

The twenty-fourth meeting of the Committee of Six for the academic year 2019–2020 was called to order by President Martin via Zoom at 2:30 P.M. on Monday, April 13, 2020. 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.

Under “Topics of the Day,” Provost Epstein noted that, at a meeting that the president and she had had with the members of the Consultative Group for Tenure-Track Faculty, the group had shared that, in its view, tenure-track faculty members would prefer that the default be that teaching evaluations not be solicited for courses taught by tenure-track faculty this semester. Under such a system, the provost explained, untenured faculty who wish to have their academic department coordinator (ADC) solicit evaluations in the usual fashion, would need to “opt in,” i.e., faculty would need to request that this process be undertaken. To do so, faculty members would contact their chair and ADC by whatever deadline is set (later agreed to be April 21). If the chair and ADC don’t hear from an untenured faculty member by the deadline, the formal solicitation of teaching evaluations for the individual’s courses would not take place this semester, the provost explained. She commented that taking this approach would also spare students from doing evaluations that faculty members might not feel are useful because remote teaching and learning are so anomalous and this semester is so challenging. In addition, the burden on ADCs would be lightened, as they would not need to solicit evaluations from all students in all classes this semester.

Continuing, Provost Epstein noted that, if tenure-track faculty members decide that they want teaching evaluations solicited for their spring 2020 courses, the following will occur, as was agreed earlier. Faculty members will decide if they want to have these evaluations included in their dossiers for reappointment and tenure. This semester, ADCs will then solicit evaluations in the usual fashion (if faculty request that evaluations be done) and will then provide anonymized evaluations only to the faculty member teaching the course. The ADC will then be asked to retain these evaluations with the student names, but not to review or share them with tenured members of the department until individual faculty members declare their intentions. The evaluations will be kept in an electronic file that is not accessible to any members of the department until the tenure-track faculty member decides how they will be used.

Provost Epstein noted that, by the semester before they will be evaluated for reappointment and tenure, tenure-track faculty will then decide if they want to share these evaluations with their tenured colleagues, and if they want them to be part of their reappointment and tenure dossiers that will be considered by the Committee of Six. If they are to be considered by the Committee of Six, they must be shared with both the department and the committee, the provost noted. The provost said that her office will write to tenure-track faculty during the semester before they are considered for reappointment and tenure to ask what their preference is, and to communicate their decision to her and to the department. In addition, tenure-track colleagues will also decide whether they want students whom they taught this spring to be asked to write a retrospective letter about their experience at the time of reappointment or tenure, Provost Epstein explained. If the student took a course with the faculty member during another semester, that student will be asked to write a retrospective letter about that course. The provost said that her office will also write to tenure-track faculty the semester before they are considered for reappointment and tenure to ask what their preference is about retrospective letters, and to communicate their decision to her and the department.

Professor Sims expressed concern that many students might want to have their voices heard through the evaluation process and might not be given the opportunity under the proposed opt-in system. She commented that she has heard from tenure-track faculty, both individually and during the Committee of Six’s meeting with untenured faculty, who want to go forward with teaching evaluations this semester. She also feels that continuing the process of teaching evaluations, even during this difficult semester, would be most consistent with Amherst’s culture of mutual feedback and mutual accountability. Faculty would still be able to decide whether to use these evaluations in the tenure and promotion process, she noted. Provost Epstein, while commenting that student feedback is important, noted that the opt-in approach would be responsive to concerns articulated by pre-tenure faculty. Professor Horton stressed the importance of being as compassionate and flexible as possible with faculty and students. Professor Brooks commented that she wants to respect the views of untenured faculty, who have expressed that they want more autonomy in determining the process that will work best this semester. Giving untenured colleagues the ability to decide whether they wish to deal with evaluations at all at this time makes sense, in her view, and she feels that the opt-in system is a good solution. Professor Brooks stressed the importance of reassuring tenure-track faculty members that the decision about whether to include end-of-semester evaluations and retrospective letters from this semester in their reappointment and/or tenure dossiers will have no bearing on decision-making about their cases. To ensure that this understanding is documented going forward, Professor Brooks suggested that a reminder be included each year in the letters that are sent to candidates and chairs about the procedures that are used for reappointment and tenure. The other members agreed that taking this step would be important, and the provost agreed to implement this suggestion.

Continuing the conversation, Professor Basu also expressed support for the opt-in system, as did Professor Schmalzbauer. Professor Horton commented that student feedback on teaching, even during this time, would be

meaningful for tenure-track colleagues, but said that he favors the opt-in system because it places decision-making in the hands of tenure-track faculty members. Concluding the conversation, the members decided that an opt-in system should be adopted for this semester. At the same time, the committee felt that tenure-track faculty should be encouraged to solicit evaluations from students—either through the formal process—or through a less formal method of their choice, as a way of gaining valuable feedback from students and to give them voice during this time. (After further consultation after the meeting, the opt-in system was extended by the provost to include lecturers, resident artists, and visiting faculty.)

The members next returned to the topic of the college's grading policy for this semester. Since the committee had last discussed the issue, there had been more conversation about this matter at the most recent meetings of chairs of academic departments and programs. In addition, the members had received [a note from Professor Gardner](#) requesting that the college shift to a mandatory pass/fail system for this semester. Some students had also voiced this view via a recent survey that the college had administered to students to learn more about their experiences with remote learning, Provost Epstein said. Other students who took the survey did not express a view, she noted, informing the members that a specific question about grading had not been included on the survey. Some students and faculty had also communicated with committee members informally about grading, some favoring the current extended flexible grading option (FGO), and others arguing for a shift to a mandatory pass-fail system. The Committee on Educational Policy still favors the extended FGO option, the provost informed the committee.

(Much of the following conversation was shared with faculty, students, and staff via an email from the provost that she sent on April 15, announcing the committee's recommendation that no further changes be made to the grading policy this semester.) In a wide-ranging discussion, the members reviewed again the compelling arguments both for and against moving to a mandatory pass/fail system, many of which center around justice and equity, the committee agreed. A member commented that many of the calls for a mandatory pass/fail system are motivated by faculty concerns for students who are currently facing additional barriers to learning in the remote environment. Another member noted that, while the mandatory pass/fail system would ensure equality of outcomes where achievement meets a basic level, the formal and informal communications that committee members have received from students suggest that the equity issue is more complex. The member shared a letter that she had received from a low income transfer student, in which the student passionately argued that, without the FGO option, there would only be three semesters of grades on the individual's transcript, which would make it difficult to apply for national fellowships and graduate programs. The student had argued that many transfer students were in the same situation. Ultimately, the committee concluded that social class and circumstances were not necessarily proxies for whether a student supported mandatory pass/fail or wanted to retain the FGO. The committee also concluded that the flexibility inherent in the extended FGO approach responds to the needs and desires of the most students, while acknowledging that this was a difficult decision and that no system of assessment can address all concerns. Many students had already invested considerable effort in their courses prior to the transition to remote learning, it was noted. Others need a record of grades to apply for future jobs or programs. At the same time, the FGO allows the option for students experiencing unexpected challenges in each course to convert grades to a "pass" as needed, the members agreed. The committee further concurred that the extended FGO is also an important way to recognize continued student engagement during this difficult semester. A member commented that, as the college enters the final three weeks of the semester, changing the grading policy again at this time would be unfair, as many students and faculty have made decisions under the assumption that the extended FGO policy would be in place. Making another change could have unintended consequences as a result. The other members agreed.

Concluding the conversation, the members commented that no grading policy can fix the wide disparities in student circumstances during this extraordinarily difficult time. Above all, the members agreed that the best approach to evaluating student learning this semester is one that cannot be legislated, but which they urge the faculty to adopt. That is, when grading, professors exercise the utmost compassion and flexibility—in light of the challenges that everyone is facing, and in keeping with Amherst's mission and values. One committee member emphasized ways to share grading information with students that might help relieve some of their anxiety during this time. For example, explaining that the work accomplished previously would already ensure that the student would earn a minimum final grade of B-minus, even if no further work was turned in, thus eliminating worries about failing the course due to current hardships. This member expressed the view that most faculty want to help and support students during this difficult time, rather than penalizing them with low grades. Provost Epstein noted that some students feel that some faculty have been assigning more work during this period of remote learning than is typical. While faculty have autonomy when it comes to the workload in their courses, the members agreed that, given the current situation, focusing on a smaller set of learning goals, and lightening the load on students would be most helpful.

Under "Questions from Committee Members," Professor Horton asked about the status of the appointment of a

faculty athletics representative (FAR). While continuing to feel that expanding the duties of this position is important, the provost informed the members that she has decided to delay the appointment of a FAR, as well as a third associate provost and associate dean of the faculty in her office, due to the budgetary pressures that the college is facing at this time. The provost said that it is her hope to appoint an additional associate provost and associate dean of the faculty as early as January of 2021, if the college's financial situation allows. Professor Horton, while understanding the rationale for the delay, noted the importance of the envisioned role of the FAR in work surrounding diversity and inclusion, in relation to athletics. Provost Epstein responded that Professor Hart, who serves as faculty diversity and inclusion officer (FDIO) has been deeply involved in such efforts in this role. For example, he has been very involved in the work that is under way to develop a program of education focusing on racism for members of the lacrosse team.

Moving on to the related topic of finding ways, more broadly, for the college to address issues of racism on campus, the members informed the provost that the Black Student Union (BSU) has invited the committee to meet virtually with its officers. President Martin, who has met with the BSU leadership a number of times in recent months, expressed support for involving more faculty members in the work of considering the BSU's concerns and recommendations. The BSU has indicated that it would like the college to address the harm that hate speech does and to adopt the view that racial epithets are not covered by academic freedom and freedom of expression. The president has informed the BSU that the faculty developed and approved the college's Statement on of Academic Freedom and Expressive Freedom. President Martin commented that issues surrounding speech are enormously complicated, and that it would be very helpful for faculty to engage the community in discussions about this important issue at Amherst, and within higher education more broadly. Professor Basu expressed support for involving the faculty in these discussions, perhaps initially informally and later at a faculty meeting. She expressed support for a meeting between the committee and the BSU. She also stressed the need to increase communication to the community about what steps have and will be taken to address racism on campus. Professor Basu suggested that the committee meet with members of the Office of Diversity and Inclusion to learn more about their work. Professor Brooks asked for the Committee of Six to request a meeting with the members of the Presidential Task Force on Diversity and Inclusion to hear more about the recommendations this body had made. Provost Epstein said that she would help facilitate these meetings. Professor Brooks suggested that the meetings with the BSU take the form of a listening session, after which the committee would deliberate on how best to respond.

Continuing with questions, Professor Sims, noting the financial pressures that the college is facing because of the pandemic, expressed concern for members of the staff whose jobs rely on students being on campus in the summer. She suggested that, if the college is considering furloughing these staff, could they instead have an opportunity for retraining so that they could be productively employed at Amherst over the summer in ways that meet college needs, and also allow for social distancing. Perhaps, for example, more staff could work on maintenance or improvement of buildings and grounds this summer, including projects in preparation for the bicentennial, Professor Sims commented. President Martin said that she would discuss this suggestion with the senior staff and other groups.

Concluding the portion of the meeting devoted to questions, Professor Schmalzbauer noted that a colleague had asked her to mention that faculty members who will stand for tenure in the fall, and who have books being released now, will likely be unable to give talks about their works because of social distancing. Professor Schmalzbauer also expressed concern about the pandemic's impact on undocumented and DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) students, noting that the Supreme Court will soon be deciding on whether to rescind DACA protections, which is adding stress to the lives of some of Amherst's most vulnerable students. She asked whether the college is continuing to work with other institutions to lobby in support of DACA students. President Martin noted that she is a member of the Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, which is "dedicated to increasing public understanding of how immigration policies and practices impact our students, campuses, and communities." Membership enables the college to be a signatory on petitions that are relevant to issues that have an impact on DACA students. President Martin said that she had signed the most recent petition as soon as she had received it. Professor Schmalzbauer then thanked the provost for providing a wealth of important information at the recent meeting of chairs of academic departments and programs.

The committee then considered whether to hold a faculty meeting on April 21. The members agreed not to do so, cognizant of the pressures that faculty members are experiencing at this time, and noting that there is no business that necessitates having a meeting. (A few days later, the president and provost decided to hold an informational meeting with faculty and other colleagues who attend faculty meetings via Zoom on April 21, during the regularly scheduled meeting time for faculty meetings.) Following up on that point, Professor Sims suggested that, during these extraordinary times, it might be helpful to look beyond the regular schedule of having faculty meetings on the first and third Tuesday of the month during the semester. Given the possibility that there might be more information unfolding about the pandemic, it might be useful to have a meeting, perhaps on May 5, but also later in May, ahead

of the commencement faculty meeting on May 28, or even after that, if developments continue to unfold, in order to ensure the role of faculty governance in the process. The other members agreed. On a related note, Provost Epstein commented that some tenure-track faculty members have expressed a preference for having departmental and other meetings involving faculty in the evening during this time. Since attendance and participation occurs from home via Zoom, they are able to put their young children to bed before the meeting.

Conversation turned to the Jeffrey B. Ferguson Memorial Teaching Prize, which was awarded for the first time last spring. Current Amherst faculty and students, and alumni who graduated from the college within the last twenty years were invited to make nominations for the award. The inaugural Karen and Brian Conway '80, P'18 Presidential Teaching Professor at the college, Jeff Ferguson taught in the Department of Black Studies and in the Department of American Studies for more than two decades. The Ferguson Prize is awarded annually to two Amherst faculty members who see teaching as an art and vocation, engage in pedagogical innovation in their courses, have a significant impact in their department or program and on the broader curriculum, help students develop foundational skills in the finest liberal arts tradition, inspire students and colleagues alike to cultivate the life of the mind, and have a lasting impact on students' intellectual and personal development. Current tenured faculty members, senior lecturers, and senior resident artists who have been at the college for at least ten years are eligible for the prize. Recipients give public talks focusing on teaching at or around homecoming and receive an honorarium of \$5,000. Nominations submitted in previous years are considered when making decisions in the current year.

Given the current state of social distancing that will preclude awarding the prize in person this year at the commencement faculty meeting, and the opportunity to reflect on the nomination process now that it has taken place twice, the members decided to discuss some matters relating to the prize. The committee agreed that refinements to the process should be considered, with the goal of garnering rich and robust commentary about the ways in which candidates exemplify Professor Ferguson's pedagogical values and practices, and transformative teaching.

Continuing the conversation, Professor Basu wondered whether the Committee of Six should select the recipient of the prize, noting that it was awkward to evaluate colleagues' teaching. Provost Epstein expressed the view that the committee, as the faculty's elected representatives, seems the most appropriate body to do so. She noted that the committee functions in a similar role when it selects colleagues for various fellowships. Professor Horton agreed and suggested that members of the Committee of Six, who function as the selection committee, should not be eligible for the prize while they are serving on the committee. This was the approach taken last year, but he feels that it is important to codify this practice. The other members agreed. Professor Basu suggested that the committee discuss the criteria it would use to decide on recipients for the prize. Since the committee would award two prizes, she suggested that recipients should reflect the diversity of faculty identities and interests. She also suggested that the committee consider giving the award to faculty at a particularly meaningful stage in their professional lives. Professor Brooks suggested that considering teaching that is transformative, not only in the classroom, but at the college, might be an additional guideline. In considering other steps in the nomination process, the committee considered whether departments should play a role. Professor Schmalzbauer commented that, at her previous institution, finalists for teaching awards were invited to present materials to the selection committee, including a statement about their teaching philosophy and letters of recommendation from students. Professor Sims expressed the view that it would be desirable to consider carefully colleagues late in their careers so as not to miss the opportunity to honor them for the impact that they have had as teachers. The committee agreed to continue its discussion of the prize, informed by information about the ways in which other colleges and universities select recipients of teaching awards. The provost agreed that her office would gather this information.

The remainder of the meeting was devoted to personnel matters.

The meeting adjourned at 5:00 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Epstein  
Provost and Dean of the Faculty