

**Committee of Six Minutes of May 19, 2008**

The thirtieth meeting of the Committee of Six for the academic year 2007-2008 was called to order by President Marx in his office at NOON on Monday, May 19, 2008. Present were Professors Frank, S. George, Jagannathan, O'Hara, Servos, and Sinos, Dean Call, President Marx, and Assistant Dean Tobin, Recorder.

The meeting began with a discussion of the nomination of Richard Wilbur '42 for the John Woodruff Simpson Lectureship, which was once held by Robert Frost. The members expressed enthusiasm for having President Marx invite Mr. Wilbur to be a Simpson Lecturer for a specified period. It was noted that, at present, Professor Goldsby is the Simpson Lecturer, but that the Simpson Fund can support additional Simpson Lectureships.

The members turned briefly to a personnel matter.

The Committee discussed the new format for the first Faculty Meeting of the 2008-2009 academic year. It was agreed that a meeting would be held immediately after Convocation only if there is a need to approve late courses for fall 2009. The Faculty would be asked to remain in their seats at the conclusion of the Convocation ceremony, and students would leave Johnson Chapel. The meeting would be very brief, and, if needed, a meeting with a full agenda could be held two weeks later. The Committee turned once again to personnel matters.

The Committee next reviewed course proposals and voted to forward them to the Faculty. Turning to its review of the nominee for the Woods-Travis Prize, the Committee voted six in favor and zero opposed to approve the nominee.

The Dean next reported that he has asked Academic Department Coordinators in departments with tenure cases that will be reviewed in fall 2008 to provide typed transcriptions of in-class teaching evaluations and has agreed to provide support to facilitate this work. The members agreed that this was an excellent first step toward having students type their own evaluations online. Professor Servos noted that he has conducted an informal survey among his students on the topic of online teaching evaluations and has learned that they were universally positive about the idea and did not have a problem with the prospect of making the completion of evaluations online a condition of receiving a final grade. Professor George noted that students should have the option of indicating that they decline to do the evaluation. It was agreed that the new Registrar and the Department of Information Technology should collaborate to develop a proposal for online teaching evaluations that would allow for multiple formats, to meet departmental needs. The Faculty will be consulted in the development and approval of the new system. Dean Call then announced that Kathleen M. Goff, who is currently the Registrar at the Sage Colleges, had recently been hired as Amherst's new Registrar.

The members continued their discussion of issues surrounding class bunching, which remains a concern. Rather than completely overhauling the class time slot system, the Committee agreed that an incremental approach, with the goal of increasing efficiencies, would be best. Professor Sinos expressed the view that students' choices are narrowed because courses are not repeated frequently enough at Amherst. She wondered if the College regularly has more new courses than its peers. Professor Servos noted that, while there are many new courses, their substance tends not to be linked to contemporary events or ephemeral ideas as they are at some institutions, but focus on the fairly traditional content of the disciplines. Professor Frank said that offering new courses frequently is a healthy practice for the Faculty, enabling colleagues to

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continue to explore and teach new ideas and not to get stuck in an intellectual rut. Professor Sinos agreed that faculty members benefit from developing new courses, but she wondered if having a constantly changing curriculum is serving the needs of students.

Continuing the conversation, Professors Frank and Servos said that the problem of course-bunching is best addressed through acts of community spirit by departments. Faculty within a department should collaborate to make sure that they are offering courses within a span of time slots, they noted. Dean Call said that departments vary in the degree to which they utilize available time slots for their courses; a letter that he wrote to chairs asking them to encourage colleagues to distribute courses more broadly was only minimally, and temporarily, effective. It seems that many faculty members want to teach once a week or twice a week during a limited number of time slots. Professor Frank suggested that creating two additional twice-a-week slots during the day and one evening time slot would go a long way toward solving the problem. It was agreed that having classes between 6:40 and 8:00 P.M. would be ideal because this slot would not interfere as much with co-curricular activities that occur in the evening. The Dean suggested having classes on Tuesday and Thursday from 9:00 A.M. to 10:20 A.M.; 10:30 A.M. to 11:50 A.M.; 1:00 P.M. to 2:20 P.M.; and 2:30 P.M. to 3:50 P.M. It was noted that First-Year Seminars, which currently meet in the 11:30 to 12:50 P.M. time slot, would need to shift to one of these new time slots, but otherwise such a system would work and add a Tuesday/Thursday slot in the afternoon. Fourth hours of courses that are required for some math and science courses could be accommodated under such a schedule it was felt.

Professor Servos, who said that he favors adding the evening slot as well as the additional daytime slot, said that, while he now enjoys teaching at 8:30 A.M., he would have found it difficult to do so when his children were younger because of issues surrounding childcare. Untenured faculty members, who may also be concerned about enrollments, may choose not to teach in the early morning, he said. President Marx commented that the current bunching problem is making the curriculum less open than it should be, and that more hours of the day should be used for instruction. The President reiterated his view that shifting the time slot of classes with very large enrollments to the morning might free students to take other classes throughout the day and thereby alleviate bunching.

At the conclusion of the discussion, it was agreed that the best approach to alleviating this problem would be to try, beginning in 2009-2010, offering evening classes and adding one or more additional 80-minute course-meeting slots during the day. Professor Jagannathan asked if a systematic change could be tried informally or if a vote of the Faculty would be required. He noted that the Faculty had voted previously to create additional slots. It was agreed that the changes discussed should be made on an experimental basis in 2009-2010 and then evaluated.

Professor O'Hara brought up a concern about the scheduling difficulties for students who wish to take science and foreign language courses during the same semester. It is her impression that such students may have to give up taking a language if they wish to take the required courses for the pre-medical curriculum, because required courses for the sciences and foreign languages, which are both sequential, are scheduled at the same times. She wondered if language and science departments might be able to coordinate their schedules to give students the flexibility to study both science and a foreign language. Professor George said that the situation would be

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helped if information was shared several years in advance about which courses would be offered. He noted that the science departments are aware of which introductory-level courses they will offer, as well as the meeting times of those courses, years ahead of time, but said that he was not sure if the same was true for language departments. One solution that was discussed was reserving an early-morning or lunchtime time slot for foreign languages exclusively. It was agreed that communication among the departments involved should be encouraged, and that, in keeping with the College's commitment to global comprehension, solutions to this apparent scheduling conflict should be explored. The Dean offered to communicate with the chairs of science and foreign language departments to this end.

The members next considered the issue of grade inflation at the College. It was noted that Professor Sarat has been leading efforts among the Faculty to explore this topic, and that he and a group of colleagues have been conducting a grading experiment. Known as the "Real Grading Group," these faculty members have kept two sets of grades for their courses this semester, one that reflects the "true" grades that they feel students have earned, and the other the actual grades that they awarded to their students. Professor Sinos, a member of the group, reported that there was not much variation between her two lists, while noting that she does bump students up, rather than down, if they are on the cusp of a particular grade. Professor Frank noted that she has different grading criteria for creative writing at the beginning level than she does for other courses. She would find it useful to have College-wide grading guidelines and averages, she said. Professor Servos recounted his experiences with calibrating a grading system when he serves on grant funding panels. He suggested that departments should set standards for grading students in their courses. Most Amherst students, he feels, are excellent students, and their writing has improved over the past thirty years. Most often, they deserve excellent grades, he said. Other members, while citing the myth of the golden age, disagreed with the claim that student writing has been improving in recent decades. Professor Frank commented that writing does not appear to be better, but that it is also not worse, in her view.

Continuing the conversation, Professor Servos commented that Amherst students are often competing for slots in the best graduate programs, and that one reason for grade inflation may be the sense among faculty that a stellar transcript has become essential for success. President Marx said that he does not believe that students from Princeton, which has implemented a college-wide grading curve, have been adversely affected in terms of graduate admissions. Professor Jagannathan noted that, if he ratcheted up grading standards, students who struggle in his classes, disproportionately students from underrepresented groups, would fail. Though past attempts in bifurcating courses so that under-prepared students could take a course more gently paced have not solved this problem, having different courses for less well-prepared students might moderate this problem, he said. Several members noted that students who take Chemistry 15, the honors version of Chemistry 11, tend to get a higher grade when they subsequently take Chemistry 12. The members wondered if students might suffer a slight grade penalty for taking the harder course, Chemistry 15, rather than Chemistry 11, in the fall. It seems clear that grading conventions vary by department and by the course within departments. Professor Servos wondered if grade inflation could be traced in part to grades in a handful of courses. Dean Call said that the average grade is high enough that a handful of courses could not

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fully account for grade inflation at the College. President Marx suggested adding the distribution of grades within courses to the Amherst transcript for informational purposes. The Committee discussed whether faculty might share with one another grade distributions by course, department, and/or division. The Committee agreed that, if grading patterns are to be shared, it should be a faculty-led initiative. It was agreed that a working group should be established to explore the issue of grade inflation and report back to the Committee of Six.

The Committee continued its conversation about the possibility of having a broad discussion by the Faculty of how being a diverse community of students, faculty, and staff at Amherst College benefits everyone. While expressing great support for the College's commitment to diversity, some members questioned whether a Faculty Meeting would be the forum most conducive to a discussion about this complex subject. Other members felt strongly that such a discussion should take place at a Faculty Meeting.

What was missing at the Faculty Meeting of May 6, Professor O'Hara noted, was a discussion of the advantages of diversity. Professor Servos expressed skepticism that such a discussion would move beyond the realm of self-congratulation and into the realm of substance. Professor Frank disagreed, arguing that the point of such a conversation would be to move beyond the pieties of diversity, beyond "celebrating" it, into a more hard-headed and honest evaluation of what the Amherst community actually gains from it. She said that, while some faculty members seem to feel that such discussions take place all the time at the College, she has never heard such a conversation. Professor Frank said that she also agrees with the report of the Faculty Committee on Admission and Financial Aid (FCFA) that students of color need to hear that they are valued by the College. Professor O'Hara noted that the Faculty is not used to having a conversation about diversity that includes a focus on successes and advantages, rather than challenges. Dean Call said that he feels that there were some misunderstandings at the last Faculty Meeting, and that some colleagues inferred that their commitment to diversity was being questioned, which was not anyone's intention in his view. It is his understanding that some faculty feel that it is important to articulate at a Faculty Meeting the underlying belief that diversity efforts should be undertaken for reasons other than social justice alone. Professor Jagannathan said that he understood the frustration expressed by some faculty members at the Faculty Meeting that the focus often seems to be on celebrating the universal value of diversity, when the more pertinent discussion, in his view, would focus on finding better ways to help the students whom Amherst admits to meet the academic challenges that they face and to succeed at the College and beyond.

In response, Professor O'Hara noted that a number of colleagues have been heartened by the formation of the Deans' Task Force on Academic Support, a step that is representative of the College's commitment to addressing, in coordinated, administratively organized ways, the issues of less well-prepared students over the long-term, developing multiple initiatives and considering how best to assess these efforts. Professor O'Hara noted that the task force plans to host a series of events to involve as many faculty members as possible in its work and to raise awareness about the issues on which the task force will focus. It was agreed that she would launch such a discussion about diversity by introducing the goal and structure of the task force at the Commencement Faculty Meeting.

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A brief conversation about the renovation of the Frost Library followed. President Marx asked for the members' vision for the library. Ideas included creating beautiful, uplifting spaces; designing classrooms for research seminars and creating spaces for thesis writers to conduct research; bringing IT, the Writing Center, and/or the Quantitative Center into the library; and, perhaps, moving the science library into Frost. The President asked whether individual library carrels for faculty members, which occupy choice space in the library at present and are often not being fully utilized, should be included in any new design. Professor Sinos noted that the library carrels provide needed places for some faculty members to isolate themselves to conduct research and to study. President Marx noted that it would be possible to create secure, flexible, and collective spaces in the library for Faculty or to create carrels in currently unused basement space, either in the library or elsewhere on campus.

The meeting ended at 3:30 with the Dean and the President expressing their great appreciation to the Committee for its excellent work throughout the year.

Respectfully submitted,

Gregory S. Call  
Dean of the Faculty