

The thirty-first meeting of the Committee of Six for the academic year 2019–2020 was called to order by President Martin via Zoom at 3:30 P.M. on Monday, June 1, 2020. Present, in addition to the president, were Professors Basu, Brooks, Goutte, Horton, Schmalzbauer, and Sims; Provost and Dean of the Faculty Epstein; and Associate Provost Tobin, recorder.

Under “Topics of the Day,” the committee noted the moving and elegant virtual celebration of graduating seniors that had taken place on May 31. President Martin praised Amherst’s special events team, which had created the event, and expressed the college’s gratitude to all who had participated in making the event so special. The committee expressed its admiration and appreciation for the President’s remarks at the celebration and for the letter, titled “[Racism, Truth, and Responsibility](#),” that she had sent to the college community following the festivities.

Turning to another topic, President Martin informed the members that she had recently received a letter from one of the leaders of the Black Student Union (BSU) asking if the college would be interested in partnering with the BSU to provide support to a non-profit organization dedicated to combatting racism through education and other efforts. President Martin noted that, while she personally would make a donation to such a project, the college, as a non-profit entity, may face barriers to providing funds to another non-profit organization. She said that she would consult with the Office of the General Counsel and the chief financial and administrative officer and then would explore the possibilities for engaging in a project with the BSU. Some members, who said that they would also make a personal donation if asked, suggested that there could be an invitation to the college community to make a donation if other ways could not be found to support this effort. The committee expressed support for this idea. Professor Sims, noting the success of the recent virtual programs that had featured accomplished Amherst alumni discussing matters of contemporary interest, suggested that this venue might provide opportunities for the college to collaborate with the BSU to offer an educational experience focused on race and racism. President Martin said that planning is under way for additional virtual talks and expressed enthusiasm for convening a conversation about race and racism. The committee also expressed support for doing so. Professor Basu wondered if donations that have been given in honor of Professor Ferguson, or that might be sought in his name, might be directed to support the BSU’s idea. The president said that she would explore this possibility.

Under “Questions from Committee Members,” Professor Schmalzbauer noted the recent hiring of what appear to be very strong coaches. The president and provost agreed that the new coaches are impressive. Professor Schmalzbauer praised the work that Professor Hart, faculty diversity and inclusion officer (FDIO), and Don Faulstick, director of athletics, have been doing with the athletics department in the area of diversity of inclusion. The committee thanked Professor Hart and D. Faulstick for these efforts. Professors Goutte and Schmalzbauer, noting that June 1 was the deadline for students to inform the college whether they would be requesting a gap year, asked the provost how many students have done so. Provost Epstein responded that close to forty students had made a request as of earlier in the day. She noted that not very many current students have requested voluntary leaves, while noting that many students are likely waiting to learn more about the college’s plans for the format of teaching and learning next year, before making such requests.

Provost Epstein next discussed with the members a summary of students’ responses to a survey about their experiences with remote learning during the spring 2020 semester. The survey instrument, which was administered between May 13 and May 20, was developed in consultation with the senior staff and members of the Ad Hoc Faculty Committee on Academic Structures. The members agreed that many students’ impressions of their educational experience this spring provided critical views about their learning during this time, views that were often different from the faculty’s assessment, which was fairly positive. Provost Epstein said that it appears that, due to time constraints and for other reasons, some colleagues may not be able to engage in learning opportunities during the summer that will be available to support them as they prepare to teach courses in the remote and online environment. The provost explained that

the college has engaged 2U to provide support for mounting large virtual classes, and that Riley Caldwell O’Keefe director of the Center for Teaching and Learning, and Jaya Kannan, director of technology for curriculum and research, will be facilitating a curriculum designed by the Association of College and University Educators (ACUE) over the summer to cohorts of faculty members in groups of thirty or so.

Continuing the conversation, Provost Epstein commented that, while some Amherst faculty members have developed pedagogies that can be readily transferred to virtual teaching, many colleagues would benefit from these programs. The goal is to provide students with the best possible educational experiences, given that some courses (all courses with enrollments of thirty-five and over) will be taught virtually next year, even if students are on campus, she said. If students are not on campus, then all courses will be taught remotely. Professor Sims asked if the expectation is that faculty should be preparing to teach in multiple modes. The provost responded that faculty members who will be teaching large courses will need to prepare to teach them remotely, and other faculty will need to prepare courses in such a way that they could be taught in person, remotely, or as a combination of both formats. The provost noted that faculty will be asked to make decisions about participation in summer programs in two weeks, and that plans call for having short presentations on the programs at the next faculty meeting (which, later in the meeting, the members agreed should take place on June 9, beginning at 7:30 P.M.).

Provost Epstein noted that the focus of the programs will be to work with faculty on how content can be delivered most effectively in a remote environment, including how best to use the “live” portion of the class, and to develop activities of various kinds. The overall goal is to find ways to help students feel more connected to their professors and also to spend less time on Zoom. Professor Sims noted that she agrees that the student surveys clearly indicate the value of live teaching (whether in person or on Zoom). She stated that she hopes that 2U can facilitate opportunities for students to ask questions and interact in real time with their peers and professors. Professor Goutte, who had attended a focus-group session with 2U the previous week, expressed the view that the company may help some colleagues grapple with how to personalize large classes, an issue that is already under consideration in her department, and perhaps may provide some helpful on-site technical support, for example with lighting and microphones. While 2U may help improve some courses, Professor Goutte said, she does not believe that the company will help solve the biggest problems facing the college in regard to remote learning. These issues stem from students missing their community and the opportunities for shared study habits and motivation that it provides. In her view, the most beneficial step, as proposed by the Ad Hoc Faculty Committee on Academic Structures during COVID-19 (ASC), will be to reallocate faculty resources, in order to have smaller classes/sections and to allow students to interface with faculty to a greater degree. She is in favor of President Martin’s plans to install additional Adirondack chairs and wondered if they could be grouped together so that classes could come together outdoors and spend time together. Mending the fabric of the community will be very important in her view. The members agreed that the summary of the survey results indicates that students’ greatest criticism of the spring was the loss of a connection with their professors and the greatest desire was to be back on campus. The members also concurred that they had not been surprised by the results of the survey, as the views that are expressed replicate what they have heard from their students directly.

In regard to the apparent disparity between students and faculty members’ perceptions, Professor Brooks commented that faculty and students perhaps had very different expectations of what success in a remote environment would mean. Going forward, she feels that devising assignments that reduce the time that students stay on screens will be important, and she expressed enthusiasm for taking advantage of the outdoors, an approach that she has taken in the past. She suggested that the college consult with experts in outdoor education for ideas of how to integrate the study of the natural world—for example, studying Amherst’s sanctuary from different disciplinary perspectives—into courses. The sanctuary, which is a wonderful resource, is underutilized as an educational resource, in her view.

Turning to a related issue, Professor Basu said that many of the ASC’s recommendations stem from concern about the academic and emotional challenges that students experienced during the part of the

spring semester that they had spent away from campus. Professor Brooks concurred, commenting that college is so much more for students than just attending classes. It is clear, she noted, that students have felt the loss of the other aspects of the college experience—from their friends to co-curricular activities, which cannot be replicated in a remote environment. Professor Basu expressed hope that Amherst will move forward with the creation of a community hour, as the ASC has recommended, as a way of strengthening community and helping to restore students' sense of connection to the college. She expressed the view that Amherst should be thinking of ways to engage students in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities such as book clubs and games, some of which could have an intellectual component. It is her hope that faculty who are teaching remotely can find ways of interacting with students, either individually or in cohorts, outside of class. Provost Epstein said that R. Caldwell O'Keefe and J. Kannan, as part of their work, will offer strategies to faculty for how to engage further with students in a remote environment as part of courses. Departments may need to consider ways of connecting with students more broadly, she noted.

Continuing the conversation, Professor Horton commented that he finds the results of the survey, including the gap between students' and faculty members' perceptions of their experiences this spring, and students' views overall, to be sobering. The importance of live connections is clear, based on student responses. Professor Horton stressed the importance of providing as much information as possible about what the company can do for the faculty. The provost's description of the pedagogical support that would be offered to faculty by 2U is encouraging. Turning to another topic, he asked when the work of the ASC will be completed, as he worries about the timetable for getting plans in place for the next academic year and for informing the faculty. Provost Epstein said that the ASC will complete its work this week and will bring its final recommendations to the Committee of Six on Thursday or Friday. The members would be asked to vote on motions remotely or could have an additional meeting, if needed, she said. The motions will come before the faculty next Tuesday, June 9. Professor Horton asked if there are plans to meet with chairs to discuss the guidelines for departments that are presented in the ASC's report. Provost Epstein said that she has scheduled a chairs' meeting for this Friday, June 5, for this purpose.

Professor Horton next inquired if progress has been made on settling on a date for the start of the fall semester. Provost Epstein responded that the start of classes, regardless of whether they begin in person or remotely, is tentatively set for August 24. This is the date that should be used for planning purposes, though there is always the possibility that it may need to change. Plans call for this timeline, and some other updates regarding plans for the fall, to be announced tomorrow, she said ([an announcement was sent to the community on June 2](#)). This earlier start date will allow the college to hold as many classes and other activities as possible outdoors, which experts agree is safer than indoors, President Martin noted. Doing so will also provide unique learning experience at the same time, as Professor Brooks has noted, she said. Provost Epstein commented that, in an effort to schedule and encourage as many activities as possible—both academic and extracurricular—to take place outdoors, with proper distancing and safety protocols, the college has ordered twenty tents that will be equipped with power and whiteboards. The tents will be linked to classrooms so that faculty can use them when the weather allows and use assigned indoor spaces as well, as the weather permits, she noted. If students are able to return to campus as is hoped, the August 24 start date will permit thirteen weeks of instruction before students leave for the Thanksgiving break, Provost Epstein explained. Reading period and finals would take place remotely under this model.

On a related note in regard to teaching technologies, Professor Schmalzbauer commented that, when she had worn a mask recently at the outdoor protest that had taken place on the town common, her experience with speaking and listening had been challenging. Her own voice had been muffled, as had those with whom she was trying to speak. This experience has led her to wonder about how classroom discussions would be able to flow organically during in-person instruction, when everyone would be wearing masks. Provost Epstein said that she believes that colleagues in IT are investigating technology that might help, for example by amplifying voices, in both classrooms and tents. Her office will check with David

Hamilton, chief information officer, to learn more about IT's plans. (The provost later learned that the college is exploring other forms of masking, such as face shields and transparent masks, which may not help with sound issues, but would make it possible for faculty and students to see more of one another's faces.)

Continuing the discussion, Professor Basu asked whether policies will be developed in regard to teaching in person. Provost Epstein and President Martin reiterated that the expectation will be that faculty who are not bound by concerns about their age, do not have underlying health conditions, or do not live with someone with an underlying health condition will teach in person, when students return to campus. Provost Epstein said that she is aware that some faculty who are not in the categories mentioned above are uncomfortable with the idea of returning to campus to teach. The president and provost expressed hope that colleagues will feel more comfortable once they see the many steps that the college will take to keep the community as safe as possible. President Martin noted that the Office of the General Counsel and the Office of Human Resources may advise the college that faculty and staff be asked to provide a doctor's note if they will not return to in-person teaching. Such a note would need to convey that there is a medical reason that the individual should not work on campus, without providing any details about the reason why this is the case. There may be reasons surrounding equity that would offer an argument for taking this approach, the president said. Provost Epstein commented that the class schedule will be extended into the evening, providing greater flexibility for faculty members with caregiving responsibilities.

Professor Sims asked what information is available about how many faculty members are likely to be in each category. It was agreed that getting a sense of how many faculty would not be able to teach in person would be helpful for planning purposes, and the provost said that the college may survey the faculty to learn more. It would also be helpful for departments to gain a sense of how many colleagues would definitely be able to teach on campus or who definitely would not. Professor Goutte commented that she has observed that some staff members who were initially anxious about returning to campus are now more comfortable doing so, seeing the social distancing, masks, and cleaning policies that are now in place. President Martin said that essential staff members who also were anxious initially are also now more comfortable working on campus, she has been told. All acknowledged that the transition from sheltering in place to returning to campus may feel strange after being away for so long. Professor Brooks asked if departments should begin to have discussions about who will be teaching and how curricula might be mounted under various scenarios that might be in place next year, as well as the detailed departmental guidelines proposed by the ASC. Provost Epstein said that many departments have already begun such conversations, and she encourages all departments to do so.

Professor Basu next reviewed some recommendations that were outlined in the second iteration of the ASC's report, which the committee had received during its meeting. Professor Basu noted that the ASC had revisited a number of issues and had considered some new ideas, taking into account feedback received at the May 28 faculty meeting.

A good deal of conversation focused on the committee's second recommendation, which appears below:

Given the challenges the pandemic poses to student learning and success, all students are permitted and encouraged to enroll in three courses per semester during the 2020–2021 academic year. Students are encouraged to explore the curriculum further by enrolling in a course during the January term. Students who want to enroll in more than three courses during the fall or spring semester must receive approval from their advisors and class dean, following current procedures for enrolling in five courses. Students cannot enroll in fewer than three courses in a semester.

Professor Horton said that, while he is supportive of the flexibility that is provided by allowing students to carry three courses instead of four, he would prefer that the default be that students take four courses, and be permitted to take three if they choose to do so. The members also discussed whether it would be too

burdensome for students to get approval from both their class dean and their advisor, in order to get permission to take four courses (a point raised in [an email sent to the committee by Professor Bishop](#)). President Martin said that she continues to have concerns about making the default three courses, expressing the view that students might infer that the faculty does not feel that they would be capable of taking four courses, which she does not believe would be the case for many students. Professor Basu said that the ASC based its recommendations on reports that many students experienced stress this spring and found it hard to concentrate on their work. The idea is to reduce stress and to provide students with more time to work on each of the courses that they take, with the goal of helping them to be successful and to get the greatest educational benefit. Professor Basu said that the ASC is aware that many students would choose to take four courses anyway, because of the requirements of their majors or because they feel capable of doing so. “Normalizing” a three-course load would be best for struggling students, who might not take advantage of the option to take three courses otherwise, because of the pressure they place on themselves or anxiety that their professors and others might think less of them if they took a reduced course load, she noted.

Continuing the conversation, Provost Epstein commented that, under the proposal, any student who wishes to take four courses would certainly be able to do so. She believes that the process to get permission to do so would not be onerous in practice. The provost commented that the current proposal provides much-needed flexibility during what promises to be an uncertain time. Professor Horton suggested that a later drop deadline be established for the next academic year, in this way providing the flexibility for students to drop one of their four courses if they feel they become overburdened. Professor Sims agreed with President Martin that it is not a good idea to create barriers to taking four courses, and added that she is concerned that a petition system may impose additional work on the class deans and could pose a barrier, particularly for students who are less comfortable navigating the system, even though they may do very well in four classes. Professor Brooks suggested that, perhaps the recommendation should be that students consult with their advisors to arrive at the decision to take four courses.

Professor Schmalzbauer said that she views the proposal to shift to three courses as the default course load for next year to be compelling, while also supporting the proposal that students make the decision to take four courses in conversation with their advisors. Professor Basu said that she also favors having three courses be the normal load. In addition to the already articulated arguments for doing so, she feels it would be helpful to have this form of support in place, if the college brings students to campus and then needs to send them home suddenly because of the pandemic, as occurred this spring. Under such a scenario, she worries about the impact on students’ learning, particularly for students with difficult living situations in their homes. Professor Goutte said she thinks that reducing the minimum number of courses per semester to three is a good way to provide flexibility, but she feels that many students would elect to take more than three, especially in the sciences where some lab courses are now 1.5 courses. Professor Basu and Provost Epstein said that they would share the committee’s views with the ASC.

It was noted that President Martin would be meeting with the ASC the next day and could share her perspective about the proposal to make three courses the regular load at that time as well. (Following her meeting with the ASC, President Martin informed the members that she had been persuaded by the ASC’s thinking. Establishing three courses as a norm seems important as a matter of equity, given the disparities in student experiences that have been exposed, not only at Amherst, but across the country, she noted. The president said that members of the ASC had also explained that the support of advisers and deans is not meant as a barrier, but, instead, as yet another opportunity for students, who could be studying remotely, to have contact with faculty. It would also give faculty advisers and class deans the chance to check in, solidify the relationship, and help become part of building an early warning system, the president noted. Given language that establishes a norm, but also makes clear that a four-course load will be acceptable, she had changed her views on this issue, she said.)

Turning to the subject of caretakers, Professor Basu noted that the ASC has revised its proposals to support caretakers, in light of concerns that were expressed at the May 28 faculty meeting. Under the new proposal, with the approval of their department and the provost and dean of the faculty, faculty members could elect to reduce their teaching load by one course in academic year 2020–2021 if they take a reduction in pay (72 percent of their semester salary), or if they agree to teach an overload at a later time that is mutually convenient to the department and the faculty member. In addition, under the proposal, any faculty member could elect to teach one additional class as an overload course in academic year 2020–2021, so as to have a reduced teaching load at a later time that is mutually convenient to the department and the faculty member. (It was noted that Professor Fong had sent [a letter to the committee](#) outlining a similar approach. Both her letter and Professor Bishop’s had been shared with the ASC.) Professor Basu noted that some senior colleagues might elect to teach more courses now in order to provide curricular coverage that could enable untenured colleagues to teach fewer courses next year, if they wish to do so.

Professor Basu explained that, under the current proposal, faculty would indicate interest in either option (to teach more or teach less) via a uniform college-wide communication system, with the goal of ensuring equity and accessibility for all faculty, but especially for tenure-track faculty. She noted that some faculty members have requested that they not be put in the position of having to ask their department chairs for a course release. Professor Basu explained that, under the ASC’s proposal, faculty members would not be asked to defend or explain their need for either course release or course overload. This information would then be distributed to department chairs, the provost and dean of the faculty’s office, and the faculty diversity and inclusion officers. Departments would be asked to honor all requests by default, rejecting them only if it is untenable to mount their curriculum without the applicant teaching a full load.

Professor Goutte, while supporting the flexibility provided by the proposal, expressed concern about how requests for overloads would be handled. She feels that this strategy might be a desirable tool to garner additional time for research in a given semester, which could create challenges for departments in regard to mounting their curricula. She noted that, while the request to teach an additional course as an overload doesn’t require the approval of the provost and chair under the ASC’s proposal, it might be helpful to require that this be the case so that departments can plan accordingly, and minimize the number of overloads in any given semester. Overloads, should only be taken as needed, in her view. The other members agreed that this would be a good idea. The committee also suggested that those who wish to teach an overload have an initial conversation with an FDIO, so that the college could gain a sense of the reasons that faculty want to take this option. Provost Epstein also expressed support for this proposal, which she said she would share with the ASC. She also noted that faculty would not be allowed to combine two course releases during a given semester so as not to teach at all.

Continuing the conversation, Professor Basu noted that, under the proposal, all such arrangements would ultimately need to be approved by the department chair and the provost, after considering departmental curricular and staffing needs. She noted that departments, chairs, and/or individual faculty members would be encouraged to utilize and/or consult with the FDIOs, when needed, to arrive at arrangements that work for both departments and individual faculty members. Additionally, faculty who are uncertain about what teaching load is appropriate for them in the coming year would be encouraged to consult their faculty mentors and/or the FDIOs for guidance. Provost Epstein commented that, while FDIOs may seem principally to be designated advocates for faculty of color, their charge is to support all faculty members. She noted that, with the proposed centralized portal, information can be collected and distributed with greater efficiency, and that faculty who feel that they are experiencing challenges that necessitate a course release will be given a voice, and will have recourse, beyond their departments. Professor Brooks emphasized the importance of supporting colleagues who have caretaking responsibilities, and she asked if there will be a sufficient number of faculty available to mount the curriculum if a significant number of colleagues choose to have a reduced teaching load under the proposed options. Provost Epstein said that she does not think that a large number of faculty members will choose to reduce their teaching

loads via these options, which do come at some cost, unless they really need to do so. She noted that the ASC's departmental guidelines include the recommendation that departments consider lightening untenured faculty members' teaching loads through mechanisms such as co-teaching, and having tenured faculty take on most of the responsibilities of the course.

Professor Sims, who said that she feels that the proposed options offer important flexibility for caregivers, thanked the ASC for revisiting so thoughtfully the challenges being faced by caregivers. She noted that, if schools reopen in the fall, they may operate under a staggered schedule—for example, having children attend only two days a week. Such a schedule represents an immense change in what is normally provided by the public school system and would present challenges for many faculty parents. She asked whether the ASC could reconsider a course release for parents with children under the age at which they can be at home without adult supervision. She worries, in particular, about the difficulties that single parents of young children would face, as they would not have the support of a partner. Provost Epstein said that faculty who face very challenging situations would be asked to consult with an FDIO, and that the college would do the best that it could to be supportive. Professor Sims thanked the provost for being sensitive to the needs of parents.

Continuing the conversation, Professor Basu expressed the view that the ASC's current proposal to support caregivers is more generous and flexible than the previous one and reduces the need to make distinctions among caregiving roles. Professor Schmalzbauer also expressed support for the new proposal, while at the same time expressing some concern, based on her experience at her previous institution, about having faculty who take a course reduction "repay" the course later. She noted that, because the previous institution did not provide paid parental leave, many female faculty members took a course reduction when they had children, which, under the rules, had to be "paid back." Such courses became known colloquially as "punishment courses," and some stigma was attached to them. She is a little leery of this approach when she thinks about a likely gendered pattern in faculty teaching overloads in the future, and how these faculty would balance overloads with other service responsibilities. She also suggested that, if this policy is adopted, clear expectations be set about the time frame in which courses would have to be paid back, so that the payback burden does not weigh for too long.

Turning to the subject of the calendar for the next year, Professor Horton asked if there would be a break between the end of the four-week January term and the beginning of the spring semester. Professor Sims expressed the view that the faculty should be provided with more specifics about the calendar, in advance of voting on the adoption of a January term and an earlier start and end dates for the semester as a principle. Provost Epstein said that she anticipates that there would be at least a four-day break period between the end of the January term and the beginning of the spring semester. It will be important to have as much time as possible for this gap, as students will need to return to campus for the second semester under a staggered schedule, it was noted. Provost Epstein said that the faculty will not be asked to vote on a detailed calendar on June 9. Such a vote would take place during a future meeting in the summer or, more likely, via a vote as was used to determine the grading system for this past semester.

Professor Basu, noting that the ASC would not be weighing in on the grading system for the next year, asked the provost how she envisions consideration of this issue would occur. The provost expressed the view that next year's Committee on Educational Policy (CEP) and Committee of Six should develop a proposal that the full faculty would need to approve.

Professor Sims asked for clarification about advising loads under the ASC's proposal. The provost said that tenure-track faculty will not be given new college advisees, including first-years, under the plan, unless they have fewer than five major and college advisees. Faculty members who have more than twenty major and/or college advisees will not be asked to take on new college advisees.

The members returned briefly to the ASC's recommendations to the Committee of Six regarding faculty personnel processes, which the committee supported. Professor Sims asked if departments' annual conversations should include discussions with the candidate about the impact that COVID-19 has had on

their teaching and research. Provost Epstein said that it is a good idea for departments to have ongoing conversations with tenure-track colleagues about these issues. Professor Goutte stressed the importance of having departments explain to outside reviewers the impact that the pandemic had had on the research operations of candidates. The provost said that departments could certainly convey this information in their letters soliciting outside reviewers, who would also have some awareness of COVID-19's impact on the field, she imagines. Professor Goutte said that the language in the report might suggest to some that departments should be evaluating the impact of the pandemic on candidates. This was not the intention Provost Epstein said. In its departmental recommendation, the department is encouraged to describe the impact of the pandemic on the candidate, and the candidate is encouraged to do so in the candidate's letter to the Committee of Six, she noted.

Professor Brooks next asked if the committee could have a follow-up discussion at its next meeting about the listening session that had taken place at the May 21 faculty meeting. The members agreed that doing so would be informative.

Concluding the meeting, the members once again expressed its gratitude to the ASC for all of its hard work on the faculty and college's behalf.

The meeting adjourned at 4:50 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Epstein
Provost and Dean of the Faculty