

The twenty-first meeting of the Committee of Six for the academic year 2020–2021 was called to order by President Martin via Zoom at 2:00 P.M. on Thursday, December 10, 2020. 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.

The meeting began with President Martin noting that four students have asked to speak at the December 15 faculty meeting to express concerns about the proposal to delay the start of the spring 2021 semester. Provost Epstein said that she would prefer that Jeremy Thomas '21, president of the Association of Amherst Students (AAS), and other students find ways to gather a broad sense of student sentiment about this issue, rather than allowing three or four students who hold the same views to speak at a faculty meeting. President Martin commented that the COVID-19 student advisory group supports delaying the start of the spring semester, recognizing that health and safety should be the priority. The president said that most of the emails that she has received from students about this issue have focused on the impact that the delay would have on them because of the leases that some students have signed to live off campus. She noted that the college is prepared to have students who have nowhere else to go between February 1 and February 15 return to campus early, and said that there would be a petition process to do so if the revised calendar is approved. The committee agreed that it would be preferable not to have the students speak at the faculty meeting, but to try to learn more about any broad concerns that students may have about delaying the start of the spring semester. President Martin said that she would inform the AAS president and ask that he encourage students to send their reasons for opposing a later start.

The members next reviewed some additional demographic information to inform their discussion of the results of the staff survey. They had requested the data to try to determine whether there are any patterns relating to issues that had been raised and respondents' race, ethnicity, and/or gender. It was noted that, overall, male respondents seem more satisfied with their jobs at Amherst than female respondents, and that the survey had drawn more responses from women as a whole. The provost noted that there are more female than male staff overall. The members wondered whether anyone has tried to learn more about the views of staff who had declined to respond to the survey. The provost said that she does not believe so. Another interest was in whether the polling company could provide better infographics than the large, somewhat unwieldy, and difficult-to-interpret table. Some members said that they would like to learn more specific results about particular divisions or departments. It was noted, however, that when broken down in this way, the numbers would likely often be too small to make inferences based on them. Privacy concerns could also be raised.

Continuing the conversation, Provost Epstein was asked what the role of the Committee of Six is vis-à-vis thinking about ways to address the concerns that had been raised. Provost Epstein said that it is her hope that the committee will help brainstorm about possible interventions. The members also wondered if staff have been asked what they want and need in order to address their concerns. Provost Epstein said that, through their commentary in the survey, staff have conveyed specifics about interactions with faculty members in which there has been a lack of respect on the part of professors. After the first staff survey, she had read a list of staff concerns to the faculty as a whole at a faculty meeting, and at a meeting of the chairs of academic departments and programs. Raising awareness seems to have made little difference, based on the survey results, the provost noted. Incidents range from faculty not responding to staff emails to demanding that their needs be met immediately and insisting that they be treated differently because they are faculty.

Professor Trapani asked if it is possible that staff have experiences of this kind with a small number of faculty, who may be having an impact on many staff, or whether the behavior that had been described is pervasive. Conversation returned briefly to the importance of providing chairs of academic departments with robust training on how to work with and supervise staff, a topic that had been discussed in more detail at a previous meeting. The committee asked if the new Workday system might be a positive influence in relation to some of the issues that staff have identified. President Martin said that, in some

ways, she expects that it will, as there will be greater clarity about the roles and responsibilities surrounding many administrative processes. The members also commented that, if faculty do not have clarity on staff roles and/or job descriptions, then they may unknowingly be requesting things that fall outside areas of staff members' responsibility. It was also noted that more needs to be done about the issue of some faculty not respecting staff and making some staff feel undervalued. The remainder of the meeting was devoted to personnel matters.

The meeting adjourned at 3:30 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Epstein
Provost and Dean of the Faculty