

The second 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, September 16, 2019. Present, in addition to the president, were Professors Basu, Brooks, Goutte, Horton, Schmalzbauer, and Sims; Provost Epstein; and Associate Provost Tobin, recorder.

The meeting began with President Martin sharing additional information about the October 3 visit to campus of U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. The president informed the members that the high demand for tickets has prompted the decision to use a lottery system to select those who may attend. Faculty, staff, and students will have the opportunity to log on to a page on the college’s website on September 19 to apply for tickets. The names of those who will receive tickets will later be selected at random from all among those who apply. President Martin said that the event will be live-streamed on the college’s website, without password protection. The conversation will also be broadcast to a venue or venues on campus, and a video will be available on Amherst’s website a day or two after the event. Both the live-stream and video will be available to the public. The members thanked President Martin for her efforts to expand access to the event beyond the Amherst community.

Continuing with “topics of the day,” Provost Epstein informed the committee that more details have emerged about students’ plans on September 27, as part of the Global Climate Strike. She said that some students may walk out of their classes, and that teach-ins and a rally are being organized. Provost Epstein expressed concern that some students might protest in front of academic buildings and prevent other students from entering. President Martin commented that the students with whom she has met about the event have indicated that they plan to stand near the entrances to buildings and to encourage other students to walk out, but not to block anyone from going to class. Professor Horton commented that the college’s [Protests, Demonstrations, and Peaceful Dissent policy](#) outlines what is acceptable behavior under these circumstances.

Professor Brooks informed the members that, in her role as chair of the American studies department, student organizers had contacted her to request that faculty members in American studies support the strike by not penalizing students for walking out. Since no American studies classes are held on Fridays, the request was moot. Professor Basu said that a student organizer had reached out to her with the same appeal. She hopes that faculty will support students’ request and consider walking out with them to a location where staff could join them. Professor Brooks concurred and also suggested that it would be wise to consult with the student organizers about what they are planning and what they are asking of faculty and the college.

While expressing support for students’ commitment to raising awareness and calling for action, and hope that staff and faculty will also participate in the strike events, the members noted that it should be made clear that faculty members may exercise their discretion with regard to delaying or cancelling their classes or excusing students from classes. As for consequences for students who choose to miss a faculty member’s class, it is also up to the faculty member to decide, Provost Epstein commented. Professor Basu suggested that consideration be given to adopting a policy that students not face consequences for participating in the walk out. Provost Epstein said that she does not believe that the Committee of Six has the authority to make such a policy unilaterally. Professor Brooks commented that, given the gravity and impact of climate change, she would not penalize her own students for missing class.

Professor Horton, reflecting on the 2017 day of dialogue, commented on how valuable the event had been. He expressed regret that the lack of flexibility in the academic schedule makes it difficult to create space for engaging in such community conversations about important issues. Professor Goutte agreed; the structural barriers that are making it difficult to bring faculty, students, and staff

together to discuss climate change highlight the need for a community hour, she noted. It is her hope that this dilemma may create some momentum for making changes that will allow Amherst to set aside time for a community hour.

The committee agreed that the provost would send an email to faculty and staff later in the week to inform the community that some Amherst students are planning a number of activities on campus as part of the Global Climate Strike. The members decided that Provost Epstein's note should also convey that, as always, faculty should use their discretion with regard to delaying or cancelling class or excusing students from class. In addition, the members agreed, she should emphasize that the college has taken a strong stand on the issue of climate change, and express hope that faculty will choose not to penalize students for their participation in this effort. The provost said that she will also recommend that students speak with their professors about the consequences of missing class. In addition, she will communicate that supervisors should make every effort to make it possible for staff to participate in the activities on September 27. President Martin informed the committee that she has asked the senior staff, as much as possible, to facilitate the participation of those who report to them, in accordance with staff members' interest.

At 3:00 P.M., Justin Smith, associate general counsel, joined the meeting to discuss [a proposal from the CEP for a Military Activation Policy](#), suggestions for revisions to the document that were made by last year's Committee of Six, and subsequent responses from J. Smith to the Committee of Six's proposed revisions. Since Amherst is enrolling veterans in increasing numbers, this policy is needed to clarify procedures for students whose studies are interrupted by service obligations in the U.S. military. This policy is intended to comply with applicable law and to bring Amherst into alignment with other colleges. The policy is intended for students, such as reservists, who might be called to active duty in the middle of a semester. While recognizing the need for the policy to reflect the law, last year's Committee of Six emphasized the need to create a tone in the policy that conveys a sense of welcome and support.

J. Smith began the discussion by informing the members that he had not been involved in drafting the initial policy three years ago, but had later been asked to review an early iteration to ensure that the college's legal obligations were being addressed fully in the document. With compliance concerns in mind, he had suggested some revisions. In some cases, last year's Committee of Six had suggested that the college go beyond legal requirements in its practices. In this vein, this year's committee wondered whether there might be different policies for students who are called to active duty and for those who volunteer to go on active duty, regarding transcript notations surrounding withdrawal from courses after the add/drop period. J. Smith expressed some concern about having different policies for those who volunteer and those who are called to duty and noted that the college may or may not be aware of individual circumstances. He stressed that the decision about whether to go beyond the legal requirements is up to the college, while commenting that exceptions to standard policies about readmission that might be granted to veterans would create precedents for all students, which could have unanticipated consequences.

Continuing the conversation, Professor Schmalzbauer expressed the view that the way in which the policy is implemented, i.e., the degree to which the college offers support to the veterans who come to Amherst, is perhaps more important than the language used in the policy to describe details. All agreed that Amherst should have structures in place to provide the most robust support possible, making every effort to provide the advice and resources that veterans need, and to facilitate re-enrollment. After reviewing some of the proposed edits to the policy with these ideas and the legal advice of J. Smith in mind, the members decided that the best course would be to have J. Smith and Associate Provost Tobin create a "clean" draft of the document for the committee's review. It was

also agreed that they should draft an introductory paragraph for the policy, which would describe the college's investment in the continuing academic success of veterans at Amherst, including the support that is offered. The paragraph should have a welcoming and supportive tone, the committee advised. The members recognized the necessity of using the language from the law within the policy, as needed, and ensuring that the college is in compliance with the legal requirements, which offer protections to veterans, it was noted. Professor Brooks suggested citing the law within the policy, so that it is clear that most of the focus of the policy is on compliance with legal requirements. The members thanked J. Smith, and he left the meeting at 3:30 P.M.

Provost Epstein next informed the members of a request that she has received to continue the Lewis-Sebring pilot that the Committee of Six launched last year. Under the program, faculty and staff who want to bring between four and eight students as guests to the Lewis-Sebring dining room can do so if they reserve a table for this purpose at least two business days in advance of the meal, and if Dining Services staff confirm that space is available. The number of guests allowed when reserving the Mullins Room or the Faerber Room, or both, to host students is limited only by the rooms' seating capacity. The members decided to continue the program, and that this decision should be announced in the provost's newsletter.

Under "Questions from Committee Members," Professor Schmalzbauer asked if progress has been made on providing IDs to family members of Amherst employees so that they can charge meals at the dining hall. Provost Epstein responded that there are currently technical issues that make it challenging to do so. She has been informed that the new Workday system should make it possible to provide IDs to family members.

Continuing with questions, Professor Goutte reiterated her view that the Global Climate Strike should be an impetus for moving forward with a proposal to revamp the class schedule and create time and space for a community hour. Provost Epstein said that the faculty would need to embrace changes to the schedule in order to effect change, for example teaching more courses on Fridays. Professor Goutte commented that she understands the hurdles involved, but at the same time she feels that it would be helpful for faculty to consider the benefits of having a community hour in place. Professor Horton feels that the best way to move forward is to prepare a proposal with examples of changes in the class schedule that might make a community hour possible. He noted the advantages of finding a new ninety-minute teaching slot and said that he has [found the chart created by Professor McGeoch](#) to be a useful tool. It illustrates effectively where the bunching of classes occurs. In regard to teaching on Fridays, Professor Sims commented that, when she has taught classes on Friday afternoon, in particular, students have often missed class in order to participate in athletic events and to interview for jobs. She supports these opportunities, she noted, and suggested that any new schedule proposals involve input from colleagues in the Loeb Center and the athletics department. Provost Epstein thanked the members for this feedback and said that Jesse Barba, director of Institutional Research and Registrar Services, will work on a proposal, based on an examination of the data that have already been gathered, as soon his schedule permits.

Before turning to a discussion about a committee assignment, Professor Goutte asked what criteria are used when nominating faculty members to serve on particular committees. She wondered if the primary reasons for choosing a colleague might be expertise in matters relating to a particular committee's charge and/or distribution of service responsibilities across the faculty. Provost Epstein said that the Committee of Six has taken different approaches. For the most part, an effort is made to appoint tenured faculty members to serve on major committees; to try to have representation across

different disciplinary areas; to try to create a balance in regard to demographics, as much as possible; and to have pre-tenure faculty serve on committees that have a lighter workload. In the spring, in accordance with the regular practice of the committee, the members will receive a spreadsheet of committees that require new members and a list of faculty who are available to serve, as well as a history of faculty members' previous service. The provost's office makes suggestions of colleagues for each committee, but the Committee of Six makes the final recommendations about whom to invite to serve. Professor Basu said that she would be interested in having the committee examine the issue of the unevenness of service burdens among faculty members and to think together about the amount of service that is valuable and/or necessary during faculty members' pre-tenure years. Professor Brooks expressed support for this proposal. She said that it is her understanding that many faculty members who have been tenured recently are uncertain whether there is an expectation that faculty will do more service after receiving tenure. She thinks it would be helpful to have more clarity on this point. Provost Epstein said that the expectation is that tenured faculty members will serve on a committee every year when they are not leave.

Continuing the discussion, Professor Goutte asked if senior lecturers with particular expertise could serve on faculty committees that would benefit from their insight. Provost Epstein responded that senior lecturers do not serve on faculty committees, though they sometimes serve on college-wide committees. Professor Sims noted that, although senior lecturers indeed offer considerable expertise of value to committees, senior lecturers also have additional teaching responsibilities that the committee should be mindful of when considering new committee responsibilities. On a related note, Professor Horton inquired about efforts that he understands are under way to eliminate some of the distinctions that exist between lecturer positions and tenure-line faculty positions. Provost Epstein said that her office is in the process of examining the position of lecturer and senior lecturer at the college, with this goal in mind. She hopes to have changes in place by July 1. It is her hope to regularize these positions and to have them more closely resemble tenure-line positions in some ways, in regard to sabbatic leaves and other benefits, for example. However, lecturers and senior lecturers will still not have all the rights of tenure-line faculty, she noted.

The members reviewed a draft of a faculty meeting agenda for a possible meeting on October 1, 2019, and voted six in favor and zero opposed to forward it to the faculty. The committee then turned next to a review of several senior sabbatical fellowship proposals. Following a brief discussion, the committee voted to forward them to the board of trustees for approval.

Conversation turned to the first draft of the Committee of Six's guidelines for administering the common teaching evaluation form, a document based on the committee's discussion of [the recommendations of the Ad Hoc Committee for the Development of a Common Form to Evaluate Classroom Teaching](#). Riley Caldwell-O'Keefe, director of the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL), recently wrote to the committee about the ad hoc committee's recommendation that a short video be used as a way of introducing the purpose and importance of teaching evaluations. She had shared the ad hoc committee's rationale for advising that a video be used, rather than having a script read, and had offered more details about the video. R. Caldwell O'Keefe had informed the members that the CTL's pedagogical research associates, who had facilitated focus groups with students on the ad hoc committee's behalf, suggested the idea of the video, based on students' responses; the ad hoc committee favored an approach that was developed by and for students. The ad hoc committee also held the view that a video would offer consistent messaging in a format that students might prefer over a listening to a script. In addition, R. Caldwell O'Keefe had noted that the ad hoc committee's outreach efforts had revealed that some faculty members are not comfortable with administering

course evaluations. A video, it was felt, could help set the stage, especially for those faculty who feel uncomfortable discussing the role that evaluations play in the reappointment and tenure processes. Touching on the substance of the video, R. Caldwell O'Keefe had noted that faculty members and students would discuss why student feedback is important. Examples of helpful and less helpful kinds of feedback would also be offered in the video, she said. The Film and Media Studies Program has offered to provide support and facilitate filming and editing with students, in order to produce a video of professional quality. Finally, R. Caldwell O'Keefe had explained that the video could be coupled with some standard bullet points to prompt faculty about how they might talk with students about why the individual cares about student feedback.

Most members found this additional information to be compelling and expressed support for using a video. Professor Sims reiterated her concerns surrounding the use of this format to frame the evaluation process, and her preference for a written script. She did express support for making a video that could be available to students outside of class. Professor Sims said that she understands that one option discussed by the ad hoc committee was that, before the start of the evaluation period, an email would be sent to all students. The purpose and importance of teaching evaluations would be described, and a link to the video would be provided in the email and, could be included on each course's Moodle page, if desired. Provost Epstein suggested that, perhaps, the video could also be shown in first-year seminars. Professor Sims worries that, if students are required to watch the video on numerous occasions, it will lose the gravity it is intended to convey. Professor Goutte suggested that such fears should be balanced with the overarching concern that the ways in which the evaluation process is framed for students are inconsistent at present, varying by department. Professor Sims agreed that ultimately consistency is the most important aspect of the new process, and that if a video is felt to be best, she would support it. Other members agreed, also favoring the use of the bullet points, as described.

The members next discussed a draft of the Committee of Six's guidelines for administering the common teaching evaluation form and decided to make some revisions. After the committee finalizes the document, the members decided to seek the input of the chairs of academic departments and programs and the Consultative Group for Untenured Faculty. The members also discussed the possibility of adding an introductory statement from the Committee of Six to the document.

In the brief time remaining, the members began a conversation about the process that is being used for soliciting teaching evaluations for courses taught by tenured faculty. The current system is described in the [Faculty Handbook \(IV., B., 2.\)](#) as follows:

**2. Teaching Evaluations of Tenured Faculty Members.** On behalf of the faculty, written evaluations will be solicited from students in each course taught by a tenured faculty member. These responses will remain anonymous. Students will not be able to submit a response after they have seen their final grades for the course; faculty members will not be able to see the responses until after final grades have been submitted. An automated system of response solicitation will direct students to an online evaluation form that offers a default template of questions (periodically reviewed by the Committee on Educational Policy) that will be customizable by each member of the faculty. All student comments will remain confidential, will be at the complete disposal of, and will be accessible only by the faculty member for whom the evaluations have been solicited (voted by the faculty, May 2007; amended, November 2014, effective 2015-2016).

Provost Epstein shared some aggregated data about low student response rates under the current system. The committee discussed the purpose and value of having teaching evaluations for tenured faculty, possibilities for making the process more meaningful and efficient, and approaches that might increase response rates, most notably having students complete the evaluations in class and perhaps moving away from the automated system. (It was noted that many tenured faculty members do not use the automated system to evaluate their courses, in some cases distributing paper evaluations in class. Professor Horton noted that the aggregated data indicate that some thirty-four courses taught by tenured faculty were evaluated using a customized form. The committee agreed that, ideally, the evaluation process should be a tool for helping all faculty members improve their teaching, while recognizing that, for tenure-track faculty, teaching evaluations create pressures, carry consequences, and play an evaluative role that is unique. Professor Brooks suggested that, for some tenured faculty members, the evaluation process continues to evoke negative associations and memories for years after the tenure decision. Tenured faculty may feel the need to take a break from the process in their post-tenure years. She wonders if it might even be helpful not to use the word *evaluation*. *Mid-semester feedback*, for example, creates a very different tone. Professor Sims said that she hopes tenured faculty will be encouraged to use the new form developed by the ad hoc committee. This could provide a valuable point of comparison to help understand student responses to the new form, she noted.

To inform the committee's deliberations, Professor Basu suggested that the provost provide the committee with some information about the debates that have taken place over the years about requiring evaluations for tenured faculty, noting the long-standing resistance to the idea at Amherst. She also raised questions about whether the evaluations should only be read by the tenured faculty member (as is the case now), or whether it could be desirable for other tenured members to read them. Professor Basu posed the question of whether the bar should be higher for promotion to full professor and whether teaching evaluations should play a role in the evaluation of associate professors at the time of promotion. Provost Epstein recommended that the promotion process not be part of the discussion about trying to make the evaluation process more meaningful for tenured faculty, including garnering more feedback from students. Commenting on the issue of the low response rate, President Martin noted the respect and admiration that Amherst students have for their professors; she wonders whether students might feel particularly uncomfortable evaluating senior scholar-teachers whom they hold in such high regard.

Noting the expectation at most other institutions that faculty members continue to have their courses evaluated after they are tenured, Professor Schmalzbauer said that she would be interested to learn more about why there was so much resistance to adopting a system of required course evaluations for tenured faculty members at Amherst, particularly given faculty members' commitment to excellence in teaching at the college. For tenured faculty, she considers the evaluations to be a responsibility to individuals and to their students and can inform professors' deep thinking about teaching. Professor Goutte suggested that, ideally, the culture at the college should shift, so that evaluation is the norm for all faculty. President Martin posed the question of whether there is a strong argument for not requiring teaching evaluations. Professor Brooks commented that, prior to tenure, the evaluation of teaching can sometimes inhibit pedagogical experimentation and innovation because of concern for the possible consequences in relation to promotion. Professor Horton commented that pre-tenure faculty members should be encouraged to be innovative, and he noted that, when evaluating teaching, the Committee of Six and departments do not rely only on end-of-semester evaluations. Candidates' statements about their teaching philosophy, retrospective letters from students, and observations by departmental colleagues are also valuable ways of assessing a

teaching record. Given the considerable recent focus on end-of-semester evaluations, Professor Sims suggested that it would be useful to emphasize to pre-tenure colleagues that these other forms of evaluation are also important.

Concluding the conversation, the members agreed that making the new common teaching evaluation form for tenure-track faculty the default form for tenured faculty, without requiring that it be used, could be a useful first step in improving the current automated process. Seeing how students respond to their own courses using the form could help tenured faculty understand how students are responding to their untenured colleagues' teaching, the committee agreed. It might also be valuable to make use of the same guidelines for administering the common form, once they are approved, the members noted. The provost agreed to bring this proposal to the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP). The members decided that there should be further conversation about the purpose and importance of teaching evaluations for tenured faculty, and about exploring ways of improving the process of soliciting the evaluations. The provost agreed to raise this topic at a meeting of the chairs of academic departments and programs this semester.

The meeting ended with the provost asking the members if they wish to consider changing the college's policy regarding consensual sexual relationships between faculty members and students. Prior to the meeting, she shared [a letter from Professor Sanderson](#) requesting that the Committee of Six review the policy and propose a new one. Professors Basu and Brooks also provided [some relevant articles](#). The current policy in the [Faculty Handbook, \(IV., A., 3.\)](#) reads as follows:

*Consensual sexual relationships between faculty members and students* (voted by the faculty, 1993). Experience has shown that consensual sexual relationships between faculty members and students can lead to harassment. Faculty members should understand the potential for coercion in sexual relationships with students with whom the faculty members also have instructional, advisory or supervisory relationships.

Even when such relationships do not lead to harassment, they can compromise the integrity of the educational process. The objectivity of evaluations which occur in making recommendations or assigning grades, honors, and fellowships may be called into question when a faculty member involved in those functions has or has had a sexual relationship with a student.

For these reasons, the college does not condone, and in fact strongly discourages consensual sexual relationships between faculty members and students. The college requires a faculty member to remove himself or herself from any supervisory, evaluative, advisory, or other pedagogical role involving a student with whom he or she has had or currently has a sexual relationship. Since the absence of this person may deprive the student of educational, advising, or career opportunities, both parties should be mindful of the potential costs to the student before entering into a sexual relationship.

In cases in which it proves necessary, the provost and dean of the faculty, in consultation with the dean of students and the chair (or head) of the relevant department, will evaluate the student's situation and take measures to prevent deprivation of educational and advising opportunities. The appropriate officers of the college will have the authority to make exceptions to normal academic rules and policies that are warranted by the circumstances.

Provost Epstein noted that Amherst is an outlier in strongly discouraging consensual sexual relationships between faculty members and students. Most institutions prohibit such relationships between undergraduates and faculty, and sometimes between graduate students and faculty, as well. The members agreed that Amherst's current policy is inadequate and antiquated, and that the time has come to change it. Professor Basu said that she would want to know what procedures Amherst would follow in investigating alleged violations of college policy. The committee also agreed that, in drafting a proposal for a new policy, it would be helpful to draw on the policies of other institutions. The provost agreed to provide the members with the policies of some peer schools. The college's attorneys will also be available to assist with the proposal, she noted. With the hour growing late, the members decided to continue their discussion of this topic at their next meeting.

The meeting adjourned at 5:18 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Epstein  
Provost and Dean of the Faculty