

The first meeting of the Faculty Executive Committee (FEC) for the academic year 2023–2024 was called to order by Professor Call, chair of the committee, in the president’s office on Monday, September 11, at 4:00 P.M. Present, in addition to Professor Call, were Professors Follette, Gardner, Katsaros, and Polk; President Elliott; Provost and Dean of the Faculty Epstein; and Associate Provost Tobin, recorder.

The meeting began with introductions and words of welcome. President Elliott and Provost Epstein said that they look forward to working with the committee this year. Professor Call commented that he is delighted that Professors Follette, Gardner, and Katsaros have joined the committee, and welcomed back Professor Polk, who served on the committee last year.

Under “Topics of the Day,” President Elliott commented that the launch of the fall semester went very smoothly, and that there seems to be a general sense of excitement on campus as the new academic year begins.

The president then shared further details about a steering committee that will focus on reckoning with the racial histories of the college, having written to the FEC earlier about his intention to constitute this body. He has charged the steering committee with advancing and coordinating campus initiatives to research and commemorate the history of the college, particularly the Black and Indigenous histories of Amherst and the land that it occupies. The group’s work will be slow and deliberative, President Elliott said, and will include consideration of the ways in which some peer institutions have addressed these complex issues.

The president described the areas on which the steering committee will focus, which include supervising and continuing the work of the racial history of Amherst project; considering the public commemoration of the Black and Indigenous histories of the college, including campus signage and other commemorative exhibits; continuing the evaluation of building and other honorific names; considering partnerships with community efforts to commemorate and repair histories of racial violence, including formal relationships with community organizations; and developing public programming related to and in support of other initiatives.

Professor Call asked about the kind of decisions the president expects will emerge from the steering committee’s work. President Elliott responded that he imagines, for example, recommendations that could lead to decisions about whether and how the college will translate research on its racial history into commemoration, matters related to honorific names on Amherst’s campus, and how the college should enter into partnerships with other local organizations interested in the Black and indigenous histories of this area. President Elliott explained that the steering committee will not necessarily answer such questions itself, but will work together with, and advise the administration on, how to design appropriately consultative processes on questions related to historical commemoration. He noted that one of the steering committee’s most important responsibilities will be to ensure that relevant stakeholders are consulted as part of the ongoing work of historical research and commemoration. Many of these efforts will benefit from faculty input, and the trustees will discuss some of this work, the president noted. He explained that the steering committee may also charge and convene other committees and task forces. The group’s progress on its work will be shared with the FEC and the Amherst community.

President Elliott informed the members that the following colleagues have agreed to serve on the steering committee, joining the president and the provost and dean of the faculty: Lisa Brooks, Henry S. Poler ’59 Presidential Teaching Professor of English and American Studies; Martin Garnar, director of the library (co-chair); Allen Hart, Manwell Professor of Life Sciences (Psychology) and special assistant to the president (co-chair); Elizabeth Herbin-Triant, associate professor of Black studies and history; Mike Kelly, head of Archives and Special Collections; Sheree Ohen, chief equity and inclusion officer; and Kate Salop, chief strategy officer. The steering committee decided not to include a student at this time, but rather to include students on the relevant task forces that end up making or recommending various decisions.

The members expressed support for constituting this group of thoughtful colleagues to think about these important questions. Discussion focused briefly on the college’s role vis-à-vis the efforts of local community groups surrounding commemoration and reparation. The president said that the college does not want to take over local efforts, but does want to provide some resources, when appropriate.

For example, Amherst loaned exhibition space to the group [Ancestral Bridges](#), he noted. Professor Polk said that it is his hope that the college's interactions with the local community around the reparations movement, for example, continue to occur in a mode of good will. The president, provost, and other members agreed that should be the goal.

Discussion then turned briefly to nominating colleagues to serve on the memorial minute committee for Martha Saxton, Professor of History and Elizabeth W. Bruss Reader, Emerita, who died on July 18, 2023. Provost Epstein agreed to invite those nominated to serve on the body.

The provost next reviewed some of the ways in which the FEC will work. She noted issues of confidentiality and attribution in the committee's minutes, informing the members that the public minutes should be used as a guide in regard to questions of whether matters that are discussed can be shared with others. The provost explained that, in her experience, very few conversations (with the exception of personnel matters and committee nominations that are under consideration) have not been included in the FEC's public minutes. She noted that minutes of discussions of certain sensitive or unresolved matters and plans in their formative stages, about which the president and she were seeking the advice of the FEC, have also sometimes been kept confidential. Generally, conversations about these issues have been made public once the matter was in a less tentative state.

Continuing the conversation about the committee's work, it was agreed that email will not be used to communicate about personnel or other confidential issues, and that the use of email to address FEC deliberations should be kept to a minimum as a general matter. Provost Epstein reviewed the policy of appending letters to the FEC's minutes when the members discuss the matters contained within them. If colleagues state at the outset that they do not want the contents of a letter discussed in the public minutes, the committee will decide whether it wishes to take up the matter in question. The members decided that, for reasons of transparency, comments by FEC members will be attributed by name in the minutes. Provost Epstein noted that the committee's regular meeting time will be 4:00 P.M. on specific Mondays this fall. The provost informed the committee that Associate Provost Tobin will continue to serve as the recorder of the FEC minutes, and that Nancy Ratner, director of academic projects, will continue to serve as the recorder of the faculty meeting minutes.

The members next reviewed a proposal that a modest change be made to the charge of the First-Year Seminar Committee, as indicated in red below. The provost noted that faculty appointments within the Writing Center are no longer a feature of the center's administrative structure, as there is no longer a faculty director of the Writing Center. As a result, the proposal is that the director of the Writing Center or another representative from the center serve (ex officio without vote) on the First-Year Seminar Committee. Professor Call asked if the First-Year Seminar Committee has been consulted about the proposed change. Provost Epstein said that she would reach out to the committee to make sure that its members are aware of the proposal and support it. If its members convey any concerns, she will share them with the FEC. Given that concerns about this change are unlikely, the provost noted that, if the FEC supports this change, a motion could be brought to the faculty for a vote. The members then voted five in favor and zero opposed on the content of a motion to make this change, and five in favor and zero opposed to forward the motion to the faculty.

**j. *The First-Year Seminar Committee*** The First-Year Seminar (FYS) Committee consists of three faculty members, among whom the committee selects its chair, and a **faculty** representative from the Writing Center (ex officio without vote). The committee is responsible for assisting faculty to develop and teach courses that advance the goals of the FYS Program as voted by the faculty. To that end, the committee solicits such course proposals and forwards them to the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP) for approval by the faculty, participates in the planning of pedagogical workshops for the FYS Program, and encourages faculty collaboration and curricular innovation in the seminar offerings. In addition, the committee is responsible for assessing the program and reporting its findings to the faculty (voted by the faculty, May 2009).

Under “Questions from Committee Members,” Professor Katsaros first commented that her experience with Workday has been more positive recently than it had been previously, noting that the Office of the Registrar has been providing very helpful support.

Turning to another topic, Professor Katsaros noted that she has heard that the printing costs at Campus Print and Mail have risen by 30 percent, which is having a significant impact on the price of producing printed course packs, the format that she prefers for her courses. She wonders how this increase can be reconciled with the 15 percent decrease in departmental budgets. (Provost Epstein later contacted Rod Squier, manager of the Campus Print and Mail Center, who reported that the center’s prices have not been raised in five years. He did note that the number of jobs being handled by the center is up this semester, and that many of the projects are taking more labor time because files are being provided incorrectly, or need to be edited.)

The president then offered an update on the work of the Textbook Task Force. He noted that negotiations have been under way with potential vendors, with the goal of selecting one to begin running a comprehensive textbook program for the college, beginning in fall 2024. Under the new system, students will receive textbooks on the first day of class at no cost. (Allowances for add/drop will be built into “emergency” delivery services.) It is hoped that the vendor that is selected will also compile course packs and clear copyright, the president said. One of the issues that prompted the college to consider shifting to a vendor is that some students have been choosing courses based on the costs of books and other materials, and some faculty members have been selecting course materials in part due to cost concerns. In addition, some students on financial aid do not spend their allocation for books, instead using the funds for other purposes, with some even sending money home to their families. Professor Call asked if TAs and faculty will receive materials through the vendor at no cost. Provost Epstein said that she would check with the task force to see if it is anticipated that this would be the case. President Elliott that it is his understanding that the vendor will not be able to provide videos as part of its services. Also under consideration, the president said, is a permanent location to distribute textbooks and course materials and/or the use of mail delivery.

Continuing with questions, Professor Gardner said that a colleague had asked her to convey concerns about continuing challenges that the individual has experienced with post-award management and leadership within the Grants Office. The colleague expressed that, since Amherst characterizes itself as a research college, it is particularly important to have an effective Grants Office to help facilitate faculty research. Provost Epstein informed the members that she would soon be sending [an email to the faculty about the restructuring of the Grants Office](#), which is now known as the Office of Sponsored Research and Foundation Relations (OSRFR). (Her note was sent on September 13.) The provost informed the members that her office’s recent review of the Grants Office has led to a number of changes. Two director positions were created within the office—one to lead work relating to foundation relations, and the other to lead efforts surrounding sponsored research—rather than having one director oversee both functions. In addition, there is now a full-time assistant director of sponsored research and foundation relations, who is providing support in both areas and serving as a bridge between the two directors. Finally, with the recent hiring of an accountant in the controller’s office who will assist the college’s senior research administrator with post-award administration and accounting, staffing has been bolstered to further support these functions, the provost said. Provost Epstein noted that Michael Stein has been promoted to the position of director of foundation relations; Jamin Weeks has been promoted to director of sponsored research; and Danielle Thompson has been promoted to assistant director of sponsored research and foundation relations. In the controller’s office, Darlene Sliwa continues to serve as senior research administrator; Holly Schwadron, who joined the college last month as an accountant in the office of the controller, is working with Darlene on post-award grant administration and accounting.

On behalf of another colleague, Professor Gardner noted that there was at least one significant issue this summer when a faculty member tried to order some equipment. The vendor would not fill the order because the college had not paid earlier bills. She understands that those who were affected had reached out to the Office of the Chief Financial Officer and others. Professor Gardner thinks that the problem has been rectified, but said that it would be helpful to know more about what had happened and to ensure

that this problem does not reoccur. The provost said that she would look into this matter and report back to the committee.

Concluding her questions, and again asking on behalf of a colleague, Professor Gardner, referring to [the August 29, 2023, email that the president had sent](#) about the Task Force on Guidelines for the Use of Generative AI Tools for Teaching and Learning at Amherst and other AI-related matters, asked for clarification about the information that had been provided about the use of Google docs. For example, should departments no longer use Google drives/docs for personnel matters? The following statement had appeared in the email: “When using generative AI tools, including within platforms such as Slack, Tableau, Google, and Office365 that are rapidly adopting them, proceed with caution. Many don't offer robust privacy controls. Unless the college's licensing agreement ensures content isn't used externally or to train algorithms without anonymization, please follow the guidelines below [see the email for further details].” Provost Epstein said that she would check in with David Hamilton, chief information officer, about this issue and report back to the committee.

Professor Polk next asked if [Sophomore Seminars](#) are still being offered. Provost Epstein responded that, as part of an ongoing pilot that is expected to continue, three Sophomore Seminars are being offered this semester. This is a smaller number of seminars than was offered last year, she said. It was decided to offer fewer as a way of trying to address the fact that only a small number of sophomores ended up taking the seminars in the last academic year. The thought is that, if there are fewer seminars, sophomores who register will make up a greater proportion of the seminars, as intended. They will receive priority, the provost noted.

The members then reviewed proposals for the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Summer Stipend Competition and selected two nominees to forward to the NEH for consideration. The members were impressed with the proposals, noting that they focus on very interesting and worthwhile projects.

In the time remaining, the committee discussed matters relating to the September 4 faculty meeting and how best to structure the October 17 faculty meeting. At the September 4 meeting, Professor Reyes had made a lengthy statement and had moved the motion below, which was approved by the faculty by a vote of 105 to 47.

That at our next faculty meeting [October 17], we enter the committee of the whole for one hour to discuss the facts—process and outcomes—of athletic admissions, and the racist or antiracist nature of those facts.

The statement and motion were read from the floor and had not been included on the faculty meeting agenda. In the course of preparing the FEC's agenda for its September 11 meeting, which would include a discussion of the faculty meeting, Associate Provost Tobin reached out to Professor Reyes to ensure that the committee had the accurate wording of the motion and to offer Professor Reyes the opportunity to convey her expectations in writing to the members. As a result, Professor Reyes sent [a memo to the FEC and the Faculty Committee on Admission and Financial Aid](#) on September 8. In the document, she noted that she had explained briefly at the faculty meeting what she meant by “the facts,” and had offered some “additional thoughts” regarding the vote and the discussion. Professor Reyes provided what she had read in the memo and offered more detail.

The members conveyed their discomfort with the way in which the course of the faculty meeting had been dominated and disrupted. It was noted that the Labor Day meeting is traditionally ceremonial in nature and is typically devoted to welcoming new colleagues to the college and celebrating the start of the academic year. While agreeing that athletics and the admission process are topics of significant interest to the faculty that warrant discussion and further critical review, and that Professor Reyes had made some valid points, the committee took issue with the mode of engagement that had been used and aspects of the substance of the statement. Professor Polk noted this mode of engagement was reminiscent of an earlier period in his time at Amherst, when faculty members—especially those protected by the privilege of tenure—habitually took up time during faculty meetings

to center their special grievances and concerns. He thought we had worked to change the culture of faculty meetings to make them more inclusive and welcoming to new faculty members and untenured colleagues, who can find these types of performances in the Red Room alienating. The committee also expressed disappointment with the commentary about race that Professor Reyes had presented, which was viewed as reductionistic, and, in some cases, inaccurate. Some members shared that some faculty members, including some faculty members of color, had conveyed to them how offended and upset they had been by these remarks. The committee expressed concern that students and coaches could also be hurt by some of what had been said. President Elliott said that he has been reflecting on this moment at the faculty meeting and his role; he apologized for not using his authority as chair of the meeting to ensure that there was greater inclusivity. The members commented that a number of colleagues had responded to what had been said at the meeting in generous, helpful, and informative ways—noting the commitment of the college as a whole and of the athletics department to diversifying athletics teams, and the progress that has been made ([see the data that Matt McGann, dean of admission and financial aid, presented to the FEC last year](#) as part of a discussion of this same topic.) Amherst, it was noted, is a leader in NESCAC in regard to the diversity of the college's student-athletes. The members also commented on the college's practice of reviewing issues surrounding the athletics program and its transparency surrounding the findings of the committees that have undertaken this work. (See the report of the Special Committee on the Place of Athletics at Amherst, [The Place of Athletics at Amherst College: A Question of Balance \(2002\)](#), the report of the Special Committee on the Place of Athletics at Amherst, [The Place of Athletics at Amherst College: Revisiting the Diver Report \(2016\)](#), and [the report of the Ad Hoc Faculty Committee on Athletics \(2018\)](#).) (See also [the minutes of the FEC's discussions about athletics and diversity from the last academic year](#).)

Conversation turned to how best to structure the October 17 faculty meeting. Particularly in light of the recent Supreme Court decision on race conscious admissions and the uncertainty that lies ahead, the members expressed some concern about the narrowness of the motion—and worried about singling out athletics from a broader conversation about affirmative action. The committee also expressed concern that there may not be sufficient time to gather data and process/synthesize it with sufficient rigor and caution to inform the discussion by October 17. It was agreed that, to protect student confidentiality, it would not be possible to provide some of the data that Professor Reyes had requested, and that she should not be tasked with the analysis of these data, as she had requested in her memo. The members decided to invite Matt McGann, dean of admission and financial aid, who has a thorough grounding in these issues, and Jesse Barba, director of institutional research and registrar services, who can be helpful in assembling and interpreting data, to the FEC's September 18 meeting. The members agreed that, based on what they would learn from Dean McGann's presentation then about how the admission process works, which should include data, they would decide if he should give a presentation at the faculty meeting. A discussion could follow.

The meeting adjourned at 5:35 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Epstein  
Provost and Dean of the Faculty