

The tenth 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, December 11, at 4:30 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 Provost Epstein sharing with the committee that she plans to step down from the position of provost and dean of the faculty on June 30, 2024, and that [an announcement would be sent to the community](#) the next day. President Elliott said that he would also be sending a [communication about the transition](#) soon after the provost’s email goes out. The provost said that she had informed the president of her plans some time ago, and that she feels that this is the right time for her personally, and for the college, to make this transition. She informed the members that she will be on sabbatical in 2024–2025 and will then return to the history department full time. On behalf of the faculty, the members expressed their tremendous appreciation to the provost for her extraordinary service in this role for close to a decade. Provost Epstein then left the meeting, and the faculty members of the committee discussed with President Elliot the search for the next provost and dean of the faculty.

The president began by noting that Provost Epstein has been a terrific partner and that he is grateful that she agreed to serve as provost during the presidential transition and during his second year as president. He respects her decision, he said, and is excited for her as she moves forward with her plans for the future.

President Elliott then discussed the advantages and disadvantages of a solely internal search for Provost Epstein’s successor versus a national search for the next provost and dean of the faculty. He said that his strong inclination is that the search should be internal, with the option of turning to a national search, if necessary. Having a current Amherst faculty member assume this important leadership role at the college would be the most desirable outcome, in his view. The committee supported this approach. President Elliott and the members next discussed the search process. The president said that his plan is to appoint a search committee of faculty members and staff colleagues to conduct a confidential process, and he asked for the committee to think about possible members of the search committee. Each member agreed to come to the FEC’s December 18 meeting with a list of possibilities.

Continuing the conversation, some members asked if there is a desire to have faculty representing different disciplines on the search committee. The president said that such representation would be helpful, while also noting that it is his hope that some search committee members will have a background in faculty leadership and/or administrative experience. Of course, all those serving on the search committee cannot be interested in applying for the position themselves, he noted. The president said that he would be happy to consult with the FEC about the membership of the search committee. The members said that they would welcome the opportunity to offer the president their advice during this process.

Turning to the timeline for the search process, President Elliott said that it is his hope that the search committee will present him with a short list of two or three candidates, from which he will select the next provost and dean of the faculty, after soliciting the advice of some other colleagues, including Provost Epstein. The members asked about the timeline for the search. President Elliott said that he would like to appoint the search committee in January. He imagines that the application process for the position will be simple and straightforward to encourage colleagues to apply. He commented that it is his hope to appoint the new provost and dean of the faculty so as to have enough time before the end of the semester to facilitate the transition.

The committee asked if the president planned to continue the model of having the position structured as it is now, or having a separate dean of the faculty and provost. The president said that,

while he is doing some research about the structures used by peer institutions and is open to considering different models, his thinking at this time is that he will retain the current structure of the position. The provost rejoined the meeting at 4:53 p.m.

Under “Questions from Committee Members,” Professor Call asked if there was any update on the [request sent to the president from a group of faculty](#) asking that the college divest any investments that Amherst holds in corporations that are profiting from the war in the Middle East. President Elliott said that the board is considering this request. Professor Follette asked if Amherst’s investment portfolio is public. President Elliott said that it is not. He explained that the college’s approach to managing the endowment centers around maintaining long-term exceptional relationships—developed over many years—with excellent fund managers. They are responsible for making investments. With a few exceptions college does not choose individual stocks. (In those few cases where the college does choose individual stocks, they are identified in the college’s annual investment report.)

Continuing with questions, Professor Call informed the members that he would be meeting with members of the Library Committee to discuss the FEC’s request to reconsider the open-access policy. Provost Epstein next mentioned that the meeting with the chairs of departments and programs that had taken place the previous Friday had been productive. Members of the Textbook Task Force had given a presentation and had responded to questions from the chairs. Professor Polk and Professor Katsaros, who had been present, said that they feel that many colleagues’ concerns about the program have been allayed. Professor Katsaros also noted that a chair had asked whether there would be a process to review and assess the textbook program, which will indeed be the case. She stressed the importance of providing technical support and responding to faculty feedback during this transition.

Professor Call next asked the provost about the faculty lunch that had just taken place earlier in the day to discuss the results of the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE) survey, including attendance at the event. Provost Epstein said that six or seven faculty members had attended. She informed the members that, if departments would find it useful, she and Jesse Barba, director of institutional research and registrar services, would be happy to meet with departments to discuss the survey in a format that would break down the results into a small group of results that might share some of the same concerns.

Continuing with questions, Professor Follette asked, on behalf of a colleague, if detailed information could be provided about how to fund student travel so that college funds can be provided to students in advance of the trip, rather than faculty putting costs on their own credit cards or students having to pay in advance, as is true in some cases now. Guidance that is given now is confusing, according to the colleague, and she agrees, she said. Booking hotels and travel can also be frustrating. The provost said that she would try to learn more about this situation and report back.

The members next reviewed correspondence from the Committee on Educational Policy about the FEC’s suggested language about expectations for holding scheduled classes, as well as [a letter that Professor Fong sent](#) regarding her concerns. The members agreed to refine the language further in the interest of clarity.

The meeting concluded with the members discussing the [report of the Task Force on Guidelines for the Use of Generative AI Tools for Teaching and Learning at Amherst](#). The members praised the report, which they found to be informative and clearly written. The committee agreed that it would be helpful to send the report out in a separate email, in addition to linking to it in these minutes and to have a discussion at the February 16 faculty meeting about issues that the report raises. The members found that it would be helpful, in particular, to draw the faculty’s attention to sections 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3 of the report, which focus on teaching strategies in the age of generative AI. Possibly, this would also make a good topic for the provost’s retreat, it was suggested. At the same time, President Elliott commented, he feels it is important to focus on matters beyond the tactical when it comes to AI, which is here to stay—for example, considering what majors might look like five years from now, due to the impact of AI.

The meeting adjourned at 5:35 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Epstein
Provost and Dean of the Faculty