

The seventh meeting of the Committee of Six for the academic year 2019–2020 was called to order by President Martin in the president's office at 2:30 P.M. on Wednesday, October 30, 2019. Present, in addition to the president, were Professors Basu, Brooks, Goutte, Horton, Schmalzbauer, and Sims; Provost and Dean of the Faculty Epstein; and Associate Provost Tobin, recorder.

The meeting began with Provost Epstein reporting that Jim Brassord, chief of campus operations, responded to the questions that were raised at the committee's last meeting. He confirmed that there are no current plans to use artificial turf on Hitchcock and Memorial Fields. A new Gooding surface has eliminated that need, he explained. J. Brassord conveyed that, in fact, the athletics department wants to preserve these fields as natural grass because it is the preferred play-surface for soccer. In regard to whether there are plans to construct a building that could house some administrative functions and free up space at the core of the campus, J. Brassord informed the provost that there are no plans to take this approach at this time. He noted that the renovation of Keefe Campus Center will create much-needed office space at the core of the campus once the new student center is completed.

Given challenges surrounding space on campus, Professor Sims and Professor Horton wondered if the college has short- and long-term plans in place to address needs surrounding offices and classrooms. Professor Sims asked if efforts are being made to project the growth of the faculty and staff and to tie such projections to planning efforts. She also inquired as to whether the Committee on Priorities and Resources (CPR) is being consulted about this issue. Provost Epstein said that the CPR discusses such issues as plans move forward, and that J. Brassord could certainly meet with that committee to discuss the issues raised by the Committee of Six. Professor Horton wondered if the current space challenges have arisen as a result of increasing the size of the student body, faculty, and staff, and not making necessary adjustments and accommodations in areas ranging from dining to offices. President Martin said that planning is robust and ongoing for both the near term (the next five years) and beyond. The comprehensive campus framework plan guides short- and long-term planning, she noted. Professors Horton and Goutte reiterated their concerns about what they see as a shortage of offices and classrooms in the science center. Provost Epstein responded that a good number of these spaces are being used by visitors and staff at this time, often at the request of science departments. When the science center was designed, much of this space was set aside for future faculty hires. As such hiring occurs, new faculty will move into these spaces.

Continuing with questions, Professor Schmalzbauer, on behalf of a few colleagues, asked if semesters spent on medical leave are counted toward eligibility for future sabbaticals. Provost Epstein responded that she is aware that this question has been raised recently and noted that some colleagues have found the language in the *Faculty Handbook* ([III., H.](#)) about this topic to be unclear. The practice in regard to college policy has been consistent, however. Semesters spent on medical leave and unpaid leave of absence are not counted as teaching semesters, since no teaching can take place during the leaves, and therefore are not counted toward eligibility for sabbaticals. Faculty are normally eligible for sabbatic leaves after having completed six semesters of teaching, the provost said. She noted that her office is currently developing a revision to the handbook to convey the policy with greater clarity. She will share the new language with the committee when it is completed, which will be soon. Professor Brooks suggested that the provost remind the chairs of academic departments and programs about the particular language of this policy, and Provost Epstein agreed to do so. The members then turned to personnel matters.

Conversation returned to the [recommendations of the Ad Hoc Curriculum Committee](#) regarding advising and to the views of these ideas that the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP) had forwarded to the Committee of Six via [a letter on April 24, 2019](#). Beginning the discussion with an overarching comment about the recommendations, Professor Brooks said that, while she finds all of the ideas to be compelling, she worries about the practicality of implementing new approaches and practices that would increase demands on a faculty that is already overextended. She noted that the curriculum committee had made this point in its report, drawing the members' attention to the following passage from that document:

We would like to conclude by observing that the current cap on faculty FTES limits our ability to move toward the realization of our educational ideals. As our graduating students testify year after year, we go to extraordinary lengths, despite enormous pressures on our time, to uncover and expand their intellectual and creative potential. Past a certain point, however, there is simply no more time to give. In our meetings with faculty members, we heard again and again that one of the factors inhibiting participation in the first-year seminar program is that many departments are so understaffed that they cannot do anything more than offer courses that count toward majors. We urge the administration to support the transformative work that we are attempting to do at the college by significantly increasing the size of the faculty.

In fact, Professor Brooks doesn't see how it would be possible to move forward with most of the suggestions, given the size of the faculty and the commitment to research, teaching, and service that Amherst requires. There simply is not enough time, in her view. Provost Epstein commented that, while faculty workloads may be greater than they were in the past, the FTE cap has been reached, and the size of the faculty is larger than it has ever been. She wonders if colleagues are feeling the impact of this growth. At the same time, she recognizes that, with the spate of hiring, demands surrounding searches, mentoring, and personnel processes have grown. Professor Brooks said that, from her experience in her two departments, as well as from conversations across the college, she can say that this is a serious issue. From what she has observed, colleagues are working very, very hard.

Professor Sims concurred that the demands on the faculty's time necessitate finding solutions that make it practical for faculty to improve advising. She worries about mandating the same approaches for all students, when advisees clearly need different levels of support. Some members noted that the CEP seemed to be making the same suggestions in its responses to the curriculum committee's recommendations. While recognizing these concerns, Professor Horton expressed the view that a college that prides itself on an open curriculum—and on the kind of robust advising that is needed when most students have very little structure in their first two years—should not be satisfied when many students' experience of college advising is two fifteen-minute advising sessions a year, plus a first meeting during orientation. As an aspiration, thirty minutes a year feels like an inadequate level of expectation, he said. The focus of the curriculum committee's recommendations is on college advising, as major advising is not the problem, Professor Horton commented. Providing additional advising sessions for a small number of college advisees would not represent a marked increase in time for each faculty member, by his calculation.

Continuing the conversation, Professor Sims suggested that, perhaps, at the beginning of each semester, each advisor could offer a “check-in week,” making some hours available and issuing an open call to advisees to meet, if the students wish to do so. Professor Schmalzbauer commented that the points being raised are excellent and suggest that the redistribution of advisees is a pivotal recommendation. Having fewer advisees makes it possible for an advisor to devote more time to learning about students and their needs and to advising, and thus to be more effective. She has found her experience with intensive advising to be among her most meaningful as an advisor, though she recognizes that the demands on faculty members’ time make an expansion of this model impossible. The aspirational quality of the curriculum committee’s recommendations is admirable, in her view, but at the same time she also finds the CEP’s pragmatic response to these ideas to be compelling. Professor Horton commented that his experience with intensive advising had been transformative, and he offered high praise for the model. Professor Goutte concurred, adding that guidelines, suggested topics of conversations, and check-ins for advisors are useful aspects of the program. Provost Epstein commented that intensive advising seems to transform the way in which participating faculty advise all of their advisees.

Following up on the other members’ comments about advising experiences that they had found to be among the most valuable, Professor Brooks commented that she often plays an advising role with students who are not her advisees in the formal sense, but whom she has gotten to know well in her classroom, through the Five College program, and through other campus programming, and with whom she has built a relationship of trust. She commented that providing informal advising for students with whom faculty interact and have connections has a significant impact on faculty time, but is also an important commitment. She noted, and others agreed, that this experience and commitment is not uncommon among the Amherst faculty. Professor Basu said that she finds that advising works best with students she has taught. To be a good advisor to other students necessitates meeting with them more often than during pre-registration. Building on this idea, Professor Brooks suggested that first-year seminar instructors could devote part of a mid-semester class to a check-in session for students. Professor Schmalzbauer said that she actually checks in with her first-year seminar students every few weeks and finds it to be very helpful to students, as well as having the effect of helping to build community within the seminar. Provost Epstein commented that it is clear that strengthening a sense of community among students who are sharing an intellectual experience contributes to their sense of belonging and academic success. This has been true for students in the college’s summer bridge program, she noted. Advising has also been playing a key role for the summer bridge students, each of whom is now required to participate in the intensive advising program. The results have been striking, the provost said. The retention rate for students who participated in the summer bridge program in 2018 is 100 percent, she noted. Professor Brooks commented that informal advising is also playing a role in the retention of those students. There is currently a focus on trying to learn more about students who decline the invitation to participate in a summer bridge program. This year their outcomes are being tracked to see if they might be at risk, and perhaps might benefit from intensive advising, the provost noted.

The members agreed that many faculty provide advising in the ways that Professor Brooks described, assuming an additional service responsibility that is most often unrecognized. Professor Horton said that there is very little research about the impact of advising from other influential faculty to whom students turn, and he noted that it would be helpful to add a question about this topic to the COFHE (Consortium on Financing Higher Education) surveys in which

the college participates. The committee commented that it has been suggested that faculty of color, women faculty, and gay faculty often spend the most time on this “invisible” form of advising. Provost Epstein informed the members that Professor Basu, who is interested in whether the distribution of service activities is equitable across such factors as faculty rank, departments/fields, gender, and race, will lead a conversation about this topic at the next meeting of chairs of academic departments and programs. Professor Basu added she would like to discuss how much time faculty are spending outside teaching and research, exploring the quantity of time and work, as well as its distribution. The members noted that there does not seem to be an interest in shifting the responsibility of advising from faculty to professional advisors. Provost Epstein commented that a recent conversation among the deans of colleges in the Northeast revealed that none of Amherst’s peers use professional advisors.

Conversation returned to the topic of the additional time that may be required of faculty if the recommendations of the Ad Hoc Curriculum Committee are implemented. Professor Basu, who said that she believes that advising is crucial for students, noted that, while improving advising may require more faculty time, advising is limited to relatively short periods within the academic year that are known well in advance. These times are part of the academic calendar, and faculty can plan ahead. Professor Brooks, while reiterating that the recommendations of the curriculum committee, taken as a whole, would require a great deal of additional faculty time, suggested that encouraging college advisees to make greater use of office hours for advising would provide another way of offering students more time with advisors. Professor Schmalzbauer said that the check-in period during her first-year seminar usually takes no more than ten minutes. The period also has the effect of making students feel more comfortable in class and facilitates intellectual exchanges, in her experience. Professor Horton said that the curriculum committee also discussed ideas such as these, which he favors, as well as other ideas, including modifying the calendar to create an advising day.

Continuing the discussion, Professor Horton noted that the curriculum committee also suggested that more attention be given to the transition to the declaration of the major and to addressing what has been described as the “sophomore blues.” While there are many factors contributing to the “blues” phenomenon, experiencing a transition to a new advisor—particularly in the absence of a great deal of communication—can contribute to students’ feelings of being adrift. Professor Schmalzbauer suggested that, when an advisor is going to go on leave the next semester, it would be helpful if advisors communicated that they will be away. If the new advisor is known at the time, the advisor could offer an introduction to the new advisor via email. Provost Epstein commented that the Bridging Divides Administrative Group, which she chairs, is considering this issue. The group is particularly concerned with developing new ways of building class cohesion among sophomores and improving the overall experience during students’ second year. Professor Sims said that she has observed the sophomore blues and is pleased that the college is taking steps to address it through a “sophomore reboot.”

In regard to advising students who are struggling, more broadly, the members agreed that it is important to provide faculty with training and to give them the tools that can make them better advisors. Knowing what resources are available and referring students to them, as needed, is essential. Professor Brooks commented that, since she arrived at Amherst, she has seen a positive shift in students’ interactions with the counseling center. In her experience, more students now place greater trust in the counseling center, as significant changes have been made, and some students seem to use this resource more readily and find the support they need there. The committee agreed that other staff also are providing essential help for students who are

struggling personally and/or academically; faculty should not feel that they must shoulder all of students' problems, given the effectiveness of the writing center, the Moss Quantitative Center, the Loeb Center for Career Exploration and Planning, the counseling center, and the Office of Student Affairs.

The meeting concluded with some final thoughts about advising. Professor Schmalzbauer commented that it may be a challenge to enforce requirements, but, perhaps, advisors could be strongly encouraged to meet with their advisees for at least twenty minutes each time. Professor Horton expressed support for this idea, noting that, after three years of trying to develop solutions to issues surrounding advising, he feels that that change will happen only if faculty share greater aspirations and higher expectations for advising. Professor Schmalzbauer expressed the view that the recommendations of the curriculum committee inform one another, and that taken as whole, may help to solve problems surrounding advising. The members expressed support for enhancing group advising as a means of building a greater sense of community among students. In this vein, Professor Basu suggested that it could be helpful to expand the [TYPO/TYSO](#) (take your professor or staff out) programs to include advisors and advisees, so that advisors and advisees will potentially share meals as individuals or a group of students and their advisor. The members also agreed that additional training would be helpful for advisors, so that faculty are aware of the tools that will help make them effective in this role. In this regard, Professor Horton noted that making advisors more aware of the [Advising Hub](#) would be helpful, as this is an excellent tool for communicating different pathways through the curriculum. (The creation of the advising hub was a recommendation and accomplishment of the curriculum committee.) While agreeing that the advising hub is excellent, Provost Epstein commented that it is underutilized. She noted that the Ad Hoc Committee on Student Learning will soon form a working group that will examine and implement ways of making pathways through the curriculum, including majors, more transparent, by developing ways to make the information on departmental web sites clearer. In addition, the Orientation Committee believes that the current approach to introducing first-year students to the curricula and pathways through majors in academic departments and programs during orientation, which involves a wide range of presentations, has not been successful. Members of that committee will be meeting with the chairs of departments and programs at the chairs in November to discuss this topic.

The meeting adjourned at 5:15 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Epstein
Provost and Dean of the Faculty