

The thirty-fifth meeting of the Committee of Six for the academic year 2020–2021 was called to order by President Martin via Zoom at 3:45 P.M. on Monday, April 30, 2021. Present, in addition to the president, were Professors del Moral, Kingston, Leise, Manion, Trapani, and Umphrey; Provost and Dean of the Faculty Epstein; and Associate Provost Tobin, recorder.

Under “Topics of the Day,” President Martin said that she is considering a request that she has just received that Senior Assembly take place on May 28 or 29, rather than on May 19. If a decision is made to move forward with this proposal, seniors would have another ceremonial event to look forward to after exams conclude, as a part of commencement weekend. In addition, student speakers and the faculty member who will be addressing those who attend Senior Assembly would have more time to prepare, she noted. The members agreed that this change would help to enliven commencement weekend, which has been scaled back dramatically, due to the pandemic. President Martin thanked the members for offering their views and said that she and others who are thinking about end-of-the-year events would consider this proposal further. In a similar vein, Professor Trapani asked if staff members will be invited to commencement, in particular instructional staff. Provost Epstein said that no decision has been made about this question yet. Once it is known how many graduating seniors and their guests, as well as faculty, will be attending commencement in person, the college will be able to gauge if seats might be available on Pratt Field for other members of the college community.

Under “Questions from Committee Members,” Professor Trapani asked if the committee will have an opportunity to report back (in the aggregate) on issues raised by tenure-track faculty at the committee’s annual meeting with assistant professors, which had taken place on April 26. It was noted that the impact of the pandemic on the research productivity of some faculty members has been profound, and that significant concern had been raised about the ways in which the college will continue to address this issue. Some assistant professors had expressed the view that the option to extend tenure-track faculty members’ tenure clocks by one or two years, while greatly appreciated, will not be sufficient to address the impact of COVID-19, particularly on STEM faculty. Many of these colleagues’ research programs have been set back by years, as a result of labs being shut down, it had been noted. President Martin and Provost Epstein said that they look forward to learning more about the concerns of tenure-track faculty, and it was agreed that the committee would share what the members had learned at the next Committee of Six meeting. On a final note, Professor Trapani commented that some concerns that had been raised at the meeting about the observation of teaching suggest that it would be helpful to provide more information about this subject. He proposed sharing more broadly [Center for Teaching and Learning \(CTL\) documents on this subject](#) that were recently discussed with the chairs of academic departments and programs. It was agreed to do so via a link from these minutes.

Continuing with questions, Professor Manion asked, on behalf of a colleague, why the Pfizer vaccine that was administered on campus had not been offered initially to faculty who are teaching on campus, but only to students. President Martin said that the college was not sure how much vaccine it would receive at first, and how many students would take advantage of this opportunity. Students were given priority to receive the vaccine, as they are for COVID-19 testing, because they live in close proximity with one another on campus, she noted. Once it was clear how much vaccine would be available, the opportunity to receive it was extended to all staff and faculty who are approved to be on campus. Professor Manion noted that the colleague also wonders about how the schedule (April 28 and May 19) for administering the vaccine was determined, as there might be an impact if students have side effects from the second shot. President Martin explained that these dates were determined by the availability of the vaccine. Professor Manion noted the colleague’s view that the faculty’s health and well-being are not being prioritized, and she asked why the Committee of Six, as the executive committee of the faculty, had not been consulted about plans for the vaccine rollout. President Martin reiterated that the college had been provided with very limited quantities of the vaccine, and that the COVID-19 Health Readiness Group had evaluated the options and had made recommendations that the president felt were appropriate.

Discussion turned to the question of orientation advising, with the committee expressing concern about plans that have been announced to have faculty participate in orientation advising over three periods during the summer—one in mid-July and two in August. Professor Kingston commented that this model, which was described in the announcement as not increasing demands upon faculty time and as allowing for flexibility, in actuality represents an incursion on faculty time. The other members concurred and asked that the decision be revisited, commenting on the importance of preserving the summer for faculty research and to provide down time after the intensity of the academic year. The idea of requiring faculty to undertake advising over the summer is symptomatic of a larger trend at the college of asking faculty members to do more and more work, the committee agreed. Professor Trapani commented that faculty have nine-month contracts, and, if asked to work over the summer, should receive additional compensation.

Professor Kingston said that he can imagine efficient alternatives to the proposed advising plan, such as offering students the opportunity to participate in a webinar with experienced Amherst advisors, during which questions could be answered. Professor Trapani, who also advocated for exploring creative solutions (e.g., having faculty who wish to do so conduct advising sessions with groups of students over the summer), commented that he is conflicted about the advising plan. He recognizes the importance of advising and the impact that it has on students. On the other hand, he feels that the summer should be protected as a time in which faculty can focus on research. Professor del Moral also stressed the importance of not intruding on research time over the summer. She noted that many faculty members typically travel to archives to conduct research as soon as the academic year concludes, for example. On a related note, Provost Epstein said that it is her hope to have a policy in place soon for college-sponsored travel over the summer. She thanked the members for their feedback, about summer advising, agreeing with the points that had been raised, and said she would speak with Professor López, dean of new students, about the possibility of rethinking current plans.

Concluding the portion of the meeting that had focused on questions from the committee, Professor del Moral asked about the college's plans to respond to the request from the Black Student Union (BSU) to double the number of counselors at Amherst's Counseling Center. President Martin commented that the college has roughly the same number of counselors as Williams, though the BSU has suggested that Williams has more than twice the number of counselors. While all of Amherst's counselors are full-time employees, many of those at Williams work on a part-time basis, the president explained, noting that this difference might account for the confusion surrounding the number of counselors at the respective institutions. President Martin said that it will be important for the Office of Student Affairs to make use of new strategies to ensure that student life at the college is more inclusive, enjoyable, healthy, and safe. What is needed is a holistic approach to student well-being, and one that begins at the time students decide to come to Amherst, and which extends until the time they leave. Part of this strategy will involve further investment in the counseling center, the details of which is currently under discussion. The members then turned to a personnel matter.

The committee discussed briefly the meeting that some members (Professors Kingston, Manion, and Trapani) had had with the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP) on April 21 to discuss the proposal to adopt either a 4.0 or 4.33 grading scale, and the related issue of the grade of A-plus. It was noted that both committees support a change from the 14-point scale, but there appear to be differing views about whether to adopt a 4.0 or a 4.33 scale, based on views surrounding the grade of A-plus. According to [the CEP's minutes of the discussion](#), the CEP generally favors keeping the A-plus, but is still considering whether it should be assigned the same value as an A, i.e., 4.0, or be assigned the value of 4.33. Both committees agreed that the best approach would be to have the faculty discuss and vote on both issues at the upcoming faculty meeting.

Also in regard to the May 18 faculty meeting, Provost Epstein informed the members that Angie Tissi-Gassoway, associate dean of students for diversity and inclusion, has agreed to give a brief presentation on the challenges faced by trans students and the resources available at the college to support them. The

provost noted that she and President Martin had met with A. Tissi-Gassoway recently and had been impressed with the resources and policies that the college has put in place, which she described. The remainder of the meeting was devoted to personnel matters.

The meeting adjourned at 5:15 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Epstein
Provost and Dean of the Faculty