

The fifth 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, October 30, 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 some of the ways in which the crisis in Israel and Gaza is affecting members of the Amherst community. He noted that he would be meeting with the Association of Amherst Students (AAS) that evening to discuss this issue. The president then described his plans to acknowledge the intense fear, pain, and anxiety that many students who have very different backgrounds are experiencing at this very difficult moment. For example, he explained, based on his own conversations with students, he knows that there is fear among many Jewish students and others about the spread of antisemitism, which is taking place across the country and around the world; among some Jewish students who do not support Israel, and who, in some cases, are being accused of being antisemitic themselves; among some students who wish to express support for the Palestinian people; and among some Muslim students who worry about the spread of Islamophobia and other forms of anti-Muslim sentiment. Many students also fear that, based on their views, they may be "doxed" (identified online and bullied and harassed), which can have serious repercussions. Some students are also finding it challenging to know how to interact with peers who hold different views on these important and emotionally charged issues. Professor Polk wondered if doxing is considered free speech. The president said that experts would need to weigh in on this question, but that he certainly considers this practice to be a form of intimidation and to be a form of speech that is attempting to shut down other speech.

Continuing, President Elliott said that, at the AAS meeting, he would return to a topic that he had emphasized in his convocation remarks earlier in the year, that is, that Amherst is a community of learners that is committed to respect and tolerance. He will urge students to speak with and listen to one another, while recognizing that doing so at this time can be very challenging—since members of the community hold so many different feelings and opinions. It is at times such as these, however, that it is even more valuable to learn from and respect one another, President Elliott commented. He also noted the challenges of speaking about the complex and tragic conflict in the Middle East. It seems that the world has reached a place in which acknowledging the suffering of some people can be interpreted as failing to acknowledge the suffering of others. The president said that he will make clear that acts of hate of any kind have no place at Amherst, including doxing anyone who is exercising the right to express their views about political issues. In his view, it is possible to support free expression and to engage in respectful and civil protest, while still being against bigotry. The president said that he had appreciated the respectful tone that had been set by the organizers of the Amherst walkout that had been held on October 25, which was linked to the National Student Walkout for Justice in Palestine. Concluding his remarks about what he will convey to students, the president said that he will note that it is clear, of course, that the issues facing the Middle East will not be solved on Amherst's campus. He will also stress the importance of listening to those who reach different conclusions when examining the same set of facts. He will also offer students the advice to be critical of the media that they consume, encouraging them to be thoughtful and careful readers. President Elliott also informed the members that he would advise students who are experiencing pain and grief to try to give themselves grace, and advised all members of the community to strive to give others grace as well.

On a related note, President Elliott said that the college is working to bring to campus speakers with a range of views on matters related to the Middle East crisis. The first speaker will be Ora Szekely, a professor at Clark University, on November 2. Professor Szekely will speak on "Understanding the Current Conflict between Israel and Hamas: What We Know and What We Don't." In addition, Eric Ward, senior fellow with the Southern Poverty Law Center and Race Forward, will speak on November 8 on "How Antisemitism Animates White Nationalism." President Elliott said that the college is considering additional programming to provide students, faculty, and staff with more information and a range of perspectives, the president said. Concluding, he informed the members that the college is planning a vigil in November for the campus community to mourn all

lives lost in the wake of the violence in Israel and Gaza. In addition, the Center for Restorative Practices is holding circles for smaller groups to grieve together, the president said.

Turning to another related topic, the president asked for the members' advice about how he might respond to a 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 requested that the president "use his platform to urge the Massachusetts congressional delegation to call for an immediate ceasefire." The committee suggested that the president discuss the request as part of his remarks at a faculty meeting.

President Elliott next offered some further details about the *Serving the Greater Good Initiative*. In addition to the curricular emphasis, which will focus on course development and which he had discussed with the members earlier, he noted his call that the community rededicate itself to building and promoting a culture of advancing democratic principles and contributing to society beyond Amherst's campus. He looks forward, he said, to the upcoming (November 1) public conversation with Governor Maura Healey about democracy and the greater good. He noted that, as another part of the initiative, the Loeb Center for Career Exploration and Planning, through a career pathways cohort program, will provide support to students who want to explore careers in the public interest. In addition, as a way of modeling and advancing civil discourse, he informed the members that Professor Umphrey is currently developing a program that is tentatively titled the *Open Minds Project*. It is based on the [Open to Debate](#) platform, which describes itself as a media organization that "brings multiple perspectives together for real debates that are structured, respectful, provocative, and fact-driven. [Open to Debate] examines the issues of the day with influential thinkers to build a stronger democracy through the civil exchange of ideas." Continuing, President Elliott shared that, as part of Amherst's commitment to be a good community partner in service of the public good, he would soon announce a donation to several pillars of the community—namely, the Jones Library, Cooley Dickinson Hospital, and the Drake arts and cultural performance venue. The gift to the Jones Library building project will amount to \$1 million over several years, he explained. The college is also continuing to work with the Town of Amherst on a more comprehensive agreement that will include additional support. Professor Follette asked if plans include some funds for the local public schools. The president said that such support is being considered as part of the comprehensive partnership agreement that is being developed.

Under "Questions from Committee Members," Professor Katsaros asked whether the college's planned shift to a new approach to purchasing textbooks will necessitate that faculty submit their book orders earlier than they have traditionally. Provost Epstein said that, while the details are still being determined, it is her understanding that orders for required texts for courses being taught in the fall semester will probably need to be submitted in mid-April, and that orders for the spring semester will likely be due in mid-November. Professor Katsaros responded that this could be challenging, in some cases. The provost said that it is recognized that this timeline will certainly require a change in culture at Amherst, and that accommodating orders by faculty who are hired late in the year who might not be able to meet the ordering deadline, for example, will need to be worked out. Provost Epstein noted that it is also anticipated that the new program will likely shift the responsibility for securing copyright-related permissions away from academic department coordinators. It is hoped that the vendor with which the college will work on the program will assume that work. The president noted that it is also possible that, if the college is able to rent space in the Hastings building, textbooks could be distributed in the new retail space.

Conversation turned first to reflections on the October 17 faculty meeting and then to possible topics of conversation for a November 7 faculty meeting. The committee agreed that the informational discussion on October 17 had been productive. The members felt that the meeting had served to introduce a complicated set of questions to the many in attendance who might not be familiar with the admission process. As for any next steps that should be considered, the committee agreed that the Faculty Committee on Admission and Financial Aid (FCAFA) is the body that would consider this matter. In regard to ongoing deliberations by the presidents of schools in the New England Small College Athletic Conference (NESCAC), President Elliott said that the

presidents have asked some of their deans of admission and athletics directors to develop alternatives to the current banding system. In addition, several NESCAC presidents are speaking with their counterparts at peer institutions that do not have system-wide agreements, as the NESCAC schools do. The president noted that NESCAC and the Ivy League are the only conferences that place league-wide restrictions on admissions, including the recruitment of student-athletes, on member institutions.

The committee next discussed whether to have a faculty meeting on November 7 and decided to have a meeting. It was agreed that the faculty should vote on [a proposal from the Committee on Educational Policy \(CEP\)](#) for a [three-year academic calendar](#) sooner rather than later. In addition, given the structural changes that have taken place within the Office of Student Affairs over the past seven months or so under the leadership of Angie Tissi-Gassoway, chief student affairs officer and dean of students, it would be helpful to have a presentation about the resources and services that are available through student affairs, as Professor Nicola Courtright proposed in [a letter she sent to the FEC](#) in May 2023 concerning faculty responses to students experiencing personal difficulties. The members asked the provost to invite A. Tissi-Gassoway to present the vision for the office and the ways in which the division has been reconfigured to serve that vision, as well as information about the resources that are available to faculty to support students. In addition, the committee agreed that it would be helpful to have A. Tissi-Gassoway introduce the members of her team, who could describe their roles briefly. Advising the faculty about whom to contact when students are in distress would also be useful, and the members agreed that they would like to learn more about the [Purple Folder Initiative](#). Provost Epstein said that she would invite A. Tissi-Gassoway to give the presentation.

Conversation turned to [a proposal from the CEP and Committee on Academic Standing and Special Majors](#) to discontinue the [Independent Scholar Program](#). Professor Katsaros, who had authored the memo to the CEP on the issues surrounding the program when she had chaired the Committee on Academic Standing and Special Majors, noted that the program is rarely used (only twelve students have participated since 2000), and that concerns about it include a lack of specificity, whether academic rigor can be ensured for students who participate, the burdens it places on faculty who serve as advisors, challenges/conflicts that might arise since the student is dependent on a single faculty member as an advisor, the challenges that surround assessment of the program's outcomes, and issues related to equity and accessibility. Professor Katsaros explained to the committee that, under the program, students are permitted to engage in exceptional extracurricular opportunities (e.g., a major research project or an internship) and do not take any courses; in most cases, they spend the semester away from campus. The committee agreed that, if the Independent Scholar Program were to be discontinued, students could still take advantage of exceptional opportunities, including a significant research project, by taking a leave of absence, pursuing the opportunity during interterm, and/or undertaking a capstone project. The committee found the arguments for discontinuing the program to be compelling. The members then voted unanimously to approve the substance of the following motion and to forward it to the faculty:

That the Independent Scholar Program be discontinued, and that no additional students (beyond any students who may be pursuing the program now) be allowed to participate in it.

Concluding the discussion about the agenda for the November 7 faculty meeting, Professor Gardner asked if the presentation about the Office of Student Affairs could follow the motions about the academic calendar and the Independent Scholar Program. Typically, such presentations are given toward the beginning of the meeting. Professor Follette noted that [Professor Hanneke had written to the FEC last spring](#) to propose that consideration be given to reordering the faculty meeting agenda for all meetings to "prioritize faculty business." The members decided that, on November 7, the presentation should follow the motions, and that the committee would take up at a future meeting whether radical changes should be made to the order of future agendas, as Professor Hanneke had proposed. This discussion, the members decided, should be part of a broader conversation about

faculty governance. The members then voted five in favor and zero opposed to forward the faculty meeting agenda for a November 7 meeting to the faculty.

The meeting concluded with a discussion of a proposal forwarded by the CEP to guide decisions about what kinds of Five-College courses the college should allow to be taken for credit. This question was prompted by a petition from an Amherst student to have a UMass ROTC course count for credit toward graduation at Amherst. The CEP noted that the college has had a longstanding policy not to grant such credit. The CEP then considered this issue more broadly and proposed a revision to the current catalog language, based on its deliberations. The CEP developed the proposed policy with the goal of clarifying the language about which Five-College courses are allowed to count for Amherst College, and streamlining the decision-making process about determining this for individual courses. Under the proposal, that decision is shifted from the registrar's office to the student's advisor, while placing ultimate authority with the provost and dean of the faculty. The proposed policy also caps at six the total number of Five-College courses a student can take, while providing a path for additional courses if required.

Professor Polk, pointing to the writing of political scientist Samuel Huntington, began the conversation by commenting that he sees it as problematic that the CEP views ROTC courses essentially as job training. He explained that it is understood by the military that officers represent the intellectual class, and that ROTC courses focus a great deal on leadership. One might argue, he suggested, that completing the training is the equivalent of earning a degree in business or management. Professor Polk said that, while he recognizes that there may be other reasons for Amherst not to award credit for ROTC courses, he feels that the CEP might be misreading the ROTC by viewing it as a vocational training program. Provost Epstein explained that the CEP had reviewed the syllabus of the ROTC course before making its determination.

The members discussed the proposal that individual advisors, rather than the registrar's office make decisions about whether students should receive college credit for Five-College courses, in accordance with certain criteria that the CEP had articulated and based on whether the course fits into a student's "particular academic goals." While the members were sympathetic to the registrar's office feeling overburdened, particularly during the add-drop period, some members found it very troubling that, under the proposed process, one student might receive credit for a course while another might not, depending on the advisor. In addition, the committee noted the enormous burden the proposed system would place on individual faculty. The committee preferred that such decisions be made at the department level, if a student petitioned the registrar's office and a determination could not easily be made. The members suggested that the process would be aided by having a list of pre-approved Five-College courses (such as the one in place for some study-away courses), so that individual decision-making is kept to a minimum. If a student wanted to take a course that might not meet the criteria for credit and was not on the list of pre-approved courses, there could be a process by which the student would have to petition the department a semester before the course would be taken, rather than during the add/drop period, for example. When it comes to determining whether a Five-College course could be counted toward a major requirement, it was agreed that the major department would need to make the determination, as they do for study-away courses.

Concluding the discussion, the members stressed that they do not want to discourage students from taking advantage of the opportunities that Five-College courses can provide, but that it is important to improve the mechanism that allows them to do so. A system that would rely too heavily on advisors is not workable, in the committee's view. Noting that the proposed policy also seeks to "formaliz[e] our existing practice of prohibiting certain Five-College courses that experience has shown to be insufficiently rigorous to meet Amherst standards," some members also questioned whether it is appropriate and respectful for Amherst to be making this kind of judgment about other institutions' courses. The committee also noted the difficulty, at times, of determining when a course crosses the line when it comes to not fitting into a liberal arts education, and whether the distinction of being pre-professional is a useful criterion. In particular, courses in subjects such as engineering, law, and education could greatly benefit some students whose focus at Amherst intersects with ideas from those disciplines, Professor Follette noted. Some members wondered if some of these issues could be addressed simply by having a cap on the number of Five-College courses a student could take, without requiring a judgment

of rigor or pre-professional status, with the understanding that departments could decide whether such courses “count” as electives toward their major. Other members were uncomfortable with this approach. The member suggested that the proposal be returned to the CEP, and that the provost convey the FEC’s concerns. She agreed to do so.

The meeting adjourned at 5:35 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Epstein
Provost and Dean of the Faculty