

The eighteenth meeting of the Committee of Six for the academic year 2020–2021 was called to order by President Martin via Zoom at 12:15 P.M. on Friday, November 20, 2020. Present, in addition to the president, were Professors del Moral, Kingston, Leise, Manion, Trapani, and Umphrey; Provost and Dean of the Faculty Epstein; and Associate Provost Tobin, recorder.

The meeting began with Provost Epstein informing the members that, due to spread of COVID-19, which is expected to increase in the coming weeks and months, consideration is being given to starting the spring semester later than originally anticipated—perhaps as late as the last week of February. The semester would end thirteen weeks after the start date, in June, she explained, and the hope would be to build in a couple of long-weekend breaks. The ability of students to pursue summer opportunities is part of the calculation, in regard to the semester’s end date, the provost said. Professor Trapani asked if any of the other colleges and/or the university within the Five-College Consortium are also considering later start dates in the spring. Provost Epstein said that, at this time, Smith is already planning on starting in mid-February; she does not know if the other colleges are considering changing their plans. The provost noted that she would keep the committee posted about the spring calendar; its approval would require a vote of the faculty.

Turning to another matter, Professor Trapani, expressed his appreciation for the series that was organized to commemorate the fifth anniversary of Amherst Uprising, including the November 19 event titled “[From Protest to Progress through Partnership: Five Years of Being Human in STEM @Amherst and Beyond.](#)” He thanked the provost and president for attending the Being Human in STEM event. President Martin noted that the HSTEM initiative, an outgrowth of Amherst Uprising, has become a national model. She and the provost commented on how significant and impressive all these events have been. The members then turned briefly to a personnel matter.

The committee next discussed some fine points of the near-final draft of the bias-reporting and response protocol. The members identified some issues surrounding structure and nomenclature and suggested some additional revisions, with the goal of enhancing clarity. Professor Umphrey also suggested a change to some of the language in the document, commenting that the tone of several references seemed inconsistent with the educative restorative practices that are interrelated with the protocol. Professor Manion expressed thanks to the framers of the document for incorporating a working definition of *bias* that is consistent with the prevailing views of the field, as the committee had suggested. President Martin thanked the members for the close reading they had done of the draft protocol and for the recommendations they had made. She said that she would share them with the colleagues who are working to finalize the document in the coming days. Some members asked how the protocol would be assessed. President Martin responded that she expects that there will be reviews of the full range of measures that the college is taking and will take and that the protocol will be included in such evaluations. The college administration will remain open to change, as needed, the president said. In addition, several members noted, it appears that the Center for Restorative Practices has built assessment into its work. Professor Kingston noted that the bias response team will include two faculty members, and he asked how these individuals will be selected and whether this will be viewed as committee service. The answer was not known at this time. Professor Kingston also noted that it is his understanding that the bias-response process is fully optional for the party accused of bias; while it is certainly hoped that those accused of bias will take advantage of the valuable opportunities for education and community-building that the restorative-practices model offers, it is not an adjudicative process, and if they decline to participate in it, the process will terminate. The provost agreed that this is her understanding also.

Conversation turned to [a letter from the Committee on Educational Policy](#) proposing once again that the flexible grading option (FGO) be replaced with a new pass-fail policy. (As the result of a technical problem with the agenda for the October 20 faculty meeting, a vote on the CEP’s motion about this matter had been postponed.) Provost Epstein noted that, following the brief discussion of the motion that had taken place at the faculty meeting, during which some substantive concerns and some confusion seemed to emerge,

the CEP had reviewed the proposal again (see the CEP minutes of October 28, 2020, and November 4, 2020). The provost noted that the CEP had had a robust discussion about whether faculty members should have the option of designating that their courses will not be pass-fail. The CEP is divided on this point. (Provost Epstein commented that, if the CEP's motion passes, departments would continue to have the option of not allowing courses that are counted toward the major to be taken pass-fail.) The provost noted that the CEP had voted three in favor and five opposed on the question of allowing faculty to decide whether to make their courses ineligible for pass-fail. Professor Kingston said that he continues to support the idea of having the faculty choose the details of the proposal by means of votes on possible amendments to the proposal (brought forward as separate motions as part of the faculty meeting agenda).

Professor Kingston commented once again on the challenges that professors face when a student may appear to be struggling, and the professor is not permitted to know if the student is taking a course pass-fail. He said that he had had a conversation recently with a senior colleague who had expressed the view that the pass-fail policy struggles to accomplish two conflicting objectives: to encourage students to take intellectual risks, and to bail out students experiencing academic difficulty. Decisions about the first objective, however, need to be made during the advising process, while decisions about the second objective are made late in the semester. In this colleague's view, this proposal's emphasis seems to be more on providing a safety valve for students who are having academic difficulty, and less on encouraging curricular exploration.

The other members of the committee expressed the strong view that it would be best to forward the CEP's motion to the faculty without a series of Committee of Six motions to amend it. They noted that the CEP, as well as the Ad Hoc Curriculum Committee, has considered the relevant issues thoroughly and has spent some time deliberating. A member asked if the CEP had consulted with a variety of constituencies before developing its proposal. Provost Epstein responded that consultation had indeed taken place. Through discussion of the motion at the meeting, the faculty could weigh in on the questions that Professor Kingston had raised, as well as other issues, the other members agreed. If desired, amendments could be moved, and votes taken, it was noted. The members asked the provost to invite Professor Melillo, chair of the CEP, to outline at the faculty meeting the points that the CEP had considered when developing its proposal, and its rationale for what is being brought forward. Professor Umphrey asked if the intention is for the new pass-fail policy, if approved, to take effect in the spring. Provost Epstein said that, if approved, the proposal would be effective on July 1, 2020. The members agreed to vote on the proposal when they vote on the December 15 faculty meeting agenda, but said that they anticipate forwarding the CEP's motion to the faculty.

The committee turned to some issues of concern that the provost had conveyed, based on some of the results of the 2020 Amherst College staff survey, the focus of which was Amherst's work culture. Ahead of the meeting, the provost had provided the members with some [aggregated data](#), including [qualitative information](#), that the company that had administered the survey had provided to the administration. The provost explained that the results of the first staff survey, which had been conducted in 2017, had also indicated that many staff members feel that faculty do not value or respect them. This continues to be the case, based on the more recent survey results. The college would like to find ways to ameliorate this problem, which is of longstanding, the provost noted. She asked the members for their views on the matter and to suggest possible approaches to addressing it.

The committee noted that the survey results indicate that there has been improvement in the staff's views of other areas of the college's work culture, which is promising, and were disappointed that the faculty-staff divide remains an issue of concern. The members wondered whether the views of professional staff and support staff differ on this issue and felt would be useful, to gain additional perspective, to have the data disaggregated further. Provost Epstein said that concerns about the ways in which faculty treat staff seem to be shared by many staff in different kinds of positions across the college. As an example, the provost noted that some staff conveyed that some faculty members expect immediate results after making requests and demand or insist that their needs be met, without going

through normal college processes. Some staff have shared that some faculty do not seem to respect their professional expertise. There are complaints that faculty ignore requests made by email and do not respond. Some members wondered whether the data suggest that issues surrounding race and gender may intersect with the results that point to a faculty-staff divide. President Martin said that she would look into this question.

Continuing the conversation, Provost Epstein noted that academic department coordinators expressed their own set of concerns via the survey, and she said that she plans to share an aggregated report of these responses with department chairs. Several members commented that the college should hold faculty members accountable for disrespectful behavior toward staff, noting that having some consequences in place could effect change. The members discussed a number of steps that could be taken to try to address some of the issues that had been raised, including appointing more staff to standing committees as full voting members, and finding other ways to integrate staff into the governance of the college to a greater degree; devoting some portion of faculty meetings to reports by staff members about administrative areas of the college; documenting staff members' responsibilities to make clear what work is appropriate for faculty to request and what work is not; creating more organic opportunities for staff and faculty to engage with one another around activities and/or opportunities for intellectual discourse; making college-wide and departmental processes and deadlines more transparent to faculty; and employing restorative practices, when needed.

Several members noted that faculty who serve as the supervisors of staff—largely department chairs—would benefit greatly from having robust supervisory training to help them carry out this role effectively. President Martin, who agreed that the Office of Human Resources should be asked to develop such training, also expressed support for the current efforts of academic departments to document their practices in department handbooks. She commented that building in more structure of this kind at the college is a positive step. In her experience, a more casual approach to the ways in which work gets done can tend to benefit individuals who have been at the institution the longest, know how to get things done, and may be able to exercise more authority as a result; transparency about policies and practices, as well as decision-making processes, results in greater clarity for everyone. The president expressed concern about the fact that the Employee Council is not more formally integrated into governance processes at the college, which can limit the role that the council can play.

Concluding the conversation, some members suggested asking staff what measures they would recommend to address the faculty-staff divide. The members agreed to return to the topic of the survey results at a future meeting.

The meeting adjourned at 2:00 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Epstein  
Provost and Dean of the Faculty