

The twenty-ninth 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, March 1, 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 members turned first to a committee nomination. Provost Epstein then shared [a draft of a revised college Section 504 Grievance Procedure](#) with the committee. She noted that Amherst needs to have this procedure as a condition of its receipt of federal funding. The procedure that was in place previously placed too much of a burden on students, in particular, to prove their cases through the regular procedure for student grievances against faculty members, the provost explained. The primary substantive change in the revised procedure is to provide a clearer avenue for the college (via Jodi Foley, director of accessibility strategy and resources, or, if circumstances warrant, an outside investigator) to investigate these grievances. This procedure does not give Ms. Foley any disciplinary authority, the provost said, but establishes a fact-gathering role for her. Any subsequent discipline would still have to occur through the appropriate disciplinary procedures of the college. Professor Trapani asked if Ms. Foley still oversees the college's Office Accessibility Services. Provost Epstein responded that Ms. Foley has a new role at the college within the Office of the General Counsel. Larissa Hopkins is the new director of accessibility services. Professor Trapani said that he has found Ms. Hopkins to be an excellent resource and suggested that faculty be encouraged to get to know her. Provost Epstein said that Associate Provost and Associate Dean of the Faculty Austin Sarat has already organized a virtual gathering with faculty to introduce Ms. Hopkins and will host another event of this kind this spring. The members raised no questions about the draft of the procedure.

Under "Questions from Committee Members," Professor Umphrey asked if the provost would share information about the renovation of a college-owned house located at 197 South Pleasant Street. Provost Epstein noted that, coincidentally, plans call for Jim Brassord, chief of Campus Operations, and her to describe the project for members of the community at a virtual meeting the next day. She explained that a recent article in the *Daily Hampshire Gazette* had contained a number of inaccuracies. The provost said that the renovation of the house, which will include building an addition, will take place over the next two years. An adjacent college-owned house will be moved this spring as part of the project. Once the renovation is complete, the building will house the Center for Humanistic Inquiry on the first floor. The history department and faculty from some other humanities departments will occupy the second and third floors. The donor who is funding the majority of the project had a vision to create a lyceum that would foster intellectual exchange among humanities scholars, students, and the broader community. The building will also include facilities for public events, the provost said. It is expected to open at the start of the 2023–2024 academic year.

Discussion turned to [a revised calendar proposal for the next academic year](#) that was forwarded by the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP), informed by suggestions made by the Committee of Six the previous week. The members expressed support for this version of the calendar and agreed that it should be brought to the faculty for a vote on March 16. Provost Epstein noted that the CEP's course schedule for 2021–2022 should also be forwarded to the faculty for a vote at the same meeting. She explained that the proposed schedule will be workable as long as dining hours are expanded, which will accommodate the needs of student-athletes, in particular. It was noted that the date of pre-registration will need to be pushed back, since the faculty will not vote on the course schedule until March 16. The provost said that she would announce a new start date for pre-registration at the faculty meeting the next evening.

The committee next reviewed [another CEP proposal, this one focusing on replacing the college's 14.0 grading scale with a 4.33-point scale](#). The provost noted that most CEP members support retaining the grade of A-plus, thus the 4.33 scale. Provost Epstein explained that Amherst is an outlier among educational institutions, nationally, in not having a 4.0 scale, and that the question of whether or not to make a change to a new scale now was prompted by the implementation of Workday Student. If there is a desire to switch, this is the time to do so, the provost noted. She explained that the current grading

scale is not easily translatable for graduate schools and fellowship and internship applications, and that many students try to convert their GPAs to a 4.0 scale on their CVs, which can result in inaccuracies. In addition, at present, the registrar's office must convert the GPAs for some students for some purposes (e.g., for nomination forms for NCAA academic honors), but does not do so for all students. Under the proposal, the grading scale would be standardized for all students, creating greater equity. The committee expressed enthusiasm for changing to the new grading scale. Provost Epstein informed the members that, if approved, the change to the scale would be retroactive, that is, it would be used on all current students' transcripts, as well as those of alumni who request transcripts. The members raised some questions, largely focusing on the impact that the method of numerical rounding used in the GPA conversion process could have on the transcripts of some alumni. In particular, some members wondered whether the new numerical GPA might translate to a different letter value for the GPA, if a graduate's GPA is on the borderline of two grades. Some members wondered if the transcripts of alumni, using the current grading scale, could be archived in some way. The provost said that creating and maintaining an archive would place too much of a burden on staff and that it would be best to have a consistent system, but she said she would consult with Jesse Barba, director of institutional research and registrar services, about this issue. The members thanked the provost and were generally supportive of the proposal.

Discussion turned to the last [proposal sent to the committee by the CEP, which focused on phasing out the flexible grading option \(FGO\) and replacing it with a new pass/fail policy](#). Under the proposal, the deadline for the pass/fail declaration would be the last day of the final examination period. Students would still be limited to four pass/fail options (transfer students would have a lower quota based on their class standing at admission) and would be limited to one pass/fail per semester. Approval of the motion would also result in the prohibition of the use of a pass-fail for first-year seminars, the provost noted. Under the proposal, any FGOs used in spring 2020 and one FGO used in each term of the 2020–2021 academic year would not count toward the maximum number of pass-fails allowed during a student's time at the college. Pass-fails or FGOs used prior to spring 2020, or in addition to the one allowed for each term of 2020–2021, would count against each student's allotted number of pass-fails.

The members raised some questions about the CEP's proposal that students be prohibited from using a pass-fail option for any course in which they had been found responsible for academic dishonesty. The committee agreed that there is a lack of specificity in the proposed policy that would likely lead to challenges surrounding implementation and enforcement. Some members were uncomfortable with both the ambiguity of the language of this part of the policy as well as its spirit, noting that the emphasis seems to be punitive rather than educative. The committee wondered who would be responsible for determining whether a student was responsible for academic dishonesty. The members also commented that the forms of academic dishonesty that would result in the application of this policy were not specified, which they viewed as problematic, noting that there is a continuum in regard to the severity of infractions. Given the complexities involved, the members agreed not to include the academic dishonesty portion of the proposal as part of the motion that would be brought to the faculty. It was noted that other college policies and practices, at both an institutional and departmental level, address the consequences of academic dishonesty. This fact could, perhaps, be referenced in the proposed language, the members agreed.

Concluding the conversation about the FGO/Pass-Fail proposal, a member expressed some concern about the following proposed language: "Not all courses are eligible for the pass-fail option." The committee agreed that, with the exception of first-year seminars, all courses should be able to be taken pass-fail, and that individual faculty members should not be able to decide that their courses cannot be taken pass-fail. At the same time, it was agreed that it would be helpful to add language to the motion that is brought to the faculty to indicate that departments and programs may decide not to accept courses taken on a pass-fail basis in fulfillment of major requirements. The members agreed that the

CEP's proposal, with some revisions made by the Committee of Six, should be brought to the faculty on March 16.

Conversation turned to two documents (one titled "[Keeping the Pandemic from Sidelining Equity: Institutional Support for Faculty,](#)" and the other titled "[Documenting Pandemic Impacts: Best Practices](#)") that the provost had obtained from the University of Massachusetts and had provided to the committee ahead of the meeting. Her purpose was to inform discussion about ways that Amherst might provide support for the work of departments and tenure-track faculty to document the impact of the pandemic on candidates for reappointment and tenure. Such documentation, it was noted, should include the impact on faculty members' scholarship, teaching, and service, and also the impact on faculty members' fields. A member also suggested that departments convey to external reviewers in tenure cases that it would be helpful if they, as experts, would discuss in their letters the impact of the pandemic on the field. In addition, it would be helpful, if departments would note the ways in which COVID-19 has affected faculty at Amherst (e.g., that labs had to be shut down for a period). The committee found the documents to be very useful, particularly the second one listed above. It was agreed that they should be provided to the faculty and that they would serve as a useful tool for candidates and chairs and other tenured colleagues. The provost noted that some other colleges have created similar documents that might also be helpful. The members said that they would be interested in seeing other models.

The members also discussed a proposal that Amherst approve the Five-College Biomathematics Certificate (see [the cover letter](#) and [proposed catalog language](#)). The certificate is an outgrowth of a \$1 million five-year National Science Foundation grant awarded to Amherst, Hampshire, Mount Holyoke, and Smith in 2011. The award was made to support cross-disciplinary training of students majoring in the experimental life sciences (broadly inclusive of biochemistry, biology, biophysics, chemistry, and neuroscience) and students majoring in the quantitative sciences (mathematics, statistics, computer science) and to catalyze research collaborations between faculty pairs who also span that divide. Professor Leise, one of the participating faculty in the program, noted that the other three colleges have already approved the certificate. She explained that some Amherst students are already taking the courses that meet the requirements of the certificate, and that adopting the certificate formally would allow Amherst students to have more guidance and a useful structure for their endeavors. She noted that the current proposal reflects changes that were made in response to some concerns articulated by a previous Committee of Six (see [the Committee of Six minutes of April 29, 2019](#)). A member wondered whether the college should consider curtailing this form of credentialing, while not raising specific objections to this proposal. Another member wondered whether an effect of the certificate might be that some students focus too heavily on STEM courses and take fewer courses in the social sciences and humanities. Professor Leise responded that previous research on the course-taking patterns of Amherst math and science students has shown that they typically take courses across the curriculum. As always, the role of the advisor ensuring that students receive a broad education is an important one, she noted. Professor Leise anticipates that a very small number of students will pursue the certificate, around three per year, she estimates. Professor Trapani, commenting on the high demand for student research experiences at Amherst already, expressed some concern that students might not be aware that off-campus experiences count for the certificate requirement. Professor Leise noted that most students fulfill the certificate's research requirement off campus, and that the research requirement has been interpreted very broadly. She does not feel that the certificate will place a burden on Amherst faculty to offer additional research experiences to enable students to meet the requirements of the certificate. At the conclusion of the discussion, the members expressed support for the proposal and agreed to bring it forward to the faculty on March 16. The remainder of the meeting was devoted to personnel matters.

The meeting adjourned at 4:49 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Epstein
Provost and Dean of the Faculty