matters.
The meeting adjourned at 5:45 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Gregory S. Call
Dean of the Faculty

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8 December 2007

Dean Gregory S. Call Secretary,
Committee of Six

Dear Greg,

I have taught here for nearly fifty years and have had innumerable occasions to be grateful to the college's librarians for help, support, and encouragement that seems invariably to go beyond what I have any right to expect. I cannot think of a single time during all these decades when I've felt the need to protest against library policy, but I was dismayed to read yesterday that faculty are now requested to submit lists of required texts so that the library can purchase additional copies to be placed on reserve for students from economically disadvantaged families.

I applaud the motive--who at the college wouldn't?--but the new policy undermines our local bookstores and, what's much more important, it undermines our teaching. Every student should have his or her copy of every assigned book. To read, to annotate, and to bring to class so that everyone present is, as we like to say, on the same page. I assign readings from out-of-print books as seldom as possible because I recognize that sending students to the reserve desk is a poor substitute for asking them to acquire their own copies. I dislike using the language of our leaders in Washington, but suggesting to the students that they needn't acquire copies of required texts is sending the wrong message.

Am I discriminating against students from economically disadvantaged families? I think not. I believe that the college's financial aid includes money for purchasing required textbooks. If I am wrong about our financial-aid policy, or if the money earmarked for textbooks is inadequate, then providing sufficient money should be a top priority. It is, moreover, actually the library's new policy that discriminates against students from economically disadvantaged families. They will be sent to the library to read required texts while classmates from wealthier families can work in their rooms.

I've tried to express my dismay in restrained language, but I appeal to you and to my colleagues on the Committee of Six to reverse this new policy as quickly as possible. And, if you think it's appropriate, I'd appreciate the committee's appending this letter to its minutes.

Sincerely, 

Allen Guttman