

The sixth 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, November 6, 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 President Elliott discussing his assessment of the campus response to the ongoing violence in the Middle East. He informed the members that a second protest about the crisis in Gaza had been held on campus the previous week, during the event with Governor Healey, and that participants had been peaceful. In regard to the campus climate at Amherst, the president noted that respectful events such as the protest stand in contrast to some activities taking place on some other campuses, where there are now threats and/or acts of hate and violence and a climate of intimidation. At Amherst and at other campuses, he is aware that some members of the community are experiencing anxiety and fear about expressing their views about the crisis in the Middle East, in addition to feeling deep sadness about the situation in the Middle East itself. The president informed the members that conversations he has had with some students have revealed that a good number are wrestling with questions and intense emotions at this time; some students have suggested to him that faculty make space inside and outside class to discuss the situation in the Middle East. President Elliott acknowledged the challenges facing faculty in holding such discussions.

Continuing, the president said that he appreciates what faculty are doing to support students at this time, with many colleagues modeling what it means to be a community of learners in which there is no place for acts of hate and no place for the incitement of violence, and where the right to free speech and the right to protest (and not to protest) are protected. The committee discussed some ways in which faculty might respond to students during this complex and deeply troubling time. Some members said that they would feel unprepared and uncomfortable discussing the situation in the Middle East inside and outside the classroom. Some members suggested that simply creating space for students to express what they are feeling could be supportive. It was noted that, depending on the subject matter of their courses, some faculty could feel able to discuss the situation in ways that touch upon course content that relates to the conflict. President Elliott said that it is understandable that many faculty and others on campus may be hesitant about speaking and/or writing about the conflict. There is a great deal of fear about saying something that will feel damaging to a particular group, even though this would not be the intention, he noted. The members felt that one of the best approaches is for faculty to adopt the intellectual position of continuing to learn and to listen as they formulate their own ideas, and to encourage students to do the same. It was agreed that it would be very helpful for faculty to share information with students about speakers that the college is bringing to campus, and to encourage them to attend these events.

On related notes, the president informed the committee that the college has organized a vigil for lives lost in Israel and Gaza. The event, which will be open to the college community, will take place on November 15, he said. Participants will be asked to gather at 4:30 p.m. at Chapin, and then will proceed to Memorial Hill. President Elliott then shared plans to continue to bring speakers to campus who offer a range of perspectives about the Middle East conflict, and to seek other ways of encouraging dialogue. He noted that Professor Ora Szekeley’s talk the previous week had been very informative; that Eric Ward, senior fellow with the Southern Poverty Law Center and Race Forward, will speak on "How Antisemitism Animates White Nationalism" on November 8; and that Palestinian poet and journalist Mohammed El-Kurd will speak on November 14.

Concluding, the president sought counsel from the members as he thought about the remarks he planned to deliver on the same subject at the following day’s faculty meeting. He noted that, as the committee had suggested earlier, he planned to address at the meeting the request made by some faculty to him as part of a letter (“Amherst College Call to Action”) about the “escalating violence in the Gaza strip” that had appeared in the *Amherst Student*. The signatories had asked President Elliott to “use his platform to urge the Massachusetts congressional delegation to call for an immediate ceasefire.” He said that he would inform the faculty at the meeting that, after thinking about this request for some time, he has decided not to do what the signatories have asked. In his view, there should be a high threshold for a president when deciding whether to weigh in

publicly on a contemporary societal matter of importance. Two criteria that he, as an institutional representative of Amherst, has considered are whether the matter is closely tied to the mission of the college and/or of higher education more generally (an example of such an issue would be the Supreme Court's decision regarding race-conscious admissions) and when there is a strong consensus within the college community about the matter at hand. In President Elliott's view, neither criterion has been met in this case. The president said that he would welcome opportunities to meet with individual faculty and/or groups of faculty who wish to discuss the issues raised in the letter, and about ways to guide the community at this very challenging geopolitical moment.

The members next considered nominees to serve on the Memorial Minute Committee for Peter Czap, Winkley Professor of History, Emeritus, who died on October 24, 2023, and asked the provost to invite the proposed colleagues to serve.

Turning to "Questions from Committee Members," Professor Follette asked if it would be possible to conduct the election for next year's FEC earlier than in the past, in order to allow those who are elected to decide which courses they will teach well before pre-registration for fall 2024 courses. Professor Gardner pointed out that an earlier election schedule could reduce the impact of electees' course releases on departments and students, should they take the releases in the fall. The provost said that the election can be launched in February 2024.

Professor Call next asked a series of questions about recent improvements to the phased retirement program ([see the announcement from the provost of June 28, 2023](#)) for faculty, noting that he views the changes as beneficial for the faculty. First, he asked if the board of trustees had approved the new program, noting that the trustees had approved the previous program. If so, he wondered whether the approval was for a specific period of time or is without term. Provost Epstein responded that it was determined that implementation of the new program did not require board approval. There is no term for the new program, the provost said, though as is the case with many benefits, the college can exercise the option to make a change in the future. This would not be done without a great deal of discussion and notice to the faculty, Provost Epstein said. After noting that the previous program had included a provision that allowed colleagues to take a year off from teaching in exchange for foregoing the teaching stipend, Professor Call asked if the new program includes a similar provision. Provost Epstein said that she would look into this question. Professor Call commented that, under the old program, there was an early-retirement option that was available to faculty beginning at age sixty-two, in which a colleague didn't teach at all, but still received 60 percent salary for three years. He asked whether, under the new program, there is an early-retirement option available to any colleague who is eligible for the program (age sixty or older, with ten years of service; so not age dependent other than overall eligibility for the program) in which such individuals could receive three years of partial salary (say 62.5 percent, or half of the 125 percent offered under the program for the first three years of phased retirement with teaching), but they don't teach. The provost responded that this is not an option under the new program. She said that legal requirements make it impossible to offer this feature, as it would be tied to age. Professor Call concluded by asking Provost Epstein to describe the policy that governs returning the FTE of a colleague entering phased retirement to the FTE pool, under the new program. He noted that under the previous program, half of the FTE was returned to the pool when a new phased retirement agreement was signed, and the second half of the FTE was returned to the pool when the "phased colleague" turned sixty-two. Provost Epstein said that, under the new program, in year two of a colleague's phased retirement, the department can bring a request forward to fill the FTE line again. She noted that it is important to remember that lines do not "belong" to departments, and that it is not automatic that a line will be returned when a colleague goes on phased retirement. In year three, the department will be allowed to search for a replacement, if the line has been allocated. A new colleague could then begin work in year four.

Continuing the discussion, Professor Gardner next asked for clarification about what it might mean to relieve a faculty member of some teaching duties to assume "other equivalent duties." Provost Epstein responded that a faculty member in such a circumstance would be taking on a role within the administration, for example. The members wondered if the FTE could be returned to the department earlier than it would otherwise under such a

scenario. The provost said that doing so would not be possible for budgetary reasons. Professor Katsaros asked for confirmation that colleagues who are on phased retirement are allowed to chair departments. The provost said that this is allowable, though not necessarily desirable, and that the individual would be eligible to receive the same compensation for chairing as other faculty do. Professor Follette asked whether special consideration might be given to a department if more than one faculty member is on phased retirement. In such a circumstance, if deemed necessary due to reasons of coverage, the department could request a visitor, the provost said. It is very unlikely that such a department would be allowed to request an FTE or to begin a search earlier than would be the case under the typical schedule. The provost reminded the members that faculty on phased retirement still teach two courses each year. Professor Katsaros asked if there is any office space on campus for faculty once they retire. The provost said that space constraints do not allow this. Some members next asked if a faculty member on phased retirement who goes on medical leave could continue to be on phased retirement. The provost said that she is uncertain and would look into this matter and report back to the committee. The discussion of the new phased retirement program concluded with Professor Polk asking if compensation is increased each year when a faculty member is on phased retirement. Provost Epstein said that, as with the previous program, faculty will continue to receive annual faculty salary pool raises when participating in the program. The annual teaching stipend, which is available during the last five years of phased retirement, will also be increased by the amount of the annual faculty salary pool increase.

The members then discussed a proposal from the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP) to revise the *Faculty Handbook* language surrounding holding scheduled classes and [a related letter that it had received from Professor Fong](#). The CEP developed the proposal after it was brought to its attention that some colleagues do not seem to be fully aware that faculty are expected to hold all scheduled classes; the CEP had learned, for example, that some faculty members have ended some of their courses several days before the end of the semester. After some conversation, the members decided to revise the proposed language to convey the distinction between an emergency situation, and an anticipated need not to teach a course in person during the semester for one or two weeks, and to share their proposed changes with the CEP. The committee felt that canceling a class because of an unexpected absence, for example, because a faculty member has become ill, should be left to the discretion of the faculty member; in such an event, the material that would be missed as a result should be conveyed to students through a mechanism determined by the faculty member, and consideration could be given to rescheduling the class.

Continuing, some members said that they were uncomfortable with the level of oversight described in the CEP's proposal and felt that it was impinging on faculty autonomy. In regard to a faculty member who has planned an absence for a period of two weeks or under, the most important thing would be for the instructor to ensure that there is a plan to deliver content to students if a course cannot be taught in person (e.g., as the CEP noted, by rescheduling the class, teaching it remotely, communicating the material asynchronously, or arranging for a colleague to teach the class). Some members wondered if there is a need for the proposed policy. Others felt there were advantages to having a policy that would clearly communicate expectations to colleagues—most notably, to the faculty member and the department chair. Otherwise, the landscape can be murky when problems arise in regard to a faculty member who cannot or will not hold classes. The provost emphasized that circumstances have arisen involving a small number of faculty that have led to a need to have a policy that she and others can reference in situations when faculty members are not holding course meetings. Teaching scheduled classes is a term of employment, the provost explained. There is also an expectation that there be a certain number of contact hours for all courses, it was noted. The provost said that both she and the department chair should be informed if a faculty member plans not to teach a course for more than one week. If a faculty member becomes unable to teach a course after the semester has started as a result of an emergency situation that will last for more than one week, the provost said she would provide additional compensation to colleagues who take over the course and teach it for a week or more. Some members also commented that they do not see the problem with ending regular class meetings before the conclusion of the semester if the usual class time were repurposed to provide students with time to work on a final project, for example, rather than attending class meetings. The

members then briefly discussed a letter from Professor Fong, noting that it raised some related issues. The provost commented that not teaching courses in person for longer than the permitted two-week period is inconsistent with the mission of a residential liberal arts college.

The committee also discussed [a proposal forwarded by the CEP](#) to revise the college's current policies regarding half courses and eligibility for a reduced course load. The committee expressed support for the proposal to remove a restriction that excludes students in their final year from the rule that permits students who withdraw from a course to graduate with thirty-one full courses, as well as the proposal to allow students who have previously taken extra courses (more than four per semester of residence) to subsequently take a reduced load of three-and-a-half courses, once per academic year. It was noted that, under the proposal, students who have completed courses in excess of what would normally be required for their class standing may, once per academic year, and with the permission of their advisor(s), enroll in three full courses and one half course. The members voted unanimously in favor of the substance of the revisions and to forward the proposal to the faculty for a vote at a future faculty meeting.

The meeting adjourned at 5:35 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Epstein
Provost and Dean of the Faculty