

The twenty-third 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 6, 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.

Having heard from some faculty members and students who feel there are strong arguments for shifting to a mandatory pass/fail system for this semester, the members discussed the possibility of doing so. Some have commented that some other institutions have already moved to this system. The committee noted that many of those schools have included in their policies a mechanism for “uncovering” grades, if needed. As part of their deliberations, the members considered a letter from a student, which had been forwarded to the committee at the student’s request, and [a letter from Professor Jaswal](#). The members also drew on their own conversations with students and faculty about this topic.

The members commented that, in her letter, Professor Jaswal had noted that many pre-med and first-generation students are upset that Amherst has not moved to a mandatory pass/fail system. She expressed the view that the extended flexible grading option (FGO) system will not alleviate stress for pre-med students, as “they have been advised to try to get the best grade they can since it’s not clear whether medical schools will accept self-elected *Pass* grades.” (Provost Epstein said that there is no indication, thus far, that medical schools will penalize students for electing a *Pass*.) Professor Jaswal had also expressed the view that a mandatory pass/fail system is the most equitable way to demonstrate that Amherst recognizes that students have been put in very different and unequal situations this semester, some of which can make learning challenging. She had noted that faculty are also experiencing many different and unequal situations, conveying that moving to a mandatory pass-fail system would help faculty “focus our very stretched capacities on helping students learn, rather than assessing them, and supporting students who are struggling the most.” The committee commented that the student letter-writer had expressed support for the extended FGO system, commenting that students have worked extremely hard, and continue to work hard while at home. In the student’s view, a switch to a pass/fail would not incentivize or reflect the time and effort students have put in to learning and in to completing good work so far and in the future. Many students are counting on this semester’s courses to improve their GPAs and to demonstrate their skills and hard work to employers, law schools, medical schools, and Master’s/Ph.D. programs, the student had noted.

The committee agreed that, since there seems to be some ambiguity among students and faculty about whether a mandatory pass/fail proposal is currently being debated, it would be helpful for the Committee of Six to provide greater clarity about its view on this matter—considering the feedback that has come forward and the members’ own thoughts. The members agreed that they had believed that the faculty vote on the FGO would be binding, but had recognized that changing circumstances could necessitate continued discussion and possible adjustments, if deemed necessary. The committee acknowledged and discussed compelling arguments on all sides. Some members expressed the view that, at the end of March, the committee had considered the full spectrum of arguments for and against adopting a mandatory pass/fail system, before deciding instead to forward a motion to the faculty to extend the FGO to cover all classes for this semester. Most members said that they continue to feel that the flexibility inherent in the extended FGO approach allows for greater equity, given that students have widely different circumstances and goals during this challenging time. Members noted that some faculty members continue to make strong arguments for a mandatory pass-fail system as the most equitable solution, given the very different scenarios that students are currently facing. Some members shared that they too have observed the vast disparity among student circumstances, which they find very concerning. Yet, the committee also continues to believe that the extended FGO is an important way to recognize student engagement during this extremely unusual and challenging semester. The committee also agreed that the faculty vote that took place should be considered binding, since there had not been an unforeseen change in the general context of the pandemic since the FGO vote, and that this matter should not be legislated again at this time. In the members’ view, making another change to the grading policy could also be disruptive and could add to the current confusion. For all of these reasons, the committee decided to recommend that no further changes in grading policy be made at this time, and the members decided not to bring another proposal forward to the faculty. The committee asked the provost to communicate the members’ view to faculty and students.

Turning to another topic, Provost Epstein commented that, at a recent meeting that she and the president had with the Consultative Group for Tenure-Track Faculty, the group had conveyed that some tenure-track faculty members would prefer that the default be that teaching evaluations not be solicited this semester. Earlier, the committee had decided that the default would be that the evaluations would be solicited from all students in all classes this semester, and that tenure-track faculty members could then decide whether they want end-of-semester evaluations from this semester included in their tenure dossiers, and whether they want students in classes taught this semester to be solicited for retrospective letters at the time of reappointment or tenure. The members of the

Consultative Group had said that they would prefer an “opt-in” system for teaching evaluations this semester, rather than an “opt out,” as is currently the case. They feel that the common teaching evaluation will not be useful this semester. Provost Epstein suggested that the committee might want to re-think its previous decision, based on this feedback. The members decided to discuss this matter further after the meeting that the committee would have with all tenure-track faculty immediately after the committee’s meeting. It was agreed that it might be useful to revisit this topic, as well as the grading policy, at the virtual meeting of chairs of academic departments and programs, which would take place on April 10.

Under “Questions from Committee Members,” Professor Basu noted that it would be helpful for the committee to discuss the issues on which it should focus for the remaining weeks of the semester. It was agreed that the members would take up this topic at a future meeting. Professor Goutte next inquired once again about the timing of the decision regarding whether summer research programs will take place this summer. Provost Epstein responded that she does not anticipate such programs taking place on campus; remote programs may be possible, perhaps for six weeks. She anticipates having a better sense by the end of April.

Concluding questions, Professor Brooks asked President Martin if she plans to make a statement on behalf of the college about incidents of COVID-19-related anti-Asian racism that are increasing across the United States during the pandemic. Referencing the fact that two Amherst students who live on campus have been the targets of verbal assaults in the town of Amherst, and that there have been reports of racist language in the college’s dorms and on social media platforms, Professor Brooks also wondered what steps have been taken to protect Amherst students from such acts of violence. President Martin said that she had plans to address both of these important issues ([she issued a statement](#) the next day).

In light of recent very troubling incidents (including the one just described), and noting the college’s commitment to diversity and inclusion and the many steps that Amherst has taken to foster diversity and inclusion on campus, the members had a wide-ranging conversation about how the college can best continue to address issues of racism on campus. The members began the discussion by applauding the extraordinary leadership that President Martin has demonstrated in this realm throughout her presidency. It was agreed that this is an issue that should be addressed by the entire college community, and that the faculty should play an important role in deliberations about changes in college policy and discussions with students. The remainder of the meeting was devoted to personnel matters.

The meeting adjourned at 4:00 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Epstein  
Provost and Dean of the Faculty