

**Committee of Six Minutes
of Monday, October 23, 2006**

The ninth meeting of the Committee of Six for the academic year 2006–2007 was called to order by President Marx in his office at 3:30 P.M. on Monday, October 23, 2006. Present were Professors George, Hilborn, O’Hara, Parker, Schneider, and Woglom, Dean Call, President Marx, and Assistant Dean Tobin, Recorder.

President Marx noted that the meetings of the Board of Trustees held from October 20 through October 21 were a productive start to the Board’s deliberations on the report of the CAP. In light of the Faculty’s desire to receive reports of the Board’s meetings, he asked the members whether it would be preferable for him to give a report at the next Faculty Meeting or whether he should offer his comments to the Committee of Six, for inclusion in the minutes. The members said that they prefer the latter approach. The President agreed to give the report to the Committee.

The Dean distributed to the Committee the minutes of the meeting of October 16. He asked the members for their thoughts regarding the email (appended) that he had received from Professor Rockwell and had shared with the Committee of Six at his request. Dean Call said that he understands Professor Rockwell’s concerns regarding the possibility of requiring departments to use every time slot for teaching courses before any slot is used a second time. Like language courses, calculus courses at different levels are purposely taught simultaneously so as to offer maximum flexibility for students, Dean Call noted. Professor Hilborn said that the science departments have developed their own scheduling agreement to ensure that introductory science courses do not conflict. Professor Schneider noted that the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP) and the Committee of Six have not yet considered whether this structure might be workable and desirable at Amherst. The members agreed that the CEP should be asked to review this issue and requested that the Dean share Professor Rockwell’s email with the CEP. The Dean said that information about course meeting time usage between fall 2004 and fall 2006 is available on the College’s institutional research Web site at <http://www.amherst.edu/~oir/> and that he encourages the Faculty to review these data.

The Committee next discussed a letter (appended) that Professor Hall sent to the members in which he expresses concerns about the practice of soliciting in-class student evaluations of tenure-track faculty members and about grade inflation. The Dean reminded the members that the Committee of Six does not consider proposals regarding tenure procedures while it is engaged in tenure deliberations. Dean Call suggested that Professor Hall’s letter be shared with the CEP and the Ad Hoc Committee on the Evaluation and Improvement of Teaching. Professor Woglom agreed that the letter should be forwarded to both committees, noting that, given the concerns expressed in the letter, the CEP was the appropriate committee to consider this issue. Professor George expressed the view that the Committee of Six, because of its role in tenure and promotion decisions, should also consider these concerns. Professor O’Hara expressed the view that the CEP should be the starting point, but that the Committee of Six should take up this issue at the appropriate moment, after it has gone through the proper governance channels. The Committee agreed.

The Dean asked the members for their views regarding the distribution of the Committee of Six minutes, since the issue was raised at the October 17 faculty meeting. After some discussion, the Committee agreed that the default should be that faculty members receive the minutes in hard-copy form. If colleagues wish not to have hard copies sent to them, they will be asked to indicate their preference to the Dean’s office. The minutes will continue to be posted

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online, and all faculty members will be notified when minutes are posted. Acknowledging that the review/approval process for the minutes is time-consuming and is accomplished on a tight schedule, particularly for the minutes of meetings that occur in close succession before a faculty meeting, the Dean, the President and the members agreed to continue to make efforts to make the minutes available in the most timely manner possible.

Discussion turned to the topic of whether there is sufficient business to have a faculty meeting on the next available date, which is November 7. The members agreed that there were not enough action items to warrant a faculty meeting. Professor Woglom proposed that an open meeting might be held to allow for further faculty discussion of the process for refining the recommendations of the CAP and to allow time for discussion of issues raised in the Committee of Six minutes. Most members preferred that time be made available for such discussions at the next faculty meeting in December.

Professor George next suggested that the President stop the business of faculty meetings at 9:15 to allow time for questions to the administration, while continuing the commitment to end the meeting at 9:30. Professor Woglom said that the Faculty should return to the business of the meeting if there are no questions. Professor Schneider expressed his sense that, above all, the Faculty wants to know that time is being given in a conscious way for questions and that there is a sensitivity to this issue. The Committee agreed that it is important for the Faculty to have the opportunity to ask questions of the administration. At the same time, the members view placement of the question period at the end of the meeting, rather than at the beginning, as a way to ensure that ample time is provided for other business of the meeting.

The Dean conveyed a request by Professor Viggo Kann, who is spending this semester at Amherst as a STINT (the Swedish Foundation for International Cooperation in Research and Higher Education) Fellow. A Swedish computer scientist, Professor Kann is using his time at Amherst to learn about how an American liberal arts college functions. He has asked the Dean if he can receive the public minutes of the Committee of Six to aid him in this pursuit. After the Dean reviewed the criteria that his office uses to determine who receives the public minutes, the members agreed to allow Professor Kann to receive the minutes. The Dean next asked the Committee's views on allowing Scott Payne, the College's new Director of Academic Technology Services (formerly Curricular Computing), to attend faculty meetings with voice but without vote. The members agreed that Mr. Payne should attend faculty meetings with voice but without vote.

The Committee then turned to personnel matters.

The meeting adjourned at 6:15 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Gregory S. Call
Dean of the Faculty

-----Original Message-----

From: Paul Rockwell
Sent: Monday, September 25, 2006 3:17 PM
To: Gregory Call
Cc: Frederick Griffiths
Subject: scheduling and foreign languages

Dear Greg,

I am writing to bring to the attention of the Committee of Six an issue specific to the foreign language departments, which arises because of placement issues for in-coming Frosh.

In the Committee of Six minutes for its meeting at the end of August, it was suggested that perhaps departments should be required to use all of the time slots available for courses before a second course can be taught at an identical time as another course in that same department. I admit that this might be a good strategy in most programs. But for foreign languages, it would cause a problem.

In foreign languages, the students arrive without any reliable means of knowing exactly what level of language instruction to sign up for. Foreign Language courses in secondary schools are notoriously variable in their quality. In some, students learn writing well, but cannot speak. In others the opposite is true. In some, four years of study is equal to two years of study in another.

No reliable placement exams exist that test all four skills (speaking, listening comprehension, writing, and reading). Those institutions that use them are constantly complaining about advanced students placing into introductory courses, etc. etc.

We have dealt with this problem by allowing students to change sections of their courses during the add/drop period. They visit a course and decide that it is too easy or too hard for them, and then change their registrations when they find the level that is reasonable for them.

This is most easily done, for example, when a section of French 5 is being taught in the same time slot as a section of French 7. Students can then migrate between different levels of ability without having to re-do their entire schedule. If they need to move from 5 to 7 or vice versa, they just change their registrations and no scheduling problems emerge from the change.

If French 5 is forced to be scheduled at a different time than French 7, it is possible that a student needing to change levels will encounter a scheduling conflict at the different time slot.

The end result of this well-intentioned proposal is that more students would end up taking foreign language courses at levels that do not correspond to their level of competence at the time of their arrival on campus. This is not setting students up for success. If a student takes a course that is over his or her head, then they will surely not have a good first-semester experience. If a student enrolls in a course that is too easy, simply to satisfy a bureaucratic desire to spread the course schedule out over the full range of scheduling times, he or she is not going to encounter the proper challenge to his or her abilities in their first semester.

If this proposal is eventually to be adopted as policy, then perhaps certain exceptions could be made for foreign language placement purposes.

Yours sincerely,

Paul Rockwell
Dean of New Students

AMHERST COLLEGE
Department of Physics

September 29, 2006

The Committee of Six
c/o Dean Gregory S. Call, Secretary
Campus Box 2209

Dear Colleagues,

I write as a recently tenured member of the faculty to express some concerns about the College's current practice of soliciting in-class student evaluations of its untenured faculty. These concerns are related principally to what I see as undesirable side-effects of the otherwise laudable goal of ascertaining how our junior colleagues are faring in the classroom, and are informed in part by my own experiences as an assistant professor.

Let me begin with the widely-held perception that student evaluations play an extremely important role in the tenure decision. This perception, whether or not justified in fact, constitutes a subtle pressure to teach in ways that lead towards more positive student evaluations. In perhaps its most obvious manifestation it is another upward pressure on the grades we assign in the classroom, at a moment when many of us feel that the scale is such that the distinctions nominally available to a thirteen-point system are already reduced to only three or four.

I believe this pressure can be even more profoundly damaging in two fundamental ways. First, maintaining broadly positive student evaluations can lead to conservative teaching approaches that stifle innovation and experimentation, especially among our younger colleagues. There is considerable risk associated with developing new teaching techniques, especially those unfamiliar to the students, if experimental "failure" (as measured by student evaluations) is perceived to be closely linked to whether or not the instructor is reappointed or tenured.

Second, the use of student evaluations in reappointment and tenure decisions can pressure the faculty to make courses less demanding and less rigorous, out of a fear that students will view an instructor more favorably if they are not constantly being pushed to their limits. Again, it is the perception, if not the fact, of the role of the student evaluations in the tenure process that

contributes to this pressure. I believe most of us are aware of this pressure and resist it as best we can, but this is not to say we are uniformly successful. I know I have not always been.

Finally, the constant use of student evaluations may be feeding a growing sense of entitlement among the students, in which the faculty are viewed as merely employees of a kind of service industry.' The diminution of faculty status makes it more likely, in my opinion, for evaluations to be used in ways that compromise our ability to teach and grade fairly. The most vulnerable among us are those for whom the evaluations are directly interpreted by tenure committees as measures of our suitability for continued employment. I am also concerned about how these side-effects will develop as we contemplate student evaluations for the senior faculty, where promotion and salary may one day replace reappointment and tenure as the loci of apprehension.

I suspect that these concerns, and others, have been articulated and discussed many times over the course of the past decade. Yet it seems appropriate to ask the Committee to revisit them as we contemplate the expansion of the role of student evaluations beyond the junior faculty. Perhaps the most pernicious side-effects of our current use of student evaluations can be ameliorated or even eliminated with some creativity in their administration and use. At the very least, we owe it to our junior colleagues to give the matter some additional thought.

Sincerely yours,

David S. Hall
Associate Professor of Physics
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