

The twenty-fifth 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, February 4, 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 a lengthy discussion of a personnel matter, after which the committee turned to “Questions from Committee Members.” Professor Umphrey asked if there is any possibility that rising seniors could study abroad in the fall and still pursue honors work that is required to take place over two semesters. If, for example, they register in January term for honors courses, as well as in the spring, would it be possible to consider this two semesters? Provost Epstein said that she would consult with the registrar about this approach.

Conversation turned to the Jeffrey B. Ferguson Memorial Teaching Prize. In the past, current Amherst faculty and students, and alumni who graduated from the college within the last twenty years have been invited to make nominations for the award. The inaugural Karen and Brian Conway ’80, P’18 Presidential Teaching Professor at the college, Jeff Ferguson taught in the Department of Black Studies and in the Department of American Studies for more than two decades. The Ferguson Prize is awarded annually to two Amherst faculty members who see teaching as an art and vocation, engage in pedagogical innovation in their courses, have a significant impact in their department or program and on the broader curriculum, help students develop foundational skills in the finest liberal arts tradition, inspire students and colleagues alike to cultivate the life of the mind, and have a lasting impact on students’ intellectual and personal development. Current tenured faculty members, senior lecturers, and senior resident artists who have been at the college for at least ten years are eligible for the prize. Recipients give public talks focusing on teaching at or around homecoming and receive an honorarium of \$5,000. Nominations submitted in previous years are considered when making decisions in the current year.

Provost Epstein explained that last year’s Committee of Six had suggested that it would be helpful to make some refinements to the process of nominating colleagues for the prize and selecting prize recipients. Issues that had been raised included whether the Committee of Six should continue to select the recipient of the prize. It had been agreed that, if the Committee of Six functions as the selection committee, current Committee of Six members would not be eligible for the prize while they served on the committee. Last year’s committee had also begun a discussion of the criteria that should be used to decide on the recipients of the prize and possible ways of strengthening the nomination process, with the goal of garnering rich and robust commentary about the ways in which candidates exemplify Professor Ferguson’s pedagogical values and practices, and transformative teaching. Last year’s committee had agreed that a significant criterion for selecting the winners of the prize should be the curricular impact that faculty members have had across the faculty and the college, in addition to excelling in the classroom and as mentors. This approach, it had been noted, would honor Professor Ferguson’s own contributions to the curriculum and his work helping other faculty members think about how to design courses that would build intellectual skills through the study of content that spanned the disciplines.

The current members shared many of the concerns pointed out by last year’s Committee of Six; they felt that it would be important to clarify what qualities and accomplishments might distinguish an Amherst faculty member as an excellent teacher, and as someone who has had a major pedagogical impact on the curriculum. Professor Trapani suggested revising the current nomination form to solicit this information more explicitly, with the goal of garnering more substantive responses. It was noted that, while faculty might be in a position to speak to the impact that a faculty member has had on the curriculum, current students and alumni likely would not have the information needed to do so. Alternatively, most faculty would not have experienced other colleagues’ teaching in the classroom over an extended period. Thus, the members wondered whether the questions on the nomination form should be tailored to the different constituencies. Professor Manion suggested that faculty be asked to

nominate fellow faculty, replicating the approach of professional societies. Once a short list of nominees emerged, a portfolio of commentary from other faculty, students, and alumni could be assembled. Some members wondered whether current students should continue to be asked to participate in the process, as they already give a teaching award through an Association of Amherst Students process. Discussion also focused on whether one award recipient should be selected each year, rather than two, and whether the current eligibility criteria for faculty should be expanded to include faculty at all ranks—with no restriction on years of service at the college. In regard to making one award annually, with a prize of \$10,000, it was suggested that half be awarded for the recipient's personal use and half be awarded to support the recipient's pedagogical and curricular endeavors. At the conclusion of the discussion, it was agreed that President Martin should think further about the award and share her views of possible changes with the members at a future meeting.

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