

The twenty-fourth meeting of the Committee of Six for the academic year 2020–2021 was called to order by President Martin via Zoom at 3:30 P.M. on Tuesday, February 2, 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.

The meeting began with Provost Epstein informing the members that, with the support of President Martin, she has engaged a consultant, Susan Pierce, to help think through issues surrounding shared governance at the college. The provost said that conversations that she has had with associate professors have revealed that many at this career stage do not find college service to be meaningful or useful. She was disappointed to learn that most of these colleagues seem to view service as a burden, rather than as a rewarding way to contribute to the life of the college and to have an impact. The provost noted that, having spent their first seven years at Amherst focused mainly on teaching and scholarship, associate professors return to campus after their sabbaticals and are expected to play more robust roles in terms of governance and other service. At the same time, many senior Amherst faculty members who had been deeply involved in college service for decades have retired. The president and provost agreed that it would be helpful to have an outside consultant interview faculty about shared governance at the college, given the views that colleagues have expressed, and the transition that has occurred in the faculty in recent years.

The provost noted that she and President Martin have each had a preliminary conversation with Ms. Pierce and were impressed with her experience and expertise, and her approach to considering this issue. The consultant has now been asked to make recommendations about how best to move forward to ensure that faculty time on service is being used most effectively—that is, in ways that have the most purpose and value—and to support faculty in balancing service with their other critical responsibilities.

Continuing, Provost Epstein informed the members that plans call for Ms. Pierce to begin her work by having a Zoom conversation with each member of this year’s Committee of Six, to learn about what members think works well, and what needs to be improved, in regard to service. Over the coming weeks, the consultant will also talk with previous members of the Committee of Six, chairs of key faculty committees, other faculty at all ranks, chairs of academic departments and programs, the faculty equity and inclusion officers, and many others at the college, including administrators who support the academic mission of the college. The committee expressed support for this effort.

Provost Epstein noted that another goal of this exercise will be to consider more ways of making the service of the faculty visible, including at the departmental level, where a good deal of “invisible” service now takes place. The provost noted that Amherst appears to be the only school among its peers that does not require that faculty submit an annual report of their activities. She feels that this might be a helpful mechanism to adopt, as it could contribute to greater transparency about how faculty are spending their time, including how much time they are devoting to service. On a related note, Professor Manion commented that, for many colleagues, it is not clear what service “counts” for reappointment, tenure, and promotion. Provost Epstein said that all service is considered as part of these processes. She is aware, however, that some faculty are frustrated that some service—for example advising—does not seem to be recognized.

Concluding the conversation, the provost said that it is her hope that service can be reconceived so that it does not feel like it is a burden. President Martin pointed out that there is a difference between governance and service. She feels that it will be very helpful to consider whether faculty are engaged in thinking about things at a strategic level, rather than being drawn into the weeds—which she has observed is sometimes the case at the college. The provost expects that Ms. Pierce will share her insights about service at the college this spring.

Under “Questions from Committee Members, Professor Manion noted the uptick in COVID-19 cases among students recently, and she asked if the college has adjusted its planning accordingly. President Martin responded that most students who have tested positive for the virus in recent days live in town; they are allowed to come to campus only for the purpose of being tested (which is conducted at special

times just for off-campus students). The college has learned that about twenty Amherst students who live near one another in two houses, and who interact, have been infected, or have been exposed. Amherst has informed the town manager about these positive cases, and public-health officials are conducting contact tracing.

Conversation turned to a draft of a charge for the ad hoc committee that will consider the evaluation of teaching at Amherst, which will be appointed this spring and begin its work in the next academic year. The members suggested some edits to the document, while approving most of the content. It was agreed that the committee would discuss the charge again once the members' revisions had been incorporated.

The members next discussed draft guidelines for the administration of the common form to evaluate classroom teaching that had been proposed by last year's Committee of Six. Last year's committee supported the development of a consistent process that would be used across departments to introduce the purpose and importance of teaching evaluations, and had begun work on this issue, the provost said. She commented that departments appear to have varying levels of enthusiasm for standardizing the processes surrounding the administration of teaching evaluations, while noting that tenure-track faculty members feel strongly that, as a matter of equity, all departments should follow the same practices. A related issue is finding ways, across departments, to ensure high student response rates—a critical part of the evaluation process. In regard to this latter issue, Professor Trapani expressed the view that adopting a college-wide policy of withholding grades until evaluations are submitted would be an effective approach.

The committee agreed that framing the purpose of the evaluation process in a consistent way is critical. It was also noted that many students are not aware of the importance that is placed on student evaluations as part of the reappointment and tenure processes, and about these faculty personnel processes themselves. The members felt strongly that information about reappointment and tenure should be a part of the messaging that is provided to students in advance of the evaluation process. The committee agreed that the ways in which bias can enter into the process of the evaluation of teaching should also be discussed with students. In addition, some members expressed the view that students should be informed that, beyond the evaluative purpose of their evaluations, student feedback is often very helpful to faculty as a way of gauging whether their pedagogy is meeting their goals, and/or should be adjusted in order to improve learning outcomes.

In anticipation of the conversation about the guidelines for administering teaching evaluations, the members had watched a short video that had been prepared last year as a way to introduce the purpose and importance of teaching evaluations to students. While agreeing that the video format could be useful, the committee expressed some concerns about aspects of the proposed video. The members asked the provost to convey some recommendations for improving this tool, and she agreed to do so. It was also noted that, in addition to having guidelines for departments' administration of teaching evaluations, it will be important to develop a comparable document for students, to provide the information that the members had discussed. The committee suggested that, perhaps, the Center for Teaching and Learning could be asked to help draft student guidelines, which the committee would review.

The remainder of the meeting was devoted to personnel matters.

The meeting adjourned at 5:00 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Epstein
Provost and Dean of the Faculty