

**Committee of Six Minutes
of Monday, April 16, 2007**

The thirty-third meeting of the Committee of Six for the academic year 2006-2007 was called to order by the Dean in the President's office at 3:05 P.M. on Monday, April 16, 2007. Present were Professors George, O'Hara, Parker, Schneider, Sinos, and Woglom, President Marx, Dean Call, and Associate Dean Griffiths, Recorder.

Under "Announcements from the Dean," Dean Call reported that Assistant Dean Tobin was unable to serve as recorder because of service on a re-accreditation committee for another institution. He informed the members that a faculty member has announced the intention to call for a quorum at the faculty meeting of April 17. A quorum is half the number of faculty teaching during the semester (whose primary affiliation is Amherst) plus one. Dean Call reported that the Committee on Priorities and Resources (CPR) has declined for the time being the invitation to discuss with the Committee the initiatives recommended by the Committee on Academic Priorities (CAP). In answer to a question raised at the last meeting about transfer and other students who require an extra semester to fulfill the requirements of a major, the Dean reported that such cases are rare but that such students do receive financial aid. He informed the Committee that a new professorship, the William McCall Vickery 1957 Professorship, has been established recently and will be announced publicly in the next couple of weeks.

The Dean noted that Professor Dennerline has submitted a letter on behalf of the Ad Hoc Committee on Study Abroad to respond to questions about the burden on faculty advisors that had been raised in the Committee's discussion of February 26 in the context of members' differing estimates of the cumulative burden on departments and on advisors both in approving of foreign-study courses for credit toward major programs and in making recommendations about previously unapproved foreign-study programs. President Marx noted that the recent hiring of a full-time study abroad advisor, Janna Behrens, was intended to address such concerns. The Committee expressed the hope that the burdens of foreign-study approval and advising could be addressed by the ad hoc committee's report next fall.

Dean Call reported that the College Council has discussed the Committee's inquiries about the possibility of noting grade distributions on transcripts and has requested some clarifications: Were transcript notations such as the median course grade or percentage of "A" grades intended to curtail grade inflation or to provide added information to readers of the transcripts, such as graduate schools and employers? Several members of the Committee agreed that the objective would be to accomplish both purposes. Professor Woglom pointed out that the problem is not merely grade inflation, but grade compression, which makes all grades less meaningful. Members noted that for colleagues to re-evaluate and modify their grading practices, they would need more information about grade distributions. Professor Woglom said that the data would need to be broken down by departments and individual courses and that both medians and inter-quartile spreads should be included. Members agreed that making grade distributions public might well serve to stem or reverse such compression, but found the question of what information to release thorny, even if courses were not identified by name. Professor O'Hara advised caution in addressing this matter without a thorough consideration of the consequences, such as the unease that might be felt by faculty members facing decisions about reappointment, tenure, and promotion. Professor Parker suggested that grade inflation, at Amherst and elsewhere, may not be among the most serious issues facing the Academy today. The majority believed that it might be difficult to give the matter due care at this point because of

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the press of other business, but hoped that the College Council could investigate the matter now that these clarifications had been made. The Committee decided that the College Council should receive a longitudinal profile of all grades given and should be asked to consider what more specific data might be helpful to its evaluation. The President noted that the format of transcripts is an administrative practice formulated in consultation with the appropriate faculty committees.

Under "Questions from Committee Members," Professor Sinos asked about an invitation from Lorna Peterson, Executive Director of Five Colleges, Inc., to all classicists in the five institutions to meet to begin a conversation about collaboration. Ms. Peterson had indicated that she was acting at the behest of the Five College Deans and Directors and that she has no specific agenda, but simply wants to begin a conversation about collaboration. Professor Sinos noted that it is a very busy time of year for faculty members, and asked if the administrators know how much the classicists already collaborate and if there are other agenda in the invitation that could be clarified. She noted that the classicists already collaborate actively on all levels, including in planning courses, lectures, conferences, and hiring searches. Dean Call noted that the initiative entailed no assumptions about classicists' level of collaboration, but was intended to begin conversation about opportunities for summer research programs for classics students and for possible shared appointments in the future. Given the number of retirements that can be anticipated in the next few years, cooperation among institutions in hiring would be highly beneficial, he said. The President noted that, with knowledge expanding faster than faculties can conceivably grow, more effective use of the Five Colleges will become increasingly essential. Professor Sinos responded that it would be helpful if the Dean could circulate the proposals for summer research programs. She said that the members of the Classics departments talk together regularly about their programs, but perhaps there is need for more communication between the administration and faculty. Dean Call said the Five College Deans and Directors were not putting forward a specific proposal, rather trying to encourage conversation, but he hoped that their colleagues in Classics would develop a model most appropriate to their field.

The Committee next approved one course proposal and voted to forward it to the Faculty.

The members turned to the agenda for a possible Faculty Meeting on May 1. The Faculty's discussion of the recommendations of the Ad Hoc Committee on Promotion on April 17 might lead the Committee of Six to frame motions for the May 1 meeting, but the Committee's next meeting, April 26, would leave too little time to notify Faculty of those motions. The College's longstanding convention, known as "Romer's Rule," stipulates that motions be distributed to Faculty at least a week in advance of a vote. Members agreed that it was hard to craft a procedure in detail without knowing the outcome of the Faculty Meeting of April 17 and agreed to meet on April 23, without the President and the Dean, who would be attending a meeting of the Trustees in Washington. They also felt that there might be some flexibility in giving advance notice, since the Faculty would know as of April 17 that motions were to be anticipated and would know the intent, if not the exact language, of those motions.

At 4:05, the Committee was joined by the Ad Hoc Committee on Student Evaluation and the Improvement of Teaching (CEIT), comprised of Professors Alex George, Jagannathan, Parham, and Sanderson, and by members of the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP): Professors Himmelstein, Niditch, Robert Sweeney, Umphrey, and Nancy Ratner, Researcher for Academic Programs in the Office of the Dean of the Faculty. The members of the CEP and the

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Committee of Six thanked the CEIT for the creativity and good sense of their recommendation. Speaking on behalf of the CEIT, Professor Jagannathan reported on their conversations with colleagues in three open meetings, on the basis of which they dropped in their final report (appended) the requirement in their preliminary proposal that student evaluations be signed. All members of the CEIT were uncomfortable with the proposal in the report of the CAP, as affirmed in principle by the Faculty, that students' written evaluations of courses be seen only by the individual instructor. The CEIT had replaced this arguably "solipsistic" practice with a conversation among colleagues, the most valuable medium for learning about pedagogy and one that can compensate for the limitations of student letters. The members of the CEIT felt that, given the centrality of teaching to the mission of the College, it was important to send a strong signal about this value. Professor Sanderson noted that the CEIT was charged with proposing ways of implementing a requirement for teaching evaluation, not with finding ways to improve teaching, concerning which they had not investigated all possibilities. Professor Jagannathan noted that such needs were being addressed by the emerging Teaching and Advising Project (TAP) in the Office of the Dean of the Faculty.

Raising a procedural matter, Professor S. George asked whether the CEIT feels that the Faculty should feel bound by its close vote in principle on a requirement last spring or whether opponents of any such requirement could reasonably persist in this view. Professor A. George replied that the CEIT is bringing a specific proposal, which should be adopted or not on its merits, not organizing a referendum on the general desirability of requiring evaluation of teaching. Professor Sinos asked if the proposal for full professors to have Teaching Instruction Partners might retain its value on a voluntary basis. The CEIT indicated that for the program to have an institutional presence it would need to be mandatory. Professor Sanderson said that, given the other pressures on Faculty, relatively few colleagues might adopt a voluntary program and community-wide norms would never emerge, nor would the Faculty signal the importance that is placed on teaching at the College. To the question of whether any required program might inspire cynicism, Professor A. George said that such cynicism was likely to be diminished by embedding conversations about teaching within the strong collegial relationships.

Asked how the CEIT had determined the frequency of three courses in a three-year period, Professor Parham said that stipulating once a year or so, with considerable flexibility, would allow the practice to become routine and habitual. In the view of the members of the CEIT, soliciting responses from a class and discussing them with a colleague was a small task. Professor Parker asked how the members of the CEIT estimated colleagues' unease about creeping bureaucratization and intrusion into the functioning of faculty members. Professor A. George replied that the Committee was well aware of such feelings, but that the current proposal was for a process not controlled by the administration and involved unsigned student letters usable for no other purpose, which would be destroyed after the review. Professor Niditch asked how substantial the benefits would be, especially given the difficulty of eliciting feedback from students. Professor Jagannathan replied that one could not be sure that the yield on student letters would be so low, especially if responses should be solicited in class and, in any case, he noted the program would be thoroughly reviewed after five years. Professor Sinos said that she questions the assumption that student evaluations are of such value in improving teaching, and noted her concern that soliciting ever more feedback from students sends them the signal that

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learning is the responsibility of the instructor, not of the students themselves. Professor A. George emphasized that the key to the program is the conversation with a colleague who is aware of the limits of student feedback. The workings of this or any system cannot be known before it is tried, and no amount of speculation will get us closer to knowing. This modest experiment is worth a trial, he said. Professor Niditch wondered about the value of the student letters if the TIP does not have a larger role, such as attending classes. Professor Jagannathan replied that the CEIT's proposal does not limit the role of the TIP. He said that the program was meant to be flexible, such that colleagues could visit each other's classes or discuss syllabi or course materials. Professor Niditch said that she understood that the TIP could always play a larger role, but that this could present other problems. (Would a few class visits give a genuine sense of the class? Would the TIP have the time for a larger commitment? Does the presence of an observer actually alter the rhythm and atmosphere of the class?) Professor Umphrey asked if "teaching evaluation" might be a misnomer for what sounds more like course evaluation.

Professor S. George asked the members of the CEIT whether they would like the Committee of Six to frame motions about the proposal to bring before the Faculty, and whether those motions should be unitary or, alternatively, should address the various steps in the proposal. The members of the CEIT said that the proposal should go forward as a whole and that they would be willing to frame a motion. Professor Jagannathan asked if a simple majority should be sufficient for adoption or perhaps a majority of 60 percent or two-thirds. Professor Woglom said that the consequences of a slim majority would need to be explored once the vote was taken. The members of the CEIT noted that their proposal included only full professors, but that they would consider whether to include associate professors if no changes are made in promotion procedures.

At 5:05 the members of the CEP and the CEIT departed and the Committee turned to personnel business.

The Committee reviewed and approved with slight emendation the text of a letter to faculty members concerning departmental recommendations for the award of graduation honors *summa cum laude*. The letter requests that departments submit recommendations on the Thursday before the end of classes rather than the following day, a small change that in effect allows the Committee to have a week more to review honors projects. The letter also announces the Committee's policy that the recommendation for *summa* for interdisciplinary theses should be unanimous.

The meeting adjourned at 6 P.M.

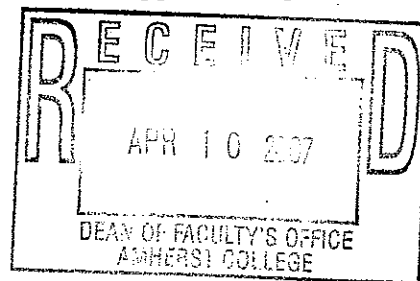
Respectfully submitted,

Gregory S. Call
Dean of the Faculty



AMHERST COLLEGE

Department of Physics



Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Student Evaluation and the Improvement of Teaching

I. Our Charge and Its Background

On May 2, 2006, the Faculty, constituting itself as The Committee of the Whole, voted (61 in favor, 50 opposed, and 4 abstaining) the following motion: *The Faculty endorses the larger CAP Report goal to improve teaching throughout the College. In order to help achieve this goal, student teaching evaluations of all Faculty should be required. The evaluations solicited for senior faculty will be made available only to the faculty member in question.* The subsequent deliberation of the Faculty resulted in a formal vote on May 25, 2006 (84 in favor, 24 opposed, and 4 abstaining) endorsing "the priorities and goals of the Report on the Committee on Academic Priorities (CAP), as modified and clarified by the Sum and Substance [that quoted, *inter alia*, the italicized language above], ... as a strategy for moving forward." This Committee was implicitly charged with exploring specific schemes for the improvement of teaching at all ranks, including proposals for evaluation of tenured faculty by students.

II. Our Procedure

We started meeting in the fall semester of 2006. We began by reading the relevant sections of the CAP report, the Faculty Minutes, and the Committee of Six Minutes to learn about the range and depth of views colleagues had expressed on the matter of required student evaluations for tenured faculty. This review was very helpful in understanding the benefits and costs of evaluations themselves as well as of various schemes for soliciting these evaluations.

Colleagues who support teaching evaluations made several arguments about the merits of this form of evaluation. Some thought that providing senior members of the Faculty with more information about the nature of student evaluations might prove useful when evaluating junior members' teaching at their times of reappointment and tenure, while others suggested that such evaluations might send a (worthy) message to our students that Amherst values their opinions and takes seriously its commitment to excellence in teaching, a message that might also be important to Trustees and others (for instance accreditors). Still others hoped the process might dim the distinction between junior and senior members of the Faculty, since currently only junior members are required to solicit evaluations. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, many claimed that reading, and reflecting on, student evaluations could only help professors improve their teaching.

We also recognized several commonly occurring concerns about student evaluation of tenured colleagues. One concern was that requiring evaluations for Associate Professors might be problematic, since this issue is already being addressed by the Ad Hoc Committee on Promotion. Another concern was that student evaluations might provide biased assessments of teaching, given that such evaluations can be influenced by the age or gender of the professor, grading or workload expectations, or by the nature of the material being taught. Still other concerns were raised about "evaluation fatigue," which could occur if students were regularly required to complete four evaluations each semester, and about the loss of class time to complete evaluations. Yet others noted that many tenured colleagues already use, and pay attention to, teaching evaluations from students.

Most colleagues seemed to recognize the worth of attending to the quality of teaching, but differed in their judgment of the role of student evaluations in that process. We agree wholeheartedly that student evaluations are simply one way of assessing teaching, and reflecting on them is certainly not the only or perhaps even the best way of improving one's teaching. We strongly support the development of other methods for the improvement of teaching, including making workshops on curriculum and course development available, creating opportunities for members of the Faculty to participate in discussion groups on pedagogy, and so on.

We gathered information on the practices of a dozen or so other colleges with which we often compare ourselves. Carleton, Haverford, and Swarthmore, we learned, do not have any mandatory system in place and are not currently contemplating creating such a system. All of the other schools (Bates, Bowdoin, Colby, Hamilton, Macalester, Mount Holyoke, Oberlin, Pomona, Wellesley, and Williams) either have a long-standing practice of mandatory evaluation or are in the process of instituting such a practice. In almost all cases, the required evaluations are shared with deans, department chairs, or receive some other form of administrative scrutiny. Some colleges use standardized forms; in the cases where we could obtain copies, we looked at the forms as well to get a sense of the questions asked. Finally, we met with the Committee on Educational Policy and also held several open meetings with members of the Faculty.

III. Our Proposal

We propose that each Full Professor (other than those on phased retirement) request one or more colleagues, also at the rank Full Professor, to serve as his or her "Teaching Instruction Partner" (hereafter, TIP(s)). We expect that in some cases colleagues will choose to serve as one another's TIP(s), but in other cases the relationship will not be reciprocal. In some cases TIP(s) will belong to one's own department, but in other cases not. We imagine that a colleague's choice of TIP(s) will be guided by their common pedagogical strategies, by shared research interest, or by other pertinent shared reference points. The relationship is meant to last a period of several years, but may be shorter if leaves or other considerations intrude.

We propose that, at the beginning of each academic year, all teaching Full Professors will communicate to the Dean whether they intend to evaluate any of their courses that year and, if so, who their TIP(s) will be. We do not propose or encourage that any additional information be transmitted to the Dean's Office.

We propose that during each three-year period, a Full Professor will have students evaluate three courses, using evaluation forms that he or she has created, perhaps in consultation with his or her TIP(s). (Those holding half-time FTE appointments will evaluate one course every two years.) We encourage colleagues to choose different types of courses for evaluation when appropriate. We also encourage the creation of a bank of templates posted on a Web site that colleagues could consult in designing their questionnaires. Of course, different evaluation forms could be designed for different kinds of courses.

We propose that the evaluation forms be unsigned. This will reduce the administrative burdens associated with the scheme: no one need spend time or effort to render evaluation forms anonymous. In addition, the anonymity of the letters/forms in effect guarantees that they will be of no possible use beyond the informing of a reflective conversation about pedagogy. We encourage the destruction of all evaluations (whether on the Web or on paper) at the end of the following semester.

We propose that, during the semester following the one in which a course is evaluated, the Full Professor and his or her TIP(s) meet to discuss the comments received from the students. Perhaps additional interactions might take place between the Full Professor and his or her TIP(s), such as class room visits or consultation on the development of syllabi; however, such additional measures are not part of this proposal. We know that such conversations about pedagogy are common among colleagues and friends. In many cases, the TIP arrangements will simply highlight and accord some institutional recognition to these laudable ongoing practices.

Should this scheme be adopted, we propose that the Faculty assesses its success six years after implementation. It is not our place to prescribe in fine detail how an evaluation of the system might be conducted. However, just for purposes of illustration, we can imagine that an ad hoc committee might be constituted in the fifth year of the program. This committee might solicit views from participating senior colleagues (but not, of course, the details of anyone's evaluations or conversations with TIPs). The questions might pertain to the relevance of the program, its usefulness to pedagogy, the ease of carrying out its provisions, and ways the program might be improved. This committee might also consider whether the program is on balance worth continuing.

IV. Our Rationale

In proposing that senior colleagues share student evaluations with his or her TIP(s), we diverge from the motion of the Committee of the Whole of May 2, 2006. We believe that a mandated system in which student evaluations are read only by the Faculty member in question, is likely to generate skepticism, even cynicism, on all sides, and might disintegrate over time. On the other hand, we are reluctant to promote a system that is insensitive to the concern that evaluations, once collected by a department or the Administration, will end up playing an unintended and undesirable role. Our proposal preserves the autonomy and control of our tenured colleagues. Furthermore, because the proposed system builds on structures of collegiality that are already part of the fabric of the College, it is our hope that Full Professors will not find it alien and indeed will take to it naturally.

In designing this system, we paid careful attention to the concerns raised by colleagues last spring about the use of student evaluations of teaching, and we believe that our proposal minimizes potential negative consequences in several ways. First, we are restricting our proposal to Full Professors to preserve the right of the Faculty to determine on its own, in a separate way, how teaching evaluations might or might not be used in promotion. Second, we are proposing that colleagues create their own forms for evaluations, which should allow each of us to determine the most appropriate and useful questions to ask given the nature of our courses. Third, to avoid "evaluation fatigue," we are proposing that senior colleagues arrange to evaluate on average only one of their courses each year. Fourth, to avoid problems associated with the use of class time for evaluation, we are proposing that colleagues be given the option of choosing whether students complete the evaluation during class or outside of class. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, to avoid problems associated with "slippery slope" concerns, we believe that only senior colleagues and their TIPs should have access to these evaluations: student evaluations should not be given to Chairs or to members of the Administration, and they should not be used to decide matters of salary, research awards, or other benefits. In order to cement this last "firewall," we have proposed that evaluation forms be unsigned.

This procedure yields a system which accords greater respect to the students who go to

the trouble of offering their responses and which also is more conducive to the kinds of conversations and exchanges of information and ideas that are likely to prove beneficial to our teaching. Our focus is on improvement and critical self-examination of pedagogy, rather than on administrative scrutiny. The involvement of colleagues is an affirmation of the best in Amherst's tradition of collaborative teaching. While we believe that the evaluations of students might have some direct role to play in the improvement of teaching, we are more confident that the collegial conversations arising from reflection on such evaluations are likely to be more beneficial. In any case, we conclude by stressing that the provisions of the current proposal are just some important steps, and not necessarily the most important ones, in our continuing efforts at improvement of teaching.

Alexander George
Jagu Jagannathan (Chair)
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