

The twenty-sixth meeting of the Committee of Six for the academic year 2020–2021 was called to order by President Martin via Zoom at 2:30 P.M. on Monday, February 8, 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 “Questions from Committee Members.” Professor Trapani shared a colleague’s concerns surrounding the recent communication to faculty that students who are already on campus will be required to be in quarantine until February 19, at the earliest, once students who are traveling to Amherst to begin the spring term arrive on campus. The decision means that the work of some honors students in STEM, and their advisors, will be interrupted, which could have an impact on their ability to complete experiments and other research, the colleague conveyed. The faculty member is also concerned that very little notice was given about this shift in policy. Provost Epstein responded that the reason for the short notice was that the college had not made this decision until just recently, after weighing current health information and considering risks. The worry is that newly arrived students could expose students who are already on campus to the virus, and could also put faculty and staff at risk, including in the science center. The provost said that Jack Cheney, associate provost and associate dean of the faculty, will be working with the Science Center Steering Committee to identify those honors students for whom it is critical to continue to be able to have access to the science center. Every effort will be made to accommodate these students, Provost Epstein said, while noting the expectation that there will be a small number of students who meet the criteria for having access to the science center during the quarantine period. Professor Trapani thanked the provost for initiating this review process. Continuing to convey the concerns of the faculty member, he then noted that the colleague is experiencing frustration, more generally, over last-minute announcements of decisions. This trend is having an impact on the ability to make plans, according to the colleague. The president commented that the health of the community is the college’s top priority, and that decisions are being made in response to the course that the pandemic takes. At the same time, she agreed that thinking further about communication strategies, including how best to share information with different campus constituencies as soon as possible after decisions are made, would be helpful.

Continuing with questions, Professor Kingston asked how likely it will be that classes will need to be taught remotely beyond the first week of the semester. President Martin responded that the college will need to see how many students test positive for the virus during the first week of classes. Each student will be required to have a negative test result at home before traveling to campus, which should help minimize the number of cases the president said. The college has also ordered rapid antigen test kits, which should be another useful screening tool, she said. The president commented that she will be surprised if there will be a need to extend the quarantine period, but that everyone will need to wait and see how things unfold.

The committee next engaged in a brief discussion about the ad hoc committee that the members expect to charge with making recommendations about how best to obtain feedback about teaching effectiveness at Amherst. 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