

Confidentiality. *The minutes of the FEC are intended to provide Amherst College faculty and staff with a high-level summary of the committee's weekly discussions. They are not direct transcriptions. Those who receive the minutes should not share them or their attachments with others.*

The twenty-second 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, May 13, at 4:00 P.M. Present, in addition to Professor Call, were Professors Gardner, Katsaros, and Polk; President Elliott; Provost and Dean of the Faculty Epstein; and Associate Provost Tobin, recorder. Professor Follette was absent, but provided asynchronous comments on a number of agenda items in advance of the meeting and voted on a number of matters remotely after the meeting.

The meeting began with President Elliott mentioning [a letter from the Hillel Executive Board](#) that was published in the *Amherst Student* on May 8, 2024. He expressed great concern that the letter conveys that some Jewish students at Amherst have experienced antisemitism and feel that their views and voices are not being represented on campus during this very difficult time.

The president next consulted with the committee about possible ways to support faculty engagement with the trustees as the board begins its consideration of the request to identify and divest from corporations that supply military equipment used in the present campaign in Gaza. (At the special faculty meeting held on May 3, the faculty approved a [nonbinding] motion to make this request.) President Elliott informed the committee that the request to divest is on the agenda of the board's upcoming meetings over commencement weekend. It was agreed that it would be informative for the board to hear directly from some faculty members who spoke in favor and against the resolution. The president thanked the committee for its advice about how to structure initial conversations with members of the faculty and the board about this issue.

The members then returned to a discussion of the two breaches of confidentiality that had occurred before and during the May 3 special faculty meeting and approaches that the committee might take to conveying the importance of maintaining trust and confidentiality as a foundational principle of faculty governance going forward. (A letter requesting the postponement of the faculty vote on divestment at the special meeting, which was sent to the FEC by a colleague and attached to the minutes with the author's permission, was "leaked" to a group of students and alumni and shared on social media before the meeting. In addition, the outcome of the faculty vote on the motion noted above was also shared in real time with the students gathered in Converse Hall.)

Continuing the conversation, the members agreed that, while the special meeting itself had led to a robust and respectful exchange of views, rooted in the principle of academic and intellectual freedom, the breaches in confidentiality that preceded and followed it went against established norms of faculty governance. The committee noted that the minutes of the FEC, as well as the documents attached to them (such as colleagues' letters) may not be shared with anyone who is not an intended recipient. They emphasized that disseminating confidential documents erodes faculty members' confidence in the process of faculty governance, hinders efforts at transparency and open dialogue, potentially subjects faculty to harassment or doxing online, and diminishes the faculty's ability to engage in sensitive conversations in ways that foster the free exchange of ideas. Similarly, the real-time revelation of the outcome of the vote represented a breach of principles of faculty governance. As a reminder that the rules of confidentiality and faculty governance are vital to the faculty's mission as educators and as members of a community of scholars, the committee decided that, going forward, the statement that appears at the top page of these minutes will appear in this location in future sets of minutes and on the web page on which the FEC minutes are posted. The members then decided to send a letter to all faculty and staff to share the substance of this conversation and to mention this issue as part of the FEC's annual report at the commencement faculty meeting.

The members next reviewed a revised motion regarding a policy on teaching expectations, finalized the motion, and voted five in favor and zero opposed on the substance of the motion and five in favor and zero opposed to forward the motion to the faculty. The revised motion will be considered at the May 23 faculty meeting. The members reviewed draft faculty meeting agendas for the May 23 and September 2 faculty

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meetings and voted five in favor and zero opposed to forward them to the faculty. (As noted earlier, Professor Follette's votes were recorded after the meeting.)

Conversation turned to [a revised version of a memo about the work of the Civil Rights Review Team \(CRRT\) and the Bias Education Response Team \(BERT\)](#), which Sheree Ohen, chief equity and inclusion officer, prepared for the committee. S. Ohen made some changes and additions in response to the committee's initial review of the memo, and following a conversation with Professor Gardner. Professor Gardner noted that she had had a very helpful conversation with S. Ohen said that she is pleased that a hypothetical has been added to the memo that serves to provide more detail about the related process. Professor Gardner also commented that S. Ohen had assured her that no faculty member will be asked to remove assigned readings from their syllabus as a result of a report being made. The committee agreed that the memo should be shared with the community via these minutes and expressed appreciation to S. Ohen for her work on this document and responsiveness to the committee's questions and suggestions.

The members next returned to a discussion of a [proposal forwarded by the Committee on Educational Policy \(CEP\)](#) 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." To recap the FEC's discussion in the fall, the committee had 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, could be challenging; doing so potentially could necessitate that the prize be awarded to dozens of students because of recent changes to the grading and honors policies (see below). Some members had not felt that it would be a problem to divide the prize among many students, while others had expressed the view that doing so would detract from winning the award. Professor Gardner had 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 had said that she feels that this value statement is misaligned with the goals of an Amherst education. The members had 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 had felt that this would prove too difficult to measure in many cases. Professor Follette had 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 lead to bias against certain majors, given variation in departmental norms around grades. The provost had said that there is variation in summa nomination norms and criteria among departments. Professor Follette had 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 had 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. The committee later discussed this proposal with Jesse Barba, director of institutional research and registrar services, who agreed to model the results of the Woods-Travis

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Prize for the classes of 2019–2023 using the new A+ grade (valued at 4.0) and the requirement that the student receive summa cum laude honors using the new honors policy.

Having now received this information from J. Barba, the members agreed that the CEP's proposal that the criteria for the Woods-Travis Prize should be broadened, with the exception of adding the proposed criterion of "making notable contributions to the extracurricular life of the college (for example, participation in student organizations and government, athletics, the student newspaper, committee service, or other activities that contribute to the greater good within our community)." Looking at the data, the members felt that it would be possible that up to five students could be eligible for the award in a given year, and that this number would be manageable in regard to decision-making. It was agreed that the award should be given to the student with the highest GPA and who also meets the criteria for summa cum laude, which includes the completion of a modest distribution requirement. Ideally, the implementation of these new criteria for the award will be effective with the class of 2025, it was agreed.

Turning to another topic, the provost expressed regret that time had not allowed the committee to consider charging an ad hoc committee to examine the role and status of lecturers at the college. The members expressed support for doing so, and it was agreed that the Associate Provost Tobin should place this issue on the agenda of next year's FEC.

The committee conveyed its profound appreciation to the provost for her dedication and support of the faculty throughout the last decade—a period marked by substantial growth in the college, significant challenges, and notable successes.

The president and provost then thanked the members for their service on the committee, and the meeting concluded.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Epstein
Provost and Dean of the Faculty