

Amended May 21, 2008

The twenty-ninth 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 Monday, May 12, 2008. Present were Professors Frank, S. George, Jagannathan, O'Hara, Servos, and Sinos, Dean Call, President Marx, and Assistant Dean Tobin, Recorder.

The Dean began the meeting by distributing to the members a cover letter and two proposals (appended) sent by Professor Umphrey, Chair of the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP). The first proposal is to shorten the drop/add period by two days, and the second, which the CEP asked to have included on the Committee of Six's agenda next fall, focuses on changes to the system for awarding Latin honors. As Professor Umphrey noted in her letter, the first proposal has ramifications for the College calendar that will be brought to the Faculty for a vote at the Commencement Faculty Meeting on May 22. The current proposal for the calendar (appended) includes a shortened drop/add period, as the CEP has proposed. The Committee also received a letter (appended) from Professor Ferguson, Chair of the College Council, in which he informed the Committee that the College Council had voted to change the College calendar for the year 2009-2010 by subtracting one day from the mid-semester break. This change to the Council's original proposal is designed to lessen the possibility of students being forced to stay on campus through December 25, if bad weather should prevent them from traveling home immediately after the originally proposed last date of exams, which was December 23. President Marx noted that he plans to discuss the issue of Five-College calendar coordination at his next meeting with the Five-College presidents. While agreeing that the change seems to be a necessity for 2009-2010, both Professor Frank and the College Council expressed the desire to maintain the traditional length of the break in the coming years. The members agreed that the CEP's rationales for reducing the length of the drop-add period were sound, and Professor Servos noted that consideration had been given to the difficulty that the change would bring for those students who enroll in once-a-week seminars that meet on Wednesdays, whose class meeting run past 4:30 P.M. In that case, as the College Council noted, an exception to the Wednesday deadline could be made without penalty for affected students.

The members then voted six in favor and zero opposed on the substance of the proposed calendar and six in favor and zero opposed to forward the calendar to the Faculty. The Committee agreed that this vote is reflective of their support for the CEP's proposal to shorten the drop/add period.

President Marx next suggested that the Committee decide on the topics that the members should discuss in the time remaining this year. He reiterated his desire to have a conversation about developing a system that would allow students to complete teaching evaluations using an online form. For tenure cases that will be reviewed in fall 2008, it has been agreed that departments will provide typed teaching evaluations (transcribing those that students hand-write in class), and the Dean's office is providing support for Academic Department Coordinators to facilitate this work. President Marx said that he would also like to discuss whether a working group should be established to explore the topic of grade inflation at the College. Class bunching remains an issue of concern, the President noted. The Committee discussed ways of possibly alleviating this problem. The Williams College approach of having each department schedule a

Amended May 21, 2008

course for every available time slot once before using any time slot again might be one idea, the President said. Some members noted that such a system is not compatible with the science departments' coordinated schedule of course meeting time rotations, which already achieves the goal of avoiding hour conflicts for students wishing to take introductory courses in those departments. Professor Jagannathan said that he would like to see additional eighty-minute time slots opened up. Professor Sinos said that doing so might have negative repercussions for language and other departments that teach on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings, should those times become available to eighty-minute classes.

Continuing the discussion, several members wondered whether the College should re-think its time slot structure. President Marx said that he would like to learn more about the relationship between the slot structure and course bunching. Professor Frank commented that it is her impression that, if a few more options for meeting times were developed, bunching would be alleviated. Professor George noted that it is particularly important, from a pedagogical point of view, that introductory science courses meet several times spread out over each week, so that there are no long gaps between class meetings, such as happens, for example, in courses that meet Tuesdays and Thursdays. Professor Frank suggested having evening meeting times for courses. The members discussed the ramifications of such a change, taking into account that many co-curricular activities take place in the evening. The Arts often make use of the evening for rehearsals and performances, it was noted. Professor Servos supported the idea of opening up one or two evening slots, commenting that some overlap between course times and the hours traditionally given to extracurricular activities may be necessary to ease the congestion in the teaching day and associated course conflicts.

Continuing the conversation, Professor O'Hara noted that, in the past, when anticipating the reaction to changes in meeting times, dire predictions were often made that do not come to pass. For instance, when 8:00 A.M. labs were introduced, it was thought that the students would not attend them. Both the morning labs, as well as evening labs (from 6 to 9 P.M.) turned out to be successful innovations, she said. Morning labs, in particular, are popular with athletes, and evening and Friday afternoon labs have smaller enrollments but tend to foster a high esprit de corps. Several members noted that the current policy is for evening labs and classes to be optional. Professor Servos said that he has been pleased with the participation and response of students in the classes (including one that is required for the Department of History's major) that he has taught at 8:30 A.M. He has noticed that enrollments are down a bit, however, when he offers classes in the early morning. The Committee noted that Psychology 11 remains over-subscribed, even when offered at 8:30 A.M.

President Marx asked if the members wished to consider the question of limiting enrollments so that classes at Amherst would not exceed fifty students. The members noted that additional faculty would be needed to implement this initiative. Professor Servos commented that it would be difficult to predict the shifts in enrollments that would drive the allocation of FTEs, if they were to be allocated for this purpose. He noted that students have positive experiences in classes with enrollments that exceed fifty students, just as they do in smaller

Amended May 21, 2008

classes. The other members agreed, and it was decided that the Committee would not discuss this question further at this time.

The President next queried the members about the possibility of soliciting nominations from the Faculty for the John Woodruff Simpson Lectureship and the John J. McCloy '16 Professorship of American Institutions and International Diplomacy. President Marx said that, if the members supported this idea, he would ask the Committee of Six to review nominations of leading scholars for these visiting appointments. After reviewing the documents that established these positions, the President found that the original intention was for the McCloy to be "a rotating appointment to be held for one to six years," rather than a series of lectures, as has been the practice. The Simpson Fund's donor designated that the fund be used for several purposes, among them securing scholars for the purpose of "delivering lectures or courses of instruction at Amherst College." At present Professor Goldsby is the Simpson Lecturer, but the fund can support additional Simpson Lectureships, President Marx said. In the past, prominent scholars (including Niels Bohr, Robert Frost, and Archibald MacLeish) who were not members of the Amherst Faculty have been named Simpson Lecturers and have taught at the College, as visitors, for a specified period of time. The Simpson Fund is now primarily used to support graduate fellowships. Professor Servos asked if the President would make nominations for these positions, and President Marx said that he would like the opportunity to do so, as well as to solicit nominations from the Faculty. All suggestions of individuals for these positions would be reviewed by the Committee of Six, he said. Since the reappointment of Robert Frost in 1949, the President has been responsible for the appointment of the Simpson Lecturer.

The Dean next shared with the members a draft letter of understanding between Amherst and the Anacapa Society. Dean Call explained that several Amherst faculty members were instrumental in forming this new organization in July 2007 and remain actively involved in it. The society is dedicated to supporting research in theoretical physics at primarily undergraduate institutions. Under the terms of the agreement, the College would host the Anacapa Society, providing the organization with facilities (mostly virtual) and assistance with proposals for grants. The members agreed that the proposed arrangement would not demand very much from Amherst, and that the fledgling organization would benefit from having the imprimatur of the College.

The members discussed a letter (appended) sent to the Committee by Professor Dumm, in which he expressed concern regarding the Respect for People All Staff Training on Harassment and Discrimination Workshop that he had attended on April 30. It was Professor Dumm's understanding that supervisors were required to attend the workshop, and that chairing a department was considered a supervisory position by the workshop organizers. He had also been told that the Commonwealth of Massachusetts is requiring supervisors to attend such workshops. The members agreed with Professor Dumm about the difficulties of viewing the chairmanship of a department as a supervisory position in terms of the chair's relationship to other members of his or her department, while noting that the chair may supervise staff members. The Dean informed the Committee that the chairs had been asked to attend, not solely because they served as supervisors, but as a means of establishing a starting point for inviting faculty members to the

Amended May 21, 2008

workshop, since chairmanships rotate among the Faculty. The thought had been, if chairs were invited every year, a large proportion of the Faculty would ultimately attend the workshop. Professor Sinos wondered whether the information that the state requires could be conveyed by means other than attendance at a workshop, perhaps in writing, for example. Professor Frank said that she could see some benefit to having faculty members, many of whom do supervise staff and have to peer-to-peer supervisory roles, attend the workshop. President Marx offered to consult with legal counsel about this matter, and the Committee agreed that he should do so.

Dean Call next informed the members that he has begun to consider which departments might have departmental reviews in 2008-2009 and would like to solicit their thoughts. High in his list of departments are those who may experience transitions in the near to medium term; those located in Merrill Science Center, which would particularly benefit from planning because of the upcoming renovation of the facility; and those that have not been reviewed in some time. The Committee members made some recommendations (the Departments of History, Economics, Physics, and Political Science), which the Dean said he would take under advisement. Professor Sinos noted the strain that self-study and external review place on small departments, and their possible lack of enthusiasm for undertaking this process. She commented that the departmental planning documents that were requested to inform the considerations of the Committee on Academic Priorities (CAP) and the process of reaccreditation required a good deal of work. She questioned the benefits to departments of embarking on yet another review at this time. The President and the Dean noted that, among other positive outcomes, the process of external review is particularly useful for informing and strengthening a department's FTE requests.

Under "Questions from Committee Members," Professor Jagannathan, while noting that the Dean had made fine appointments of new Associate Deans, commented that in the recent letter announcing those appointments, it was inaccurate to say that the Committee of Six had been offered recommendations for these positions and had agreed to the choices for them. He noted that the Dean had informed the Committee that the appointments of particular individuals were to be made. It was also noted that three faculty members—Deans Basu, Courtright, and Cheney would now be teaching half-time. The Dean responded that Dean Griffiths and Dean Basu have also accounted for one-and-a-half FTEs. He noted, from his own experience as Dean of New Students, that serving as a Dean in a half-time capacity enables colleagues to continue to participate in their departments, which is desirable. The members then returned briefly to committee assignments. The Dean noted that Professors Dizard and Clotfelter have urged that the Wildlife Sanctuary Committee remain as a committee, rather than having its responsibilities assumed by the Committee on Priorities and Resources. The Dean said that, with the Committee of Six's assent, he would like to honor this request. The members agreed that Dean Call should do so.

The Committee next reviewed the nominee for the Hitchcock Fellowship, and the Committee voted six in favor and zero opposed to approve the nominee.

Discussion turned to the Faculty's conversation at the Faculty Meeting of May 6 about the reports of the Faculty Committee on Admission and Financial Aid (FCAFA) and the Special Assistant to the President for Diversity. Professor O'Hara commented that, while the discussion

Amended May 21, 2008

at the Faculty Meeting was a good beginning, it focused largely on the needs of less well-prepared students, in relation to the curriculum and to academic support, particularly in regard to the sciences. While this was and continues to be an important conversation, there was not enough time to move the discussion beyond this topic, she said. Professor O'Hara noted that the two reports serve as a prompt for a broader conversation about how being a diverse community of students, faculty, and staff at Amherst College is in everyone's best interest.

Professor O'Hara proposed that, at the Commencement Faculty Meeting on May 22, perhaps under the rubric of "Unfinished Business," she report to the Faculty that a task force on academic support has been formed and will explore many of the comprehensive questions raised at the last faculty meeting. She would also like to acknowledge that the important questions of how diversity affects other dimensions of the scholarly activity at the College—in the Arts, the Humanities, the Social Sciences, and how it affects other dimensions of life at the College—for example community-based learning, athletics, and relationships and respect among students, staff, and faculty—have yet to be addressed. Professor Frank agreed that such a conversation about the impact of diversity and what the College community gains from being diverse should take place.

Professors Servos and Jagannathan, while expressing great support for the College's commitment to diversity, questioned whether a Faculty Meeting would be the forum most conducive to a frank, nuanced, and informative discussion about this complex subject. Professor Servos asked what the productive consequence of such a discussion would be if there are no specific questions or solutions put before the Faculty. Professor Jagannathan said that, while he is appreciative of the two reports, they are not specific enough to engender such a conversation and further clarity is needed about what exactly the Faculty would be discussing. Professor Frank said that she envisions a discussion of the benefits of having students at the College who persist despite great challenges. Professor Servos noted that it is very difficult, at the time of application to the College, to determine which prospective students have this quality of persistence. He feels that all faculty would agree that persistence and imagination are among the most valuable qualities that a student can possess and are very important to success. Finding ways to help students develop these qualities is a very difficult proposition, he noted.

Continuing the conversation, but in a slightly different vein, Professor George noted that, while so-called over-prepared students (who were discussed as a category in the report of the FCAFA) often do become academically engaged and go on to a chosen career, less well-prepared students frequently experience failure and heartache. He feels that the way the SAT data are portrayed in the FCAFA report does not convey accurately the range of preparation for college work, particularly in math and science, among our students. Professor George said he would like to review information about less well-prepared students, to correct an impression created by reports and statements recently and in the past that most or all Amherst students are academically near the top of their respective racial groups. His concern, he said, is that we tell the truth about the range of preparation of Amherst students, not that we change our admission policies. He said that he plans to discuss this issue with Tom Parker, Dean of Admission and

Amended May 21, 2008

Financial Aid, to get Dean Parker's feedback and to share his views with the new Committee of Six, by letter, in the fall.

The members next reviewed the theses and transcripts of students recommended by their departments for a summa cum laude degree and having an overall grade point average in the top 25 percent of the graduating class. After a discussion of the theses and the departmental statements, the members voted unanimously to forward them to the Faculty. The Committee was deeply impressed with the quality of thesis students' research and scholarship, and Professor O'Hara suggested that the College should consider posting the theses or portions thereof on the Website. The Dean agreed that it would be wonderful to share this high caliber student work more broadly, and he said that he would explore how issues surrounding copyright might be solved. Professor George said that theses from his department are posted as PDFs and are password-protected so that access is limited to the Amherst community.

The Committee next approved the Faculty Meeting agenda for May 22, agreeing that the diversity discussion should be included under "Unfinished Business."

The meeting adjourned at 6:00 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Gregory S. Call
Dean of the Faculty

AMHERST COLLEGE
Department of Law, jurisprudence & Social Thought

PROFESSOR MARTHA MERRILL UMPHREY

9 May 2008

Committee of Six
Converse Hall

Dear Colleagues -

Attached you will find two proposals emerging out of the Committee on Educational Policy's deliberations this spring: a proposal to shorten add/drop period by two days, and a proposal to revise the current system of awarding Latin Honors. We would be grateful if you could, prior to the impending Commencement meeting of the faculty, take up the add/drop period proposal because it has ramifications for the college calendar upon which the faculty votes at that meeting. We would ask that the proposal concerning Latin Honors be place on the Committee of Six's agenda early next fall.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

Martha Umphrey
Chair, CEP

Proposal to Shorten Add/Drop Period

The CEP recommends the following alteration to the College's drop-add procedures:

The period during which a student may add or drop a course without penalty shall run from the first day of the semester through Wednesday of the second week of classes.

Rationale: The dynamism of the add/drop period poses sometimes daunting pedagogical difficulties in the classroom. Many faculty have worried about negative effects when students shuffle through the classroom for a full two weeks at the beginning of the semester, and find it frustrating and counterproductive to postpone certain kinds of assignments and to return, for newcomers, to materials already covered in the classroom. A fair number of students, anxious enough about the add/drop process, tend to wait until the last day or two to finalize their course selections and find themselves frantically trying to find their advisors at the last minute on that final Friday.

This proposal, while it will not resolve any of these concerns fully, will have at least two salutary effects:

- reduce the period during which enrollment uncertainty hampers effective pedagogy in the classroom
- encourage students to come to a decision at a point in the week when faculty tend to be available.

This proposal poses an administrative difficulty only for those once-a-week seminars that meet on Wednesdays whose class meetings run past 4:30 pm. In that case, a student who might wish to join the class but who only attends the second session will not be able to add the course before the Registrar's office closes on Wednesday. We have discussed this problem with Gerry Mager, who assures us that an exception to the Wednesday deadline can be made without penalty for such students.

We have undertaken to propose this change after consulting with the CEP's student representatives, who canvassed their constituency, with the College Registrar and, with Greg Call's help, with administrators at the other three colleges and the university. The proposal appears to create no administrative problems, and indeed was met with a uniformly positive response. Hence we forward this proposal believing that shortening the add/drop period by two days will alleviate some of its most nettling pedagogical and advising issues faculty face while offering students sufficient time to make thoughtful final decisions about their schedules in consultation with their advisors and their professors.

Proposal to Revise the Current System of Awarding Latin Honors

The CEP recommends that, early in Fall 2008, the Committee of Six and the faculty take up, debate, and vote on the following amendment to our system of awarding Latin Honors (Faculty Handbook, p. 71; changes underlined):

2. Candidates eligible for the degree magna cum laude must have a minimum overall grade point average in the top 30% of their class and have received a recommendation of magna based on a thesis or comparable work from a department or program in which they have majored....

Distinction

Candidates eligible for a degree with Distinction must have an overall grade point average in the top 30% of their class.

Process and Rationale for Proposed Change:

In 2004 the College implemented a new policy on the awarding of honor, and at that time mandated that the CEP review the new system after three years. To fulfill this mandate, the CEP did the following:

1. In Fall 2007 we considered whether to review the entire Latin Honors system de novo or to focus on what seemed to us to be the most pressing issues and solicit feedback from students and faculty on those issues. We opted for the more focused approach because reopening the larger field of questions concerning how the College might award Latin (and English) Honors (to consider, for example, a breadth requirement for Latin honors), after two substantial periods of conversation on that very subject in the last decade, seemed to invite unwarranted and unfortunate instability. We agreed, however, that if we heard large and pressing concerns from either students or faculty we could revisit that decision.

2. On that basis, we solicited and received thoughtful responses from departments to the following three questions:

What is your perception of the grade point average cutoff? Given that any cutoff is arbitrary, is the current scheme causing such serious problems for you or your students that we ought to consider changing it? Is a single cutoff appropriate?

What has happened to the process of doing a thesis in your department? Do you have any concerns about how these changes have affected that process?

Do you have other concerns that warrant a revisiting of the College's current policy on awarding honors?

3. We asked our student representatives to canvass students on similar questions and incorporated their feedback into our deliberations.

4. The Chair also had a lengthy conversation with the Registrar.

5. We assessed the feedback we received from students, from nineteen departments, and from the Registrar. Opinions about the current Latin Honors system quite expectedly varied both among and within departments and among students, but two issues came to the fore in a significant number of comments:

some departments (approximately four) would like to make possible the granting of exceptions or exemptions from the GPA cutoff under extraordinary circumstances.

a larger number of departments (seven or eight) would like to re-examine the 25% cutoff for students writing magna cum laude theses, enlarging the pool of students eligible for magna somewhat.

A number of overlapping rationales were forwarded in support of both suggestions. Focusing primarily on the situation in which a student writes an exceptional thesis but still graduates cum laude, some colleagues and students worried about unfairness when a student has one bad semester for reasons out of his or her control; or when a student takes risks in course selection and has a somewhat more uneven record than one who plays it safe; or comes to Amherst somewhat underprepared and requires some transition time to accustom him or herself to the demands of our curriculum. Faculty and students worry about the unfairness of an arbitrary cutoff that lumps summers and magnas together, disadvantaging and demoralizing those excellent students who just barely miss the 25% cutoff.

The CEP discussed both suggestions thoroughly. We were unanimously of the opinion that allowing for departmental petitions in exceptional cases would, as it did in the past, introduce an unfair arbitrariness into the awarding of Latin honors: some departments might be more willing to petition than others; some students might be more willing than others to request an exception or discuss any reasons for it in the first place. Opinion was divided, however, on the issue of expanding the grade point cutoff for magna cum laude. Some members argued strongly in favor of raising the cutoff to 30%; others thought that such a move would not solve the problem of "near-misses" since such a situation arises wherever an arbitrary line is drawn, and hence any change would not mitigate the disappointment of those just missing the new cutoff. Moreover, some argued, that the number of tightly bunched GPAs would only increase the closer one approached the class's median GPA.

Given the division of opinion among CEP members, the Committee decided that the faculty ought to weigh in the question of amending our current system of awarding Latin Honors. Since the language proposed above enlarges the grade point range for awarding *magna cum laude*, we have also adjusted the cutoff for English honors but leave the advisability of that change up for debate as well.

We request that the Committee of Six and, if the C6 agrees, the faculty deliberate on the proposed changes to language on the faculty handbook detailed above. We offer this language not because all of us would ourselves embrace it, but because we believe a concrete proposal will propel a focused and thorough discussion among colleagues on the faculty floor. We also request that those deliberations include a discussion of the following questions:

1. Should the GPA required for a summa designation differ from the GPA required for a *magna* designation?
2. If so, should this be accomplished by tightening the GPA required for the *summa*?
3. Alternatively, should this be accomplished by broadening the GPA for a *magna*?

We hope that this proposal might be placed on the Committee of Six's agenda sometime early in Fall 2008, and forwarded to the faculty soon thereafter if the Committee of Six finds it advisable to do so.

Amherst College Calendars 2009-2012

Event	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012
Classes Begin	Tues., Sept. 8	Tues., Sept. 7	Tues., Sept. 6
End of Interchange Registration	Wed., Sept. 16	Wed., Sept. 15	Wed., Sept. 14
Mid-Semester Break	Sat., Oct. 10-Mon., Oct. 12	Sat., Oct. 9-Tues., Oct. 12	Sat., Oct. 8-Tues., Oct. 11
Pre-Registration for Spring	Thur., Nov. 12-Wed., Nov. 18	Thur., Nov. 11-Wed., Nov. 17	Thur., Nov. 10-Wed., Nov. 16
Thanksgiving Vacation	Sat., Nov. 21-Sun., Nov. 29	Sat., Nov. 20.-Sun., Nov. 28	Sat., Nov. 19.-Sun., Nov. 27
Last Day of Classes	Tues., Dec. 15	Wed., Dec. 15	Wed., Dec. 14
Reading/Study Period	Wed., Dec. 16-Thurs., Dec. 17	Thur., Dec. 16-Fri., Dec. 17	Thur., Dec. 15-Sat., Dec. 17
Examination Period	Fri., Dec. 18-Tues., Dec. 22	Sat., Dec. 18-Wed., Dec. 22	Sun., Dec. 18-Thurs., Dec. 22
Grades Due	Mon., Jan. 4	Mon., Jan. 3	Tues., Jan. 3
January Term	Mon., Jan. 4-Fri., Jan. 22	Mon., Jan. 3-Fri., Jan. 21	Mon., Jan. 9-Fri., Jan. 27
Classes Begin	Mon., Jan. 25	Mon., Jan. 24	Mon., Jan. 30
End of Interchange Registration	Wed., Feb. 3	Wed., Feb. 2	Wed., Feb. 8
Spring Recess	Sat., Mar. 13-Sun., Mar. 21	Sat., Mar. 12-Sun., Mar. 20	Sat., Mar. 17-Sun., Mar. 25
Pre-Registration for Fall	Mon., Apr. 5-Fri., Apr. 9	Mon., Apr. 4-Fri., Apr. 8	Mon., Apr. 9-Fri., Apr. 13
Last Day of Classes	Fri., May 7	Fri., May 6	Fri., May 11
Reading/Study Period	Sat., May 8-Sun., May 9	Sat., May 7-Sun., May 8	Sat., May 12-Sun., May 13
Examination Period	Mon., May 10-Fri., May 14	Mon., May 9-Fri., May 13	Mon., May 14-Fri., May 18
Grades Due --Senior	Mon., May 17-9:00a.m.	Mon., May 16-9:00a.m.	Mon., May 21-9:00a.m.
Other	Wed., May 19	Wed., May 18	Wed., May 23
Commencement	Sun., May 23	Sun., May 22	Sun., May 27
	*Mon. Classes on Tues., Sept. 8	*Mon. Classes on Wed., Sept. 8	*Mon. Classes on Wed., Sept. 7

AMHERST COLLEGE
Department of Black Studies

JEFFREY B. FERGUSON
Associate Professor of Black Studies
and American Studies

May 8, 2008

Gregory Call
Dean of the Faculty
Amherst College

Dear Greg:

I am writing in my capacity as Chair of the College Council.. Last Thursday we voted to change the College calendar for the year 2009-2010 by subtracting one day from the mid-semester break. Nevertheless, we would also like to convey the strong desire to maintain the traditional length of the break in the future. When the timing of the ongoing calendar discussion allows, we would like to reconsider the possibility of starting the semester a bit earlier than Labor Day in order to provide room for maneuver in a more permanent form. Thanks for visiting with us.

Sincerely,

Jeffrey B. Ferguson
Chair of the College Council

AMHERST COLLEGE
Department of Political Science

May 1, 2008

Committee of Six
Amherst College
c/o Dean of Faculty's Office

Dear Colleagues:

I write to express my deep concern regarding information that was disseminated at the Respect for People All Staff Training on Harassment and Discrimination Workshop yesterday morning. My understanding is that attendance at this workshop is mandatory for all supervisory personnel at the College because the Commonwealth is now demanding that such programs be compulsory. The rationale seems to be that a more fully informed employee workforce will be more sensitive to the various and insidious ways that discrimination and harassment operates, and will become more fully informed of the force of the law as a remedy for such discrimination.

As a professor at the College, the language of mandated workshops and compulsory attendance rings strange to my ear, but I also think it is important that all of us be attuned to how discrimination and harassment wreak their insidious effects in our institution. So I am not, in principle, opposed to such efforts, whether they are mandatory or not.

What does worry me is that professors who are chairs of departments are now being ordered to "stop the inappropriate behavior" of our colleagues. I quote now from the document that was distributed at the workshop (since it was in the form of a Powerpoint diagram, the quotation is itself a bit awkward in form, but I hope you get the sense of it).

A supervisor should respond in three ways to any situations involving harassment.

Supervisor is informed of an incident, or observes inappropriate behavior at work.

Speak to the person who acted inappropriately Insure the behavior stops

Inform the appropriate college office or individual to discuss appropriate responses, to initiate an investigation or to document your response to the incident (Human Resources, Office of Diversity & Inclusion, Dean of Faculty or Students)

Report back to the person who filed the complaint to inform him or her that the situation is being addressed

Providing specifics about the response is not necessary in most cases

Those of us who attended yesterday's meeting were informed, in somewhat scary detail, how failure on

the part of supervisory personnel to take such steps could result, not only in the college being sued, but the individual supervisor being sued as well for failure to properly act.

This final piece of information is the reason for my letter. It seems to me that supervisory personnel at the College who are hired as regular employees understand that an explicit responsibility of their jobs involves the implementation of these policies. But it was news to me to learn that I, as a department chair, have the same supervisory responsibility in regard to a group of people I have long known, not as people working under me, but as colleagues. I think that the two groups of people are qualitatively different from each other for one other reason as well. The position of department chair, at least in the political science department, is the moral equivalent of being a paperclip counter. I convene meetings, I remind colleagues of deadlines, I sign entry into major forms, I have at most a vague understanding of our budget - which is handled by the department coordinator, fortunately. If I ever got it into my head that I was more than one among equals, my colleagues would very quickly remind me otherwise. Moreover, whereas regular employees are hired with the details of the job descriptions explicitly including the aspects of supervision for which they are to be evaluated, the position of department chair is voluntary, not a result of anyone seeking the job, but a responsibility that we undertake understanding that it rotates, even if now for the most part on two year cycles, involves no training (until now!) and provides no benefits in the form of extra salary and/or course relief.

I am led to think that the position of department chair needs to be dramatically rethought by the College. My first reaction to the news I received at yesterday's meeting was to consider resigning as chair. After all, why should I expose myself to the possibility of lawsuit when, first, I have until yesterday received no training in handling discrimination and harassment, and second, have a dramatically increased burden of responsibility, now that I am aware of the seriousness of my duties. But I realize that the College is in a serious moment of transition, and we all need to do what we can to help. Nevertheless, yesterday's meeting made it clear to me that the idea that the system of department chairmanship can continue as it has in the past is becoming untenable.

I urge you to take this matter up at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,

Thomas Dumm
Chair, Political Science Department