

The eighth 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 27, at 4:15 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 welcoming the members back from Thanksgiving break. He then shared that, like many others, he has been deeply saddened and shaken by the recent shooting of three young men of Palestinian descent in Burlington, Vermont, who were walking near the University of Vermont. They attend Brown University, Haverford College, and Trinity College, institutions that are much like Amherst, which makes the horrific incident feel particularly close to home, the president noted. Many students, including many Amherst students, particularly those of Palestinian and Jewish descent, have a deepening sense of vulnerability during this very difficult time; the president emphasized the importance of being attentive to these feelings and said that the college is being as protective as possible of Amherst students.

Continuing his remarks, President Elliott informed the members about a disturbing incident that had begun on November 15, soon after the *Amherst Student* had posted an opinion piece about the situation in the Middle East; five of the newspaper’s editors had co-authored the piece. The president explained that an organization not affiliated with the college had posted the editors’ names and photos online in order to “dox” the students, who had later received vile messages online. Understandably, this frightening social-media attack created a sense of fear among the students, President Elliott said. He informed the committee that the Office of Student Affairs has been supporting the students, and that he met with two of them as well. In addition, he had asked his office to reach out to some peer institutions that are developing and sharing with their communities resources and services to help students who are experiencing doxing and related online security issues. The college may find it necessary to develop a similar guide and set of resources. The president said that, at his request, Sandy Genelius, chief communications officer, and Stephanie Ramirez, associate director of social and new media, had also spoken with the students about ways to navigate their online presence in the wake of the attack. The president said that this incident and the continuing impact of the crisis in the Middle East had prompted him to [send a message to students, faculty, and staff on November 20](#), in which he had reiterated Amherst’s foundational principles surrounding respectful dialogue and the free expression of different points of view. In addition, he had made clear once again that intimidation and harassment have no place at Amherst. The members were troubled by the experience of the students and expressed support for the steps that the college is taking during this very challenging time.

Conversation turned to [a letter to President Elliott from Professor Hasan](#), which Professor Hasan had also sent to the FEC and which he had provided to the *Amherst Student*, where it was reprinted. The letter focused on [the announcement from the president’s office](#) that Bret Stephens, opinion columnist for the *New York Times* and senior contributor to NBC News, would be on campus to discuss “Israel, Antisemitism, and the United States,” in dialogue with Professor Lawrence Douglas. Professor Hasan pointed out in his letter that there had not been a similar announcement about the visit to campus of Palestinian writer and journalist Mohammed El-Kurd, who was recently named “one of the 100 most influential people in the world” by *Time Magazine*. Professor Hasan felt that this “disparity” was reflective of the college not supporting diverse viewpoints and learning across difference, which has been a stated goal. While also criticizing B. Stephens’s views in the letter, Professor Hasan stressed his commitment to “free speech and viewpoint diversity” and noted that, “although [he] strongly disagrees[s] with Stephens’ views, they are entirely within the orbit of legitimate discourse.” President Elliott said that he had spoken with Professor Hasan, a valued and trusted colleague, about the concerns raised in the letter. While not intending to privilege any speaker who would be coming to campus to discuss the situation in the Middle East, or to support any particular perspectives, he said that, upon reflection, he understood and accepted Professor Hasan’s criticism that B. Stephens was not announced as part of a larger announcement about future speakers, including speakers who could represent a Palestinian perspective. He stated that, indeed, the college is actively working to line up speakers who represent a diversity of voices and viewpoints about the situation in the Middle East, and that he now understands better the sensitivity about how

speakers on these subjects are announced. He also noted that some of the speakers of great interest to the college, including those suggested by faculty, are in great demand and difficult to secure.

Professor Polk asked if the Stephens event has generated interest among Amherst alumni. President Elliott responded that he has heard only from two alumni who have indicated that they might be interested in attending. He commented that he does hear from alumni regularly about the campus climate and the campus response to the situation in the Middle East, and that alumni share with him a wide range of perspectives and concerns; however, he has yet to experience the kind of concerted or coordinated alumni pressure that has been described at some other institutions. The committee thanked the president for his continuing efforts to encourage the free expression and exchange of ideas and a diversity of opinion on campus. The members then turned briefly to a personnel matter.

Under "Questions from Committee Members," Professor Gardner asked about the status of the college's program that offered a process for faculty and staff to host Amherst students for a Thanksgiving meal. She hasn't seen anything about the program, and she is interested in hosting students in the future. Associate Provost Tobin said that she had supported the program for a number of years, matching faculty and staff with interested students. The Office of Student Affairs began to oversee the program at some point. It does not appear to be an active program at this time, she believes. Provost Epstein wondered whether the hosting program might have been discontinued when the college began hosting a dinner at the Inn on Boltwood for students who remain on campus for Thanksgiving. The provost said that, in addition, Val was open to provide meals over Thanksgiving break, including on Thanksgiving. It is possible that the pandemic interrupted the earlier program, it was noted. President Elliott said that he would ask colleagues in the Office of Student Affairs about the hosting program to learn more.

Continuing with questions, Professor Katsaros asked if the dates of the spring 2024 faculty meetings have been set, commenting that the new meeting time of Friday at 3:00 p.m. will begin then. The dates have been set and [are posted online](#), the provost said. The dates are February 16, March 8, April 26, and May 23 (the commencement meeting will be held on this Thursday at 9:00 a.m.).

Conversation returned briefly to the proposal forwarded by the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP) to revise [the comprehensive requirement language](#) in the *Amherst College Catalog*. (See the committee's minutes of November 13, 2023, for the members' conversation about the details of the proposal.) The committee discussed the substance of the motion that it would bring forward to revise the language, which is largely the same as what was proposed by the CEP. Professor Polk asked if, under the revised requirement, the college would provide support to departments and programs that may not have sufficient resources to offer a capstone experience, as would be required if the proposed language is approved. Other members said that it is their understanding that the new language represents a "rebranding" of the current language, which already requires a comprehensive evaluation, and is not meant to introduce a new requirement. The provost concurred. In fact, it was noted, the proposed language is meant to offer greater flexibility, providing a number of examples of ways in which the requirement of a capstone experience could be satisfied. As is true now, if the new language is approved, each department and program would continue to be able to design and require its own capstone requirement. Such an experience is not expected to be more onerous than a comprehensive exam, and may be less onerous, if desired. If adopted, the new language would codify that the requirement cannot be satisfied simply by satisfying course requirements for a major and would extend the deadline for completing the requirement to the last day of class. The members discussed briefly the purpose of having any requirement of this kind and whether it is valuable. Provost Epstein suggested that the purpose is to demonstrate that majors have acquired broad knowledge of the discipline in which they are majoring. Some members wondered if the requirement is relevant or necessary, after being in place for years. It was noted that carrying out current

comprehensive requirements can place significant demands on departments and programs. The committee noted that the current comprehensive requirement language includes the following: “The mode of the evaluation need not be the same for all the majors within a department, and, indeed, may be designed individually to test the skills each student has developed.” This flexibility is still possible, and desirable, under the proposed language, the committee agreed. Some members commented that majors in their departments currently have different requirements when it comes to the comprehensive requirement. For example, in some departments, students who complete honors theses are not also required to take a comprehensive exam, while those who do not complete a thesis must take the exam. In other departments, every student, including students who complete an honors thesis, must pass an exam. Several members expressed the view that having some kind of summative experience is valuable and should remain an important part of an Amherst education. The members then voted five in favor and zero opposed on the substance of the motion below and five in favor and zero opposed to forward the motion to the faculty.

That, effective at the start of the 2024–2025 academic year, the changes below (indicated in red text and with strike-outs) be made to what is now the comprehensive requirement language in the *Amherst College Catalog*. If this motion is approved, other references to “the comprehensive requirement” in the catalog would be changed to “the capstone requirement.”

#### Comprehensive Requirement

~~A part of the major requirement in every department is an evaluation of the student’s comprehension in his or her major field of study. This evaluation may be based on a special written examination or upon any other performance deemed appropriate by each department. The mode of the evaluation need not be the same for all the majors within a department, and, indeed, may be designed individually to test the skills each student has developed.~~

~~The evaluation should be completed by the seventh week of the second semester of the senior year. Any student whose comprehension is judged to be inadequate will have two opportunities for reevaluation: one not later than the last day of classes of the second semester of the senior year, and the other during the next college year.~~

#### Capstone Requirement

Each department and program at Amherst College designs a capstone experience (CE) for its majors. The CE can take various forms, but in all cases, students are expected to use the knowledge and skill that they have gained in the major in the service of an academic endeavor. Some examples of CEs are departmental seminars, analyses of current articles, presentations of student work, exams, and metacognitive reflections. In addition to deepening the learning experience in the major, CEs are meant to heighten the feeling of belonging to a knowledge-based community, a community that includes faculty and students alike. For that reason, CEs often culminate in events that bring seniors and departmental faculty members together. The capstone experience should be completed, at the latest, by the last class day of the second semester of the senior year.

The members next reviewed a draft agenda for a December 5 faculty meeting and voted five in favor and zero opposed to forward it to the faculty.

Discussion turned to [a letter to the committee from Professor Kunichika](#), in which he had shared questions and concerns about the textbook program that is under development at this time. Professor Follette posed some questions about the implications of the program’s earlier deadlines for the submission of materials for

course packs (readers), as she and other STEM faculty do not typically make use of readers, she commented. Professor Follette wonders how close to the beginning of the semester readers are usually finalized. Professor Katsaros, who said that she shares some of Professor Kunichika's concerns about the program, responded that there are often good pedagogical reasons for taking time to get a reader just right, particularly in language classes. In her experience, while it is typical that a faculty member can decide well in advance of a semester about the choice of a textbook for a course, the contents of the readers that they assemble (e.g., book chapters, articles, etc.) may evolve over an extended period. For example, there may be an updated new translation or a new edition with a new introduction that the faculty member sees as very valuable, but it may not be clear when such material will be released, she explained. Professor Katsaros shared that she typically spends time over the summer refining the contents of her readers. She also raised the issue of whether Follett will be able to source books in the original language, or will be more capable of sourcing English-language resources. Provost Epstein responded that Professor Brenneis, a member of the Spanish department who served on the Textbook Task Force, had tested the company's ability to source materials in another language, and had found that Follett was able to do so very effectively, even when asked to procure an obscure text.

Continuing the discussion, the provost asked Professor Katsaros about the time period in which she refines readers for her spring courses. Professor Katsaros said she typically does so during interterm. The provost noted that, under the textbook program, it will still be possible for faculty to post readings on their Moodle sites for students or simply to make handouts, if changes are needed after the submission deadline has passed. In addition, Frost Library will be working with Follett on e-reserves and other materials, so if faculty are accustomed to working with Frost to access materials owned by the library, they will experience no change. On the other hand, Follett will need more time if acquiring new materials that the library does not already hold and arranging for copyright permissions. More lead time will also be required if Follett is sourcing out-of-print materials. The provost said that it is her understanding that the submission deadline will be in April for fall courses and in October for spring courses.

Provost Epstein noted that the new system will represent a change in culture, but that there are important reasons for making the transition. First and foremost, students will benefit from the change, for all the reasons noted at the faculty meeting of November 7, including as a matter of equity. ([See the minutes of that discussion.](#)) There are also issues of compliance under the college's current system that must be addressed, as there are federal requirements under the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) surrounding when the costs of textbooks and "supplemental materials" for each course must be posted on an institution's website. Finally, she noted that Amherst's current system, which enables faculty to delay choosing course materials and making them available to students until shortly before classes begins, is an outlier among colleges and universities. In addition, under the current system, the provost added, tremendous pressure can be placed on staff members, most prominently academic department coordinators and librarians. These implications of the current system are important to consider, in her view.

Continuing the conversation, Professor Call said that, when he was dean, he remembers talking with fellow deans about the number of new courses that Amherst faculty propose on a regular basis. He had found that Amherst faculty develop significantly more new courses than faculty at most peer institutions, often to a stunning degree. He wonders whether the new textbook system would dampen the faculty's enthusiasm and ability to do so; tracking trends such as this under the new system will be important, he suggested. Professor Follette asked if it will be possible to extend the submission deadlines that the new system requires, making exceptions for materials for faculty who are preparing new courses, as she understands it will be possible to do for newly hired faculty. Provost Epstein said that it will not be possible to make exceptions for faculty who are preparing new courses. There are simply too many faculty doing so.

Professor Katsaros next raised the question of whether it would be possible to make course materials that are posted online available in print as well, under the new system. For pedagogical reasons, she prefers that her students read text in a print form rather than on a screen, and she knows colleagues who also prefer this approach. The provost said that this is possible, as it is now and is unrelated to the new program, but that there

would be significant costs involved that the college would not assume. Professor Follette said that she believes that there are likely workarounds in this regard. When she taught a seminar, she found that she needed to prepare some book excerpts for students, which is not something that she does regularly in other courses. Her understanding is that it is permissible under “fair use” to copy some portion of a text for students in a course, particularly when a text is being used for the first time. Professor Follette suggested that faculty consult with the library about what is possible and how the library can support faculty. The committee wondered if it might be useful to have a representative from Follett answer the faculty’s questions directly. The provost said that the company has prepared a video about the textbook program, and that sharing this tool could be preferable. She intends to review the video soon and will let the committee know if it will be suitable to provide to the faculty.

The members next briefly discussed Professor Kunichika’s concerns surrounding faculty governance in regard to the textbook program. President Elliott commented that he has been impressed by the effectiveness with which the Textbook Task Force has made use of channels of faculty governance in carrying out its work. Professor Gardner responded that she thinks that Professor Kunichika is not necessarily focused on the Task Force’s process. He notes some of the negative implications of adopting the Workday system in regard to the faculty’s role in carrying out some essential responsibilities and worries that the textbook program will lead to a similar diminution in other faculty arenas. Professor Gardner commented that she had interpreted Professor Kunichika’s concern as being that adoption of the new textbook system will lead to decisions about what faculty can use in their courses that will be taken out of the hands of faculty—creating limitations on core faculty prerogatives. Professor Call noted that the use of systems such as Workday and Follett’s system have and will continue to change the way faculty work. Some of these changes were not chosen by the faculty, but are limitations imposed by these systems. Rather than describing these systems as a potential threat to faculty governance, as some do, some members felt that it is more accurate to describe the systems as a potential threat to faculty autonomy. Professor Polk said that, while appreciating Professor Kunichika’s perspective, he is not convinced that decision-making about the textbook program represents an erosion of faculty governance. He sees the way in which this process has unfolded more as an evolution of faculty governance—which has historically privileged an older order. Professor Gardner said that it is her understanding that faculty governance does not mean that all faculty must be involved in every major decision. She trusts that colleagues charged with doing so will think through issues carefully, from a faculty perspective. Other faculty should be consulted, and should provide feedback, she feels, but not all issues need to be discussed at a faculty meeting, in her view.

It was noted that plans call for the new textbook system to be piloted in some departments in the spring. The committee asked the provost if she knows which departments will participate in the pilot. She said that she believes that the departments of faculty who are serving on the task force will participate, but that the participants have not yet been finalized. The committee emphasized the importance of having a representative cross section of departments participate in the pilot. The members decided to invite Jesse Barba, director of institutional research and registrar services, and a member of the task force, to their December 4 meeting. During the conversation with him about the textbook program, they agreed to pose questions, including those raised by Professor Kunichika. Later, it could be decided whether more conversation with the faculty about the textbook program is needed. Professor Follette suggested that it would be useful to provide the faculty with an FAQ about the textbook program, and the other members agreed.

Concluding the conversation, President Elliott noted that it is important to remember that Follett, with the many resources at its disposal, should be able to source all of the materials that Amherst Books could. In addition, moving to a more systems-based approach is being done with student needs in mind, he said. It is his understanding that, beyond the earlier deadlines, faculty should not experience changes under the new system. He also reminded the committee that, as noted at the faculty meeting, the new system will not solve the problems surrounding streaming films and related copyright issues; the problems exist under the current system.

The meeting ended with a discussion of [a proposal forwarded by the CEP regarding the criteria for awarding the Woods-Travis Prize](#). The CEP noted that, with grade inflation, “GPA has become an increasingly

inappropriate tool for distinguishing among our most accomplished students in the awarding of honors and prizes.” The members noted that continuing to use the simple criterion of awarding the prize to the student in the class with the highest GPA, as is the case now, will be challenging; doing so will necessitate that the prize be awarded to dozens of students potentially because of recent changes to the grading and honors policies (see below). Some members didn’t feel it would be a problem to divide the prize among many students, while others felt that doing so would detract from winning the award. Provost Epstein said that she holds the latter opinion. Professor Gardner expressed the view that continuing to offer the prize based on GPA alone would seem to fuel a student culture in which the highest educational value is placed on grades rather than student learning. She feels that this value statement is misaligned with the goals of an Amherst education.

Continuing the discussion, the members expressed support for the CEP’s recommendation that the criteria for the Woods-Travis Prize be broadened so that the prize is awarded to a senior who has completed an honors thesis, ideally at a summa level; taken courses that span the curriculum; taken courses at an advanced level (proxied by a high fraction of 300- and 400- level courses); and has maintained a high GPA. (For example, a 4.0 threshold would still encompass a large number of students because of the faculty’s recent decision to count A+ grades as a 4.0 rather than 4.3; it is expected that the competition for the highest GPA will soon involve a tie among dozens of students with 4.0 GPAs). While the CEP had also recommended that notable contributions to the extracurricular life of the college also be a criterion, the FEC felt that this would prove too difficult to measure in many cases. Professor Follette wondered if departments have different standards and criteria for allowing students to pursue honors work and for making summa recommendations, and questioned whether a “highest possible” GPA criterion might bias against certain majors, given variation in departmental norms around grades. The provost said that there is variation in summa nomination norms and criteria among departments. Professor Follette expressed concern about the ways in which a GPA criterion, in particular, might introduce inequities and bias against students who have taken intellectual risks. The members agreed that it would be a helpful exercise to apply the criteria under consideration for the award to the students at the top of the class by class year for the past three years, using the new GPA and honors standards that are now in place, and the criteria being recommended by the CEP (exclusive of the co- extracurricular life criterion). In this way, a sense of the number of ties that could emerge could be ascertained. It was agreed that the committee would discuss this proposal with J. Barba on December 4.

The meeting adjourned at 5:45 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Epstein  
Provost and Dean of the Faculty