

The fourth 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 Monday, October 7, 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 the committee, the president, and the provost noting, with great sadness, the loss of Lyle McGeoch, Brian E. Boyle ’69 Professor of Mathematics and Computer Science. Professor McGeoch died suddenly and unexpectedly on October 5, 2019. President Martin informed the members that details about arrangements would be shared with the community as soon as information becomes available. She said that she has spoken with Cathy McGeoch, Professor McGeoch’s wife, and has expressed the college community’s deepest condolences and support during this very difficult time. President Martin informed the members that a memorial service for Professor McGeoch will take place on December 14 in Johnson Chapel. The president also discussed the resources that are being provided to support students.

Under “Questions from Committee Members,” the members thanked President Martin for her efforts surrounding the October 3 visit to campus of U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, which all agreed had been a wonderful event. President Martin applauded the teamwork of the many staff members who had worked with such enthusiasm, generosity, and diligence on the complex logistics that had contributed to the visit’s success. She informed the members that Andrew Nussbaum ’85, chairman of Amherst’s board of trustees and the justice’s former clerk, had spoken with Justice Ginsburg after she had returned to Washington. She expressed to him how much she had enjoyed her time at Amherst, including the performance by the Choral Society and the memento that she had received from the college, which was crafted by members of Amherst’s Building Trades Shop. The committee, the president, and the provost noted the poise of the students who had asked questions during several events with the justice.

Professor Basu next raised the topic of the range of departmental criteria for students undertaking honors work at the college; some departments allow all majors to write theses, while others require a minimum GPA for prospective thesis writers. The minimum grade also varies across departments. She said that she is concerned about inconsistencies in college policies around this issue. One consequence, Professor Basu noted, is that a student who is majoring in two departments may be allowed to write a thesis in one department, but not in the other. She is conflicted about what policy is preferable. While attracted to the principle that all students should have the opportunity to do honors work, she is also concerned that students whose prior academic performance has not been strong may be less likely to succeed in the honors program. On a related front, it was noted that some departments may use a GPA cut-off when determining which students can become majors. Provost Epstein said that it is her impression that departments no longer take this approach, which prevents access to the full curriculum for some students. The provost expressed support for having consistent practices across departments. The committee agreed that it would be helpful to learn more about the range of departmental practices regarding honors work and majoring. The members suggested that the provost have a discussion about this topic with the chairs of academic departments and programs at an upcoming chairs’ meeting. The committee also asked that the current system of Latin honors be discussed by the chairs. The provost agreed to include these topics on the agenda of a chairs’ meeting.

Continuing with questions, Professor Brooks inquired about the college's policy regarding the use of *Indigenous Peoples Day* as the name for the October holiday that has traditionally been called *Columbus Day*. She noted that some students have asked her if the college plans to stop using Columbus Day, commenting that both names for the holiday appear in the printed calendar that is distributed on campus. It was noted that Columbus Day is also the name used in the default holiday calendar that Google provides as part of its standard "G Suite" tool kit for the United States. (Information technology staff later noted that it is possible to turn off the holiday feature or to subscribe to another holiday calendar in which the holiday is called *Indigenous Peoples Day*.) Provost Epstein commented that the college's academic calendar does not include any references to Columbus Day or Indigenous Peoples Day.

Discussion turned to the conversation that took place at the October 1 faculty meeting about the recommendation of the Ad Hoc Committee for the Development of a Common Form to Evaluate Classroom Teaching that the faculty vote on whether to retain the current system used for teaching evaluations for tenure-track faculty members or to adopt a fully anonymous system see ([the report of the Ad Hoc Committee for the Development of a Common Form to Evaluate Classroom Teaching](#) (pages nine through eleven). Professor Horton commented that the conversation at the faculty meeting had been productive, though it appears that a specific proposal did not emerge. The other members agreed, while commenting that arguments for moving to a fully anonymous system seemed to revolve around the possibility that some students would respond more freely; arguments for retaining the current system seemed to revolve around protecting tenure-track faculty—in particular, protecting faculty members of color and women faculty members from potential bias.

Continuing the conversation, the members concurred that they had found Professor Kingston's comments at the meeting, which had focused on holding students accountable as the best way to address bias, to be compelling. The committee did not find the research that was discussed to be convincing, noting there seems to be very little research on the implications of having a system of evaluation that is fully anonymous. Professor Brooks expressed concern that the research that has been cited seems to make large claims that do not seem to be supported. Professor Schmalzbauer agreed, while commenting that there is a great deal of relevant research that may be generalizable when it comes to the teaching evaluation process and the power dynamic that is inherent in it. Seminal sociological research that has compared youth from underrepresented backgrounds, namely, working-class backgrounds, with those from middle- and upper-class backgrounds, suggests that those from privileged backgrounds are much more likely to be comfortable challenging their teachers than are those from less privileged backgrounds. Those in the latter demographic are likely to have been socialized to defer to their teachers out of respect. This suggests to Professor Schmalzbauer that low-income students may feel uncomfortable being candid in evaluations, especially when being candid entails being critical, when they must sign their names. Students from more privileged backgrounds may feel more comfortable doing so. Professor Schmalzbauer summarized that this research suggests to her that anonymity could help equalize the student experience of evaluating their professors. Professor Sims said that she agrees with Professor Schmalzbauer that it is important to elevate the voices of students from underprivileged backgrounds. In her view, though, the current system helps to protect students because it allows tenured faculty to check that there are no apparent patterns of bias toward particular groups of students that emerge from the evaluations. As she had suggested previously, Professor Basu wondered if it might be helpful to launch a pilot in which some tenured

colleagues could be asked to have students evaluate their courses using unsigned forms, so student identities would not be available. Other tenured colleagues could be asked to have their classes evaluated under the current system. The results could then be reviewed to try to determine if anonymity has an impact on the extent of critical comments different groups of students provide. In the end, the committee decided that the faculty should be asked to vote on whether to retain the current system used for teaching evaluations for tenure-track faculty members or to adopt a fully anonymous system. The majority of the committee expressed a preference for retaining the current system.

The next subject of discussion was also informed by a matter addressed at the October 1 faculty meeting, that is, the change in title of the *dean of the faculty* to the *provost and dean of the faculty*. The members agreed that President Martin's remarks about her rationale for changing the title of Amherst's chief academic officer, and the implications of the decision, had provided the clarification that was needed. Professor Horton suggested that care should be taken when shortening the new title to *provost*, and the committee agreed that the full position title should appear in the *Faculty Handbook* whenever the title of the chief academic officer is referenced. Since the role and responsibilities of the position have not changed, the members decided that changing the title in the *Faculty Handbook* does not require a vote of the faculty, as doing so simply updates the title to the current title of Amherst's chief academic officer. The members considered a personnel matter.

Conversation turned to the committee's draft of a policy to replace the college's current policy regarding consensual sexual relationships between faculty members and students ([Faculty Handbook, \(IV., A., 3.\)](#)), which the members had agreed to draft following their previous conversation about this topic. Prior to today's meeting, the provost's office had provided the members with [the policies of some additional liberal arts colleges within the New England Small College Athletic Conference \(NESCAC\) and several other elite liberal arts colleges](#), as well as the minutes of past discussions of this topic that have taken place over the years at faculty meetings and within the Committee of Six, per the members' request. The committee did not find past arguments for the current policy, which "strongly discourages" consensual sexual relationships between faculty members and students, to be convincing. The members were struck, once again, by the fact that Amherst is an outlier among its peers in not prohibiting sexual and romantic relationships between faculty members and students.

Continuing the discussion, the members agreed that the best approach in regard to the policy would be to rethink it, rather than to revise the current handbook language, since a stronger statement is required. The committee decided that the following tenets should serve as the underpinning of the new policy that the committee would propose: that the integrity of the faculty-student relationship is at the core of Amherst's educational mission, and that, because of the unequal institutional power inherent in this relationship, the college prohibits sexual or romantic relations between faculty and students, even if both parties consider the relationship consensual. The members also agreed that, in its draft policy, it would signal that, even when such relationships do not entail harassment, they compromise the integrity of the educational process. Also stressed would be the importance of creating a healthy learning environment. The committee considered having the policy also apply to coaches, teaching assistants, and associates, and staff in instructional roles, as well as students who evaluate other students, but decided that other policies should be developed to cover these constituencies. It was agreed that consideration should be given to developing a policy for staff. The provost said that she

would consult with Lisa Rutherford, chief policy officer and general counsel, about policies that might govern other members of the community.

Beyond the policy itself, the committee noted the importance of exploring training, including bias training, that could be offered to faculty and coaches about the topics covered under the policy. The members asked the provost to seek more information about the ways in which a new policy that prohibits sexual and romantic relations between members of the community (as described above) may intersect with college's compliance with Title IX, including, whether faculty would become mandated reporters. The members also wondered about possible overlap with Amherst's policies regarding sexual harassment. The provost agreed to consult with L. Rutherford about these questions too. Professor Brooks asked whether it might also be helpful to consult with the Sexual Respect Task Force.

As the meeting drew to a close, the members also discussed issues of process and procedure in relation to its proposed policy, continuing to explore what the mechanisms might be for reporting relationships; how complaints might be adjudicated; how to protect confidentiality in the case of false accusations; and the range of penalties that might be applied if a faculty member or coach is found to have engaged in prohibited behavior. Provost Epstein explained that the existing grievance procedures ([*Faculty Handbook, III, I*](#)), which, depending on the circumstances, may include an informal resolution to a grievance, would apply if the proposed policy were to be violated. The members agreed that it would be important to preserve informal ways of resolving violations of the policy. The committee felt that it would be helpful to know the range of possible ways of addressing violations of the committee's proposed policy. For example, do most schools address violations through their standing grievance processes? Are there alternatives to this model? Does the chief academic officer always play a central decision-making role? The members wondered about the degree to which the proposed policy should describe possible penalties, as well as ways of achieving resolution without penalty. The provost said that she would consult with L. Rutherford about these questions, as well.

At the conclusion of the conversation, the members agreed that, after making some refinements to their draft policy, they would seek the faculty's feedback via a committee-of-the-whole conversation at the next faculty meeting. At that meeting, the members agreed that it will be particularly important to hear the views of faculty who are relatively new to the college.

The meeting adjourned at 5:18 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Epstein
Provost and Dean of the Faculty