

The eighteenth meeting of the Committee of Six for the academic year 2021–2022 was called to order by President Martin via Zoom at 2:30 P.M. on Monday, February 21, 2022. Present via Zoom, in addition to the president, were Professors Clotfelter, Manion, Martini, Schroeder Rodríguez, Umphrey, and Vaughan; Provost and Dean of the Faculty Epstein; and Associate Provost Tobin, recorder.

The meeting began with the provost—following up on questions asked by Professor Vaughan the previous week—sharing information about the status of hiring in the area of information technology at the college. Provost Epstein informed the members that David Hamilton, chief information officer, has told her that he is about to hire a technology operations specialist and a technology services operations manager. The searches for these positions took longer than anticipated, unfortunately. In addition, interviews are about to begin for the position of associate chief information officer, D. Hamilton informed the provost. In other hiring news, recruitment of a high-performance computing administrator is presenting some challenges, and D. Hamilton said that he is exploring ways to attract a more robust application pool. Unfortunately, two more IT staff members (the assistant to the chief information officer and the IT accessibility specialist) have left the college. The assistant position has been posted and has generated a good pool of candidates, and the IT accessibility specialist position will be listed this month. D. Hamilton has also requested an additional position (systems administrator/integrator) to support IT's work on cybersecurity; in addition, he has asked for a permanent appointment for an academic technology specialist that was originally a term appointment, with the goal of bolstering support for the use of technology in teaching and research.

Under “Questions from Committee Members,” Professor Vaughan thanked Provost Epstein for providing this update and then commented on another topic—the rising number of students who have tested positive for COVID-19. He suggested that the provost remind the faculty about strategies for supporting students in their courses who are in isolation. The provost said that she would be happy to resend the email on this topic that she had shared with the faculty prior to the start of the spring semester, which would serve as a reminder. She noted that the most helpful action that faculty can take is to let students know how absences and missed work will be addressed during the period in which students cannot attend class. Many students in isolation are feeling anxious about their academic performance while they are in isolation, the provost noted. She also informed the members that the library would soon be providing suggestions regarding how best to provide reserve material to students in isolation. The members agreed that it is very important that faculty communicate their policies (perhaps via Moodle) to their students, as well as how students can expect to be supported while they are in isolation. (The provost later sent two emails on this subject to the faculty, [one on February 23](#) and [the other on February 25](#).)

Continuing with questions, Professor Umphrey inquired, on behalf of a colleague who has been receiving questions on the subject from students, whether Amherst will make medical abortions available to students and whether the college's insurance will cover this medication. The University of Massachusetts has begun doing so, it was noted, and the *Amherst Student* ran [a piece](#) on this issue. The provost said that she would contact Dr. Emily Jones, director of student health services, and report back to the committee about what she learns.

Turning to another matter, Professor Manion expressed frustration with the college's current data system for tracking whether students have met major and graduation requirements and prerequisites for courses in which they might want to enroll. She noted that the system is cumbersome and archaic and creates challenges for advisors and students, who need this information to be readily accessible. Given that Workday Student is not yet in place, she wonders whether some interim solution might be found, suggesting the use of Google forms, for example, to support the next round of registration. Provost Epstein said that, while Workday will not be a panacea, it is expected to address many of these issues. Putting an interim system in place does not seem workable to her, but she said that she would consult with Jesse Barba, director of institutional research and registrar services, and, if the committee

wishes, would invite him to the next meeting to discuss this issue. The members agreed that it would be helpful to learn more from J. Barba about the possibility of making use of an interim system and the status of Workday Student. Professor Martini said that she had been impressed with some aspects of Workday Student after seeing a preview of some of its features, and said that she is hopeful that the new system will be an improvement. At the same time, she noted that she has found Workday to be a challenge when using the system for some administrative processes. The provost said that the college is continuing to address issues surrounding the implementation of Workday, including considering new strategies to support the administrative work of academic departments that might include new staffing models.

Continuing with questions, Professor Schroeder Rodríguez suggested that [a letter that the committee had received from Professor Rangan](#), which focuses on the service burden of serving as the chair of an academic program, be discussed when the committee next discusses the topic of service. The members agreed.

Discussion turned to the topic of the proposal to divide the Committee of Six into two separate committees—a faculty executive committee and a tenure and promotion committee—and to transform the committee structure more broadly. Most members agreed that views expressed in the committee-of-the-whole conversation at the February 15 faculty meeting suggested that there is support for dividing the Committee of Six, but that more time should be taken to consider possible changes to the committee structure as a whole, particularly in regard to eliminating some major committees. In addition, the members noted that, at the meeting, some tenure-track professors had spoken eloquently to the idea of having a faculty executive committee with broader representation, a possible outcome if the review of reappointment, tenure, and promotion cases is no longer part of the charge of the executive committee. The members agreed that dividing the Committee of Six presents an opportunity to make it feasible for tenure-track faculty to serve on the executive committee and that having broader representation on the executive committee is a worthy goal.

Professor Clotfelter expressed the view that, if the proposal that is brought forward is to split the Committee of Six for a trial period of three years, proposals for broader changes to the committee structure should wait until this period is over and the experiment is assessed. Most members felt that the take away from the discussion at the faculty meeting was that some faculty feel that committees should not be dissolved, but rather the work of committees should be reimagined so that committees can have more of an impact. If an executive committee is created, it could be tasked with taking a careful look at what committees are doing, before any proposal for change is made. Most members agreed that this would be the best approach. The Committee of Six's focus now, most members felt, should be on developing a charge for the Tenure and Promotion Committee. In addition, the committee noted that it would be useful for the Committee of Six at this time to consider changes to the ways in which faculty meetings are conducted, with the goal of creating new approaches that could encourage a broader range of voices to be heard. Professor Schroeder Rodríguez suggested that one approach to gather more feedback from the faculty body might be to use straw polls when considering proposals.

Professor Manion agreed with the other members' view that a proposal to split the Committee of Six should be brought forward at this time, but also thought that the committee should move forward with proposals for further changes and bring them to a vote before the faculty. She argued that there is overwhelming evidence that many faculty members find committee service, in its current form, to be a waste of time. Other members emphasized that they do not think that the work of transforming the committee structure should be abandoned, but that, if such work is undertaken, it requires a more sustained period of deliberation and consultation, in order to be educative and successful and to gain the support of the faculty. Most members felt that charging the executive committee to undertake this effort would lead to the best outcome.

Agreeing with Professor Manion, President Martin commented that creating the impression that a

small number of voices can carry the day, without more meaningful conversation by the body, can limit the effectiveness of faculty governance. As the president had said at the meeting, she was dismayed by the discourse that had characterized the proposal to relieve the faculty's service burden as an attempt by the administration to take power away from the faculty. In her view, it would be best to engage in further conversation about the proposal for a new committee structure by bringing a proposal forward. Of course, the decision is up to the Committee of Six, she noted.

Continuing the conversation, Professor Umphrey agreed that it would be valuable to have more conversation about the role that faculty should play in thinking about areas such as admission and athletics, for example, given the history of the faculty's contributions to considering these and other issues. While the faculty may not have decision-making authority in some areas, it continues to be important for the faculty to have venues in which to foreground its values and to weigh in effectively, she commented. Professor Clotfelter said that he thinks that the focus now should be on bringing a proposal forward to split the Committee of Six, which will involve ironing out the details. Before proposals are brought forward to decommission major committees, he would like to learn more about the role that the faculty plays on these committees. Other members agreed, and noted that the question of how faculty are best informed about significant matters at the college should be considered. It was noted that, historically, through work on committees, faculty have effected change; Professor Martini offered the example of the work of faculty members on the Committee on Priorities and Resources that had led to the current policy on parenting leave for faculty members, which has had a significant positive impact. Professor Manion commented that, if a faculty member has not served on a major committee, the individual would not know how the committee functions. While she learned a great deal from serving on the Faculty Committee on Admission and Financial Aid (FCAFA), for example, she reiterated her view that other ways of informing more faculty about the admission process would be preferable to having a small number of faculty serving on the FCAFA spend hours in committee meetings when they play no role in decision-making. President Martin suggested that the committee might want to consider a future model in which there would be a small number of standing committees, among them—a faculty executive committee and a tenure and promotion committee—giving the executive committee the authority to charge ad hoc committees, as issues arise. The charges of such ad hoc committees could be precisely defined and would be a workable substitute for standing committees, in her view. Swarthmore uses this model, she noted.

Returning briefly to the topic of improving the ways in which faculty meetings are conducted, Professor Schroeder Rodríguez commented that the rigid interpretation of Robert's Rules of Order is not serving the faculty well. He asked if there might be a way of limiting comments by a speaker to two or three minutes, for example, so more voices can be heard. He also reiterated his proposal that straw polls be used, suggesting that a poll on the question of splitting the Committee of Six would have changed the course of the conversation at the February 15 meeting. Responses to a simple "yes" or "no" question would have generated a sense of the faculty's views on the issue quickly and efficiently, he noted. In his view, the committee should consider the issue of the kind of space that the faculty wants to create for conversation, striving to find ways to foster community, rather than confrontation. The other members agreed. In regard to time limits specifically, President Martin said that the faculty would have to vote to set such limits. She commented that other presidents whom she has consulted about the use of Robert's Rules at faculty meetings all said that their institutions do not adhere so precisely to Robert's rules. She agreed that the tenor of discussions at Amherst faculty meetings can be demoralizing, particularly for administrators who may be singled out for criticism, and when the administration as a whole is treated with contempt. In regard to commentary of this kind at the February 15 meeting, Professor Martini noted that the idea that the administration and the board of trustees have a history of rejecting proposals from the faculty is an uncommon occurrence. In her experience, proposals brought forward by faculty committees are regularly dismissed by the faculty on

the floor of faculty meetings.

In preparation for drafting a charge for the Tenure and Promotion Committee, the members discussed some details about the possible makeup, terms, and selection process for this body. It was noted that a model that maintains continuity with the Committee of Six in regard to makeup and terms of the new committee could be desirable. This would mean that there would be six tenured professors serving. It was noted that if there were only four members, one from each division, for example, the number of members considering some personnel cases could be too small—when candidates from some of the members' departments were standing. Some system of selecting an alternate might be possible in such a circumstance, however. The question of whether to adopt a selection process that would ensure representation across the humanities, social sciences, sciences, and arts was also discussed. It was noted that such representation has typically occurred organically through the Committee of Six election, without imposing a process to ensure disciplinary distribution. Another model—the so-called “elect/select procedure—was also considered as a possible way of constituting the committee. Under this process, a slate of faculty would be elected, and then the Faculty Executive Committee would choose from among those who had been elected to serve, filling in any gaps in terms of discipline and other forms of diversity, perhaps, as needed. The members considered questions such as what the criteria might be for selecting from the elected individuals and what would be done if some or all of those who were elected felt that they were overburdened with other work.

The committee also discussed whether members of both committees should have course releases and also whether course releases should be a feature of chairing a major committee such as the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP). Views varied on this question, since the workload of the separate committees, particularly the committee that would focus on the reappointment, tenure, and promotion, would not be consistent. One idea would be to have a threshold for course release for that committee that would be based on the number of personnel cases in a given year. Another suggestion was to provide one course release to members during their term on either of the two committees, to be taken in the heaviest semester in regard to workload, or to provide course releases only to those who would chair the committees, if it is decided that there should be chairs. The provost pointed out that course releases are very expensive, something that should be considered. In addition, removing the number of courses from the curriculum that would be required to grant the number of course releases under discussion would increase the workload of other faculty, in order to make the needed number and kind of courses available to students.

Continuing the discussion, Professor Umphrey stressed the importance of not increasing the service burden of faculty leaders by taking away course releases, unless the workload of the committees is lightened and meetings are less frequent than they are now. Professor Manion agreed with Professor Umphrey about the importance of not taking away course releases for this important work. If course releases were not available for everyone, she wonders if faculty serving on these committees could be compensated in ways other than those in which chairs of academic departments are. It was agreed that the committee should develop a draft motion, based on today's conversation, as a starting point for honing the details of the proposal for a charge for the committee that will focus on faculty personnel process.

The members next reviewed proposals for senior sabbatical fellowships. Following a brief discussion, the committee voted to forward them to the board of trustees for ratification. The members then turned to personnel matters.

The meeting concluded with a brief discussion of [a draft proposal, not yet finalized, from the CEP to revise the college's Latin honors system](#). [In a note from Professor Burkett, chair of the CEP](#), she requests that the Committee of Six provide feedback on the draft proposal. Learning the committee's views would inform the final proposal that the CEP would bring forward, she noted. Provost Epstein said that the proposal seeks to address a concern surrounding the use of a GPA cut-off that is based on class rank,

as measured by a student's cumulative GPA relative to the student's classmates, as one of the criteria for Latin honors. Under the CEP's proposal, the class rank criterion would be replaced with two college-level requirements for receiving summa or magna honors—achieving a fixed grade cut-off based, for example, on students having a median grade such as A or above (summa) or A-minus or above (magna) and satisfying a “modest breadth requirement.” The letter of recommendation for honors from students' departments would be retained as a feature of the requirements for Latin honors. The provost commented that removing the class rank criterion would enable departmental recommendations to play more of a role in awarding Latin honors, and likely would result in more students achieving summa and magna honors. Preventing honors inflation would largely be left to departments, under the proposal, she noted. Adding the breadth requirement would represent a college-wide requirement for achieving honors. Professor Manion expressed support for removing the cut-off based on class rank, expressing the view that doing so will improve teaching and learning. Some members expressed concern about the implementation of the proposal, wondering, for example, whether there might be consequences that still need to be thought through. It was noted that the breadth requirement would require that each course be assigned to a discipline, and that someone review students' transcripts to ensure that they have met the requirement. Provost Epstein noted that the idea would be that all faculty would need to tag their courses as representing one of the defined categories. Each course could satisfy only one breadth requirement. Professor Umphrey, noting that the current system for Latin honors was put in place because the faculty had been concerned that too many students were earning Latin honors, expressed some concern that the current proposal, if implemented, might reproduce the problem. She suggested that the numeric median grade be higher than what has been proposed, which would have the effect of making it a little harder to achieve summa and magna honors. She also expressed some concern that, since most students would meet the median-grade requirement, the breadth requirement feels a bit like a de facto distribution requirement. Professor Umphrey finds the idea of creating a backdoor to closing the open curriculum to be problematic, she said. The members agreed to continue their discussion of the proposal at their next meeting.

The meeting adjourned at 5:00 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Epstein
Provost and Dean of the Faculty