

The twelfth 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, January 29, 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.

Under “Topics of the Day,” President Elliott noted that, since the committee had last met in December, the board had responded to the request sent to him 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. The president said that Professor George, one of the signatories, had acknowledged receipt of the response.

Continuing with his remarks, President Elliott noted that three speakers have been invited to campus in March to offer their perspectives on the violence in the Middle East, as was noted in an email that he had sent earlier in the day to the community. The president said that a focus of these talks will be on the reverberations of the conflict in the Middle East in communities within the United States.

Turning to the topic of the current public mistrust of institutions of higher learning—particularly of elite institutions—that is a result of the ways in which higher education is currently being portrayed in the national press, the president said that he sees this as a very serious concern. He noted, as well, that this mistrust is bipartisan and profound. President Elliott said that he plans to find opportunities to discuss with the community, including at the February 16 faculty meeting, ways in which the college can work to navigate this tumultuous time. In his view, continuing to adhere to Amherst’s core principles, consistently and with integrity, is essential. These include a commitment to academic freedom and the free exchange of ideas—including challenging ideas—as the foundation of the pursuit of knowledge and the education of Amherst students. At the same time that freedom of speech is deeply valued, the college has put some boundaries in place, placing limits on hate speech and actions directed at individuals in the community, he noted. Another of the college’s core principles is the value of a community comprising students, faculty, and staff of diverse backgrounds, who speak and listen to one another with empathy and respect in an environment of inclusion, with everyone being enriched by the range of perspectives that are held and shared. Returning to the issue of public distrust of higher education, the president noted some tangible outcomes of this trend, including legislative proposals at the state and federal level that could place serious constraints on institutions’ ability to fulfill their educational missions. As examples, the president pointed to the Office of Civil Rights’ investigations into colleges and universities for allegedly not adequately supporting and protecting some students from certain backgrounds and efforts that will place financial constraints on colleges and universities that could have an impact on their financial health and ability to provide support to students. President Elliott also commented on the importance of colleges and universities placing more emphasis on the ways in which they share their stories, to further understanding of how they fulfill their educational missions.

It is against this backdrop, the president said, that he developed the *Serving the Greater Good Initiative*, through which he hopes that Amherst can encourage further experimentation and innovation that will enhance the focus on the greater good within the college’s curriculum. He has been pleased to learn about curricular endeavors that faculty members have already undertaken that focus on the greater good, he commented. These include courses that ask students what it means to be a member of a democratic society, courses that invite students to work with community partners, and courses that address the pressing challenges of our time. The current initiative will support efforts that bring more courses with this focus into the curriculum, through either the creation of new courses or the substantial modification of existing ones. The initiative is centered on course development (developing a new course or substantially modifying an existing one), and the expectation is that the courses that the faculty propose will be taught in either 2024–2025 or 2025–2026. The president said that he would provide the members with the proposals that have now been received so that he can discuss with the committee the principles that should guide the process for selecting the proposals that will be funded. President Elliott turned to the topic of the search process for the next provost and dean of the faculty, thanking the committee for the advice the members had given him about colleagues who might serve on the search committee. He then shared the finalized list of search committee members: Ellen “Nellie” Boucher, associate

professor of history; Rhonda Cobham-Sander, Emily C. Jordan Folger Professor of Black Studies and English (chair); Javier Corrales, Dwight W. Morrow 1895 Professor of Political Science; Sheila Jaswal, professor of chemistry and faculty equity and inclusion officer; Justin Kimball, Conway Professor in New Media; Mikayla Rasnic, academic department coordinator, Department of Russian, who will represent the Employee Council; Missy Roser, head of Research and Instruction, Frost Library; Justin Serpone, senior head coach (men's soccer); and Josef Trapani, associate professor of biology. Kathleen Pertzborn, the president's chief of staff, will support the committee's work. The president informed the members that he had already met with Professor Cobham-Sander and would be speaking with the full search committee on Wednesday. Next steps, the president said, will include inviting faculty to express interest in the position and to nominate other colleagues, if they wish, and holding listening sessions for faculty and staff. (The president sent an email to faculty and staff on February 2 in which he shared the membership of the search committee and details about the search process, as well as the position description.) The president confirmed that, at the conclusion of its work, the search committee will provide him with a short list of two or three recommended candidates for the position.

The committee next discussed the possibility of separating the current position into two separate positions—provost and dean of the faculty. President Elliott, who noted that he has been considering this question and welcomes advice, solicited the members' views on this question and also asked Provost Epstein to share her thoughts. On this same subject, the committee also discussed a letter sent by some members of the faculty asking that the FEC "take up the question of separating the dean of the faculty from the provost," which they feel would protect faculty interests, among other benefits, they wrote. President Elliott said that he had met with three of the letter's signatories to discuss the matter. Professor Gardner began the conversation by asking the provost if she has experienced tensions between the roles of dean and provost, i.e., between advocating for the faculty and the needs of the administration. Provost Epstein said that she has not felt that there are tensions and expressed the view that the current structure of the position strengthens faculty governance. In fact, she feels that separating the roles would diminish faculty governance and would not be productive.

Continuing, the provost said that those who have argued for the separation may not realize that the influence of the faculty that is centered within the position would be diminished if the roles were to be split and could even pit the two roles against one another. Provost Epstein also noted that, whether dean of the faculty or provost and dean, there is a need to balance competing demands and trade-offs, and to consider the needs of various constituencies, in relation to what is in the best interest of the institution. Having the individual who oversees academic affairs also oversee the academic budget is the most advantageous for the faculty and the institution in her view. Professor Call, the previous dean of the faculty, agreed that the faculty and the college are best served by having one faculty member hold the position of provost and dean. The provost noted that, under the current configuration, the provost's division comprises a number of entities that have been created during her tenure, including the Center for Teaching and Learning, the Center for Humanistic Inquiry, and the Center for Strategic Learning; some offices that have moved to the provost's division from other divisions, for example, the Loeb Center for Career Exploration and Planning, the Office of Fellowships, and the Center for Community Engagement; and myriad other offices and departments that have traditionally reported to the dean of the faculty and now report to the provost and dean of the faculty, such as the libraries and museums, institutional research and registrar services, and athletics, which also reports to the president in the latter case. Having such a significant number of administrative units report to a member of the faculty rests a good deal of authority for the administration of the college in the faculty, Provost Epstein noted; if oversight of these areas were to be divided between a dean and the provost, and the two individuals had different visions or sets of priorities, it would be a problem, she commented. When asked about concerns about the workload that the position carries, the provost said that she has found the job to be quite doable and has been able to maintain work/life balance, even while having three school-age children at home during her early years in the role. She said that to be successful, it is essential to delegate responsibilities and projects to the associate provosts and other colleagues in the provost's office, as well as the very strong administrative department heads, on whom she has relied.

Some members asked about the experiment to have a separate provost at Amherst, which was in place for a relatively brief period between 2013 and 2015. Professor Call noted that the position was charged with oversight of planning efforts across campus and directing initiatives in the areas of diversity and inclusion, globalization, and student learning. In the end, it had been agreed that the structure had not been successful with the portfolio alone. The provost explained that most of Amherst's peers have a chief academic officer who is also the provost, with the exception of Williams and Middlebury. In the latter case, Middlebury has a number of satellite campuses that require additional oversight. It was agreed that it would be helpful to see an organizational chart of the provost's division at the college. Provost Epstein said that efforts to create an updated chart are currently under way.

Under "Questions from Committee Members," Professor Call noted that attendance seemed to be down at the annual winter celebration luncheon and wondered if consideration could be given to inviting emeritus faculty and former staff to attend, given that there seems to be space to accommodate them. They were invited in the past and remain valued members of the community, he commented. President Elliott said that attendance may have been affected because the event was held on December 21, which is late in the semester. He also conjectured that there was a desire to keep numbers down soon after the return to in-person events following the height of the pandemic. He said that he would share Professor Call's feedback with the Office of Human Resources.

Continuing with questions, Professor Gardner asked, on behalf of a colleague, whether the concrete used in Merrill is going to be repurposed as part of the construction of the new student center. Observing the demolition of Merrill, it had appeared to the colleague that this was not the case. President Elliott responded that the concrete foundation of Merrill will be used for the new student center.

Turning to another topic, Professor Gardner asked why teaching slots that extend into the new faculty meeting time (Fridays, beginning at 3:00 p.m.) have been preserved. She said that it is her understanding that eight courses, taught by ten instructors, are being taught after 3 p.m. on Fridays. According to Workday information, two courses are seminars that meet for an extended period once a week (one from 12:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m., and one from 2:00 p.m. to 4:45 p.m.). Continuing, she noted that one of these is taught by a tenure-line faculty member, the other by a visitor. Three courses meet either Monday/Friday or Wednesday/Friday, from 2:00 to 3:20 p.m. One of these is taught by a tenure-line faculty member, the other by a visitor. Three lab sections meet from 1:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. One section is taught by a lecturer, one is co-taught by two tenure-line faculty members, and one is co-taught by a visitor and an academic manager, she noted. Professor Gardner suggested that seminar and course slots that extend past 3:00 p.m. could possibly be eliminated as options from the course schedule, possibly with minimal impact on classroom usage because very few courses would be affected, and because the Monday/Friday and Wednesday/Friday courses are already using a classroom that cannot be in use for, say, a Monday/Wednesday/Friday, 2:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. course; thus, these likely could be moved to Monday/Wednesday without much impact. Professor Call commented that the Monday/Wednesday, Monday/Friday-Wednesday/Friday pattern allows for some potential relief of classroom availability challenges because one could imagine scheduling three 2:00 p.m. to 3:20 p.m. courses using two rooms, with the following schedule: Course one: Monday, classroom A, Wednesday classroom A; Course two: Monday classroom B, Friday classroom B; Course three, Wednesday classroom B, Friday classroom A. The committee was not aware if any courses are currently scheduled using this pattern. Provost Epstein noted that the Ad Hoc Committee on Student Learning plans to bring forward a proposal for a new teaching schedule. She said that she would ask Jesse Barba, director of institutional research and registrar services, to consider the issues that had been raised and the suggestions that had been put forward.

The committee next discussed the possibility of adding one additional tenured member to FEC, beginning in the next academic year. The conversation began with the tenured members noting the many contributions that the tenure-track members have made to the committee in its inaugural two years and how effective these colleagues have been. The president and provost agreed wholeheartedly. At the same time, they said that they would benefit from the advice and ideas of another tenured member who has been at the college long enough

to bring a significant amount of experience to the work of the FEC. The committee was supportive of the spirit of this recommendation. It was noted that this revision to the FEC charge would require a vote of the full faculty to implement. Professors Gardner and Follette commented that, while learning a great deal about the institution and finding their service on the committee to be valuable and interesting, they would not in all cases advise other tenure-track faculty to leave their names on the FEC ballot. They conveyed that the heavy workload of the committee reduced the time that was available to devote to their research. Both noted that, had they not been in the final year of their tenure-track appointments and anticipating submitting their dossier materials before service on the FEC began, they would have removed their names from the ballot. Professor Gardner and Professor Follette also said that, because their election occurred so late in the spring semester last year, they were not able to reduce their commitments (e.g., thesis advising) or take the course release that was available to them until this spring. Professor Gardner commented that some tenure-track colleagues seem to have the impression that the role of the tenure-track members is to represent tenure-track faculty, which is not, in fact, the intention. All committee members are asked to take an institutional perspective and also to consider the issues of concern to the faculty as a whole. Professor Gardner commented that she imagines that the tenured members of the committee would take seriously issues of concern to tenure-track faculty without being at the tenure-track career stage themselves.

Continuing, the members noted that, in an effort to increase the possibility of continuity of membership among the tenured members of the FEC (all five of the current members will leave the committee next year), an additional change in the *election* section of the charge should be proposed to make it clear that service by the tenured members will be staggered (leave patterns could still result in a scenario in which all members would rotate off the committee in a given year, however). Since the committee has now found that the most efficacious schedule is to meet on a weekly basis, a change that should also be proposed is to have the charge language reflect current practice. It was agreed that, if approved, these changes should take effect with next year's committee via the spring 2024 FEC election process to select the members for 2024. The committee voted unanimously to place a motion on the February 16 faculty meeting agenda to bring these suggestions forward (a vote on the substance of the motion would take place at the next FEC meeting). In another matter related to faculty meetings, the FEC agreed to host lunches for faculty from noon to 1:00 p.m. on Friday, February 16 (Mullins-Faerber Room); Friday, March 8 (Porter Lounge), and Friday, April 26 (Mullins-Faerber Room). These dates correspond to the dates of faculty meetings, and the purpose of the lunches is to provide a venue for interested colleagues to discuss the items on the agenda of the upcoming faculty meeting.

The members then turned to some committee assignments for committees that have vacancies this spring and need replacements. President Elliott then requested that Provost Epstein and Associate Provost Tobin leave the meeting so that the members would not feel constrained in conveying their thoughts about how the provost and dean of the faculty role is currently being performed or how the office is functioning.

In a communication that the president later sent to the signatories of the letter about dividing the provost and dean of the faculty role, copying the faculty members of the FEC, Provost Epstein and Associate Provost Tobin, President Elliott conveyed that he plans to maintain the current configuration of the provost and dean of the faculty position for now. While commenting that the arguments that were put forward for dividing the positions are good ones, he also noted the substantial costs that come with a major reorganization, in his experience. He said that he is not yet convinced that the benefits of a reorganization would outweigh the impact of those costs. In his mind, the president explained, a provost is the leading administrator overseeing the academic mission of the college, and to perform such a role without responsibility for and to the faculty seems both challenging and un compelling to him. President Elliott expressed the view that everyone at Amherst has been well served by having a strong leader, a close partner to the president, who understands deeply the needs of the faculty, and who has the capacity to reallocate resources among the needs of different faculty and administrative units. There is also a real value in having administrative departments and offices that are essential to the academic mission of the college report to the same faculty leader who is deeply familiar with the work and needs of the faculty, the president said. At the same time, the current decision is not meant to

suggest that the position shouldn't change in the future, including during his presidency, President Elliott noted. He would be open to thinking about the issue again in the future, he said. The president also stressed that the portfolio of the provost and dean of the faculty—and the ways that the work of the division is organized to manage it—may change with the incoming provost and dean.

The meeting adjourned at 5:40 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Epstein  
Provost and Dean of the Faculty