

The twenty-sixth 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 27, 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.

The members began the meeting by turning briefly to personnel matters. Under “Questions from committee members, Professor Horton suggested that a faculty member be added to the Logistics Working Group that will consider preparations that would be needed to bring students back to campus. The current members of the group are Jesse Barba, director of institutional research and registrar services; Jim Brassord, chief of campus operations; Provost Epstein (chair); Karu Kozuma, chief student affairs officer; and Matt McGann, dean of admission and financial aid. The provost responded that the logistics group is focusing on matters that are not academic in nature, for example, ensuring that there would be sufficient personal-protection supplies on campus. For this reason, in her view, it does not seem necessary to have another faculty member serve.

Following up on Provost Horton’s question, Provost Epstein noted that she and the president have begun conversations about the need to engage more faculty members in the process of thinking about possible temporary adjustments to academic structures for the next academic year, in order to support remote learning and teaching. Such adjustments may be needed, they feel, given the likelihood that this mode will be necessary for some part of the year and/or for some students and faculty. The provost said that, after classes end, the plan would be to charge an ad hoc faculty committee with thinking about such adjustments, which may include, but are not limited to, different teaching time blocks and modular approaches to structuring the semester; different ways of mounting curricula and distributing teaching responsibilities among faculty within departments and across the college; and different ways of organizing and balancing the service and administrative work of the faculty, in recognition of the additional support needed by students during the pandemic, and the extraordinary burdens that COVID-19 is placing on the faculty. Provost Epstein noted that, in developing its recommendations, the ad hoc faculty committee would be asked to consult widely with all constituencies and relevant college offices; consider information that has been gathered about the experiences of students, faculty, and staff during spring 2020; collect new information, as needed; and draw on the relevant findings of the three working groups recently charged by the president. The ad hoc committee would also review and consider ideas developed by peer institutions in the face of the pandemic, Provost Epstein explained. In appointing faculty to the committee, the provost and the president said that they favor drawing on faculty from a range of faculty governance committees, disciplines, and career stages. In addition, the president commented, she plans to constitute a student advisory group to gain a better sense of students’ thinking about these and other issues.

Professor Brooks asked the president and provost for clarification of the role of members of governance bodies who might serve on the envisioned ad hoc committee. She feels that it is important to gain clarity about whether such faculty would represent their committees, and in so doing would bring information back to the other members of those bodies and consult with their colleagues, or would be serving as individual faculty who would bring their own perspectives and judgement to the work of the ad hoc committee. Provost Epstein responded that members of the governance bodies would be serving as individuals who are representing their own views and considering what is best for the institution. (Over the weekend following the meeting, the provost, in the interest of time, shared the president’s formal charge to the ad hoc committee and proposed faculty members to serve. The provost also informed the members that she would chair the ad hoc committee. The committees offered advice on the make-up of the ad hoc committee, and the president and provost said that they would take the committee’s comments into consideration when appointing faculty members to serve.)

Continuing with questions, Professor Basu asked about plans for commencement for this year’s graduating seniors, including whether degrees would be conferred remotely. She noted that some departments are considering ways to honor their majors who are members of the class of ’20. President Martin said that graduating seniors have been asked about their preferences regarding commencement, and that she has not yet seen the results of this informal survey. There will be a virtual ceremony to confer degrees and to celebrate seniors, though the shape of this event is not yet known. Students have also

expressed interest in having a commencement on campus a year from this summer—perhaps sometime between June and September. In addition, the provost noted, an event celebrating academic achievements will take place on the same weekend as an in-person graduation. In the meantime, those who win prizes will receive their prizes, and a list of the winners of undergraduate awards will also be made public, though there will not be a ceremony in any form this year, she explained.

Professor Basu next asked about the Committee of Six's role in addressing questions and suggestions relating to the college's response to the pandemic that it receives from faculty and students, and also how the committee should convey its own thoughts. She noted that the faculty had been encouraged to contact the Committee of Six at the last faculty town-hall meeting. Professor Basu asked to what degree the Committee of Six should be actively involved in considering questions related to COVID-19 and what type of questions the committee is best-positioned to explore and answer. President Martin said that she sees the logic of the Committee of Six, as the elected representatives of the faculty, participating in this process on the faculty's behalf. The president reminded the members of her plans to constitute a campus-wide committee in the next several weeks. That committee will resemble the 2008 Ad Hoc Advisory Budget Committee (ABC) in its make-up, with representation from all constituencies. The president and provost emphasized the importance of engaging the entire Amherst community in thinking about the challenges ahead, and in developing solutions. She said that she and the provost would think further about the Committee of Six's role and bring her thoughts back to the committee.

Continuing with questions, Professor Basu asked about plans for the international students who are now on campus, once the academic year ends. Some of these students might not be able to return to the U.S. to pursue graduate studies and employment here, and others would lose their visa status if they were to return to their homes, she said. President Martin responded that the international students who are on campus at this time will be permitted to stay on campus this summer, if this is the best solution for them. The exception is graduating seniors. She noted that Liz Agosto, dean of students, is working with each graduating senior who is currently on campus, trying to develop plans on a case-by-case basis. Professor Horton expressed concern for the students who are now on campus, particularly after the academic year ends. At that time, he commented, they will no longer have remote classes to provide some structure to their daily lives, as they endure isolation, uncertainty about the future, and other challenges. The members wondered whether it would be possible to inform departments about whether any of their majors will be on campus this summer. Provost Epstein said that she can ensure that this information is made available. President Martin said that she is also concerned about students who will need to be on campus over the summer. She informed the committee that the college will provide remote opportunities and/or jobs for these students. One possibility that she is exploring is whether the students can be trained to conduct contract tracing. Professor Sims noted that students have been working on the campus farm this spring and seem to have enjoyed doing so. Perhaps they could continue to work on the farm over the summer, she suggested. President Martin said that this could be a possibility. On a related note, the president discussed procedures that she has put in place for those who are on campus. President Martin informed the members that everyone should be wearing masks and practicing social distancing, even if they are taking walks on campus. She has asked that signs be posted to this effect to make sure that those who are visiting, working, or living on campus follow these practices.

Professor Schmalzbauer next asked whether the college is accepting aid through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act that is being allocated as part of an emergency relief package for institutions of higher education, in order to provide emergency funds to students in need whose lives have been disrupted by the pandemic. It was noted that wealthy institutions such as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton have received criticism for accepting these funds. Harvard recently returned CARE funds to the Department of Education, though it had planned on using the aid to help its students with the greatest financial needs. President Martin said Amherst will not accept CARES funding to support the temporary transition to online learning, but will accept funding to provide grants to students who are experiencing hardship. In addition, Amherst, drawing on college funds, will provide grants in an equivalent amount to Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), undocumented, and international students who are in need. The CARES Act, President Martin commented, does not allow for funding to be given to students who fall into these

categories. Professor Schmalzbauer thanked President Martin and expressed gratitude that the college is supporting students in this way.

Continuing with questions, Professor Brooks said that she is troubled that some faculty members are assigning a great deal of work during this very difficult time, according to concerns shared by some students. She worries about the impact that significant academic pressures may place on students who may be experiencing a range of challenges. It is her understanding that, while continuing to respect faculty autonomy, some faculty members are trying to communicate with colleagues about the need for flexibility, compassion, and workload accommodations for students, due to the impact of COVID-19. She noted that, from the beginning of the pandemic, Jackie Alvarez, director of the counseling center, has shared information with the faculty about the additional cognitive load that students are carrying during this crisis and how that load is not distributed evenly. Nevertheless, students have been communicating with faculty whom they trust, particularly during advising week, that some faculty seem to be going forward with “business as usual,” or even requiring more work at the end of the semester than is typical. Continuing, Professor Brooks noted that some faculty are incorporating student check-ins during their classes, and that she is aware that students are sharing these concerns in this format as well. From all that the faculty has been told, students’ learning can be aided by empowering them to learn in different ways, not simply by forcing them to adhere to deadlines and typical requirements, under penalty of failure. Professor Brooks said that she has adjusted assignments in her own class, and has found that doing so is fostering student engagement and success. She expressed concern about the workload issue, as classes end and exam period begins.

Professor Basu commented that these issues are complex, and that finding a balance between supporting students and continuing to challenge them intellectually during this time can be difficult. While she feels that overloading students with work at this time is a problem, she finds that holding students accountable and maintaining structures that reward them for their hard work can be beneficial to them. The committee agreed that finding the right balance is important, particularly because of the likelihood that the pandemic will continue to have an impact in the fall, and that remote learning may once again be in place. Professor Brooks said that she continues to believe that identifying the core learning outcomes of courses and providing multiple pathways to achieve goals is essential during this time. There are ways of reducing quantity, while still providing meaningful learning experiences that are sustainable, she noted. Professor Horton concurred, and commented that he had observed, while serving on an ad hoc committee that worked on identifying the technology needs of faculty at this time, that meaningful learning takes place when professors take the approach of focusing on a pared-down set of learning goals during this time of remote teaching and learning.

At the conclusion of the conversation, the members agreed that it would be helpful to send an email to faculty, students, and staff reminding everyone of the resources and policies that are available to the faculty to provide flexibility and support for students. In the email, faculty could also be reminded that, if they have concerns about any of their students, including individuals’ ability to complete academic work successfully at this very difficult time, they should reach out to the class deans as early as possible to discuss the possibility of granting extensions. The members concurred that it would also be helpful to include information about the flexible grading option (FGO), which has been extended to all courses being taught this semester, and about extensions, including for seniors. The provost said that she would coordinate the communication. (Two days after the meeting, the chief student affairs officer and the interim registrar sent an email with this information.)

The members turned to a “brainstorming document” that Professor Trapani sent to the committee on behalf of a small group of faculty and staff who had recently generated a set of ideas about ways to support colleagues who have become “primary, full-time caregivers” as a result of the closing of schools and daycare centers during the pandemic. Provost Epstein said that this is a significant issue and that she appreciates receiving these ideas, some of which have already been under discussion. The provost noted that, having a better sense of what the enrollment will be in the fall will aid planning efforts. If there are fewer students on campus than is typical, it is possible that fewer faculty will need to teach full loads. It may be possible to institute some form of parenting leave. Adjusting sabbaticals might also be possible, as long as the college

does not incur additional costs as a result, and if departmental needs can still be met, the provost said. Those who wish to request or adjust leaves should contact her, Provost Epstein said.

It was noted that, beyond faculty who are facing challenges because they have small children, there are colleagues with underlying health conditions or who are caring for elderly relatives, and/or who have other concerns about teaching on campus, if it becomes possible to do so in the fall. Flexibility on everyone's part will be key, Provost Epstein said, adding that departmental and individuals' needs will have to be considered and balanced. The members discussed that, in considering ways of providing support to those who are serving as caregivers, it will be important to be cognizant that those who do not have these responsibilities should not assume too many burdens. Professor Goutte commented that, within a department, pre-tenure colleagues may disproportionately face the challenge of caring for young children during the pandemic, but may worry about asking for help or flexibility from their department. Supporting these colleagues should be a priority, she said. It was agreed that departments will need to think creatively about what courses need to be offered during this time and about possibly redistributing teaching responsibilities. The college could also decide that all faculty should teach one course instead of two in the fall, President Martin noted, if there are good educational reasons for doing so. Professor Basu commented that service demands are likely to grow if the pandemic continues to have an impact in the fall, as more students struggle and need mentoring and advice. She suggested that faculty who assume additional service responsibilities might be given a reduced teaching load.

The committee noted that other approaches might involve faculty members collaborating on the design of a course and then team-teaching two sections. Professor Brooks commented that she has found such collaboration to be intellectually and pedagogically enriching. Professor Horton applauded the spirit of moving in directions of this kind, noting that the faculty will need to come together to meet learning objectives. He expressed the view that "all-or-nothing" teaching will not be viable for students in hybrid environments. Professor Sims commented that preparing to teach in multiple formats will create burdens for faculty. Knowing what approach will be needed as soon as it is practicable will be most helpful. She noted that it would also be helpful to avoid changing more about teaching structures than is necessary, because of the high time burden of preparation. The provost said that all faculty members should be thinking about how they would teach their courses remotely, and departments should be planning on how to mount their curricula remotely, including thinking flexibly about major requirements.

Turning to another topic, Professor Sims noted that a colleague has asked her to convey to the president a recommendation of another Amherst alumnus who could offer valuable advice about the pandemic. The president agreed to contact the individual, a physician who has expertise in public health.

Professor Sims next asked if there is a sense of what the enrollment will look like in the fall, for example how many students will choose to take a gap year or voluntary leave. President Martin said that the deadline for students to inform the college about whether they intend to take a gap year or a leave has been extended from May 1 to June 1. President Martin commented that, under current college policies, there is no deadline in place by which families must pay tuition. The president said that plans are in place to reexamine and revise this and other related policies. As a result of the flexibility that currently exists, it will be difficult for the college to have certainty about the enrollment for the next academic year. Professor Sims asked when a decision will be made about the format of teaching for the fall—for example, whether courses will all be taught remotely, or whether some students will be able to attend some classes on campus. President Martin said that she anticipates that some of the information that is needed to make a decision may be available by July 1, but she is not certain. Provost Epstein stressed the need for faculty to prepare to teach under all possible eventualities.

The members next discussed whether to have a faculty meeting on May 5 for the purpose of engaging the faculty in a discussion about race and racism on campus. After considering the time needed to prepare for the meeting, the committee decided that it would be most helpful to have a faculty meeting on May 21 instead. By that time, the members would have met with the members of the Presidential Task Force on Diversity and Inclusion and, possibly, staff in the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, and would have the benefit of their perspectives on the issues that have been raised. It might also be possible, under this timetable, to share some relevant readings with the faculty in advance of the meeting, the members noted.

The committee also agreed that the faculty would benefit from having Norm Jones, chief diversity and inclusion officer, as well as representatives from the Black Student Union speak at the meeting, and the president agreed to invite N. Jones and the students. The members felt that hearing about students' experiences with racism on campus would be compelling, and that N. Jones would be helpful in discussing issues surrounding race and racism more broadly. President Martin noted that it is her understanding that the BSU student-leaders may wish to discuss the possibility of adding specific language about hate speech to the Amherst College Statement of Academic and Expressive Freedom, drawing on language in other institutions' statements. The president said that she would ask the students whether they would share this language with the Committee of Six. It was noted that N. Jones could, perhaps, discuss the development of a proposal for a bias-reporting system, work that is currently under way. Provost Epstein noted that having the faculty meeting on May 21 would also make it possible to update the faculty on the COVID-19 situation, since more may be known about the pandemic and the college's responses in several weeks.

Conversation returned briefly to the topic of the distribution of students taking courses that are attentive to issues of race, class, and gender and sexuality. Prior to the meeting, the members had reviewed data provided by J. Barba, director institutional research and registrar services. The information that he had assembled showed that the demographics of students who take these courses is more diverse than the committee had anticipated. Professor Basu said that she would like to see data on how the intersection of identities influences course selection, for example, by comparing athletes by race and gender. She also wants to learn how course selection differs across athletic teams. The provost said that she would ask J. Barba to provide this information, while commenting that it would be important not to use these data to target particular teams.

The meeting ended with a discussion of the nominees for the Jeffrey B. Ferguson Memorial Teaching Prize. The members first discussed whether a separate committee should be established to select the winners of the prize, and most members felt that the Committee of Six should continue in this role; some members said that they did not hold a strong view. In regard to making the selection process more robust, Professor Basu commented that, after reviewing information about other institutions' models for awarding their teaching prizes, she did not find approaches that would be compelling to adopt at Amherst. It was agreed that, as one of its first tasks, the new Committee of Six should develop ways of strengthening the nomination process for the prize, as well as criteria for selecting the winners. For this round of consideration, the members decided that, in evaluating the nominees, a significant criterion for selecting the winners of the prize should be the curricular impact that faculty members have had across the faculty and the college, in addition to exceling in the classroom and in serving as mentors. This approach would honor Professor Ferguson's own contribution to the curriculum and his work helping other faculty members think about how to design courses that would build intellectual skills through the study of content that spanned the disciplines. The members then selected the winners of the prize for this round. It was agreed that President Martin would inform these colleagues, but that the award would be announced publicly at the first in-person faculty meeting. The winners would be asked to give public talks when it becomes possible to do so.

The meeting adjourned at 4:15 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Epstein
Provost and Dean of the Faculty