

The thirty-first 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 15, 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 personnel matters. Following those discussions, at 3:30 P.M., Susan Resneck Pierce, the consultant who has been engaged to think through issues surrounding service at the college, joined the meeting to offer her impressions after interviewing some faculty—including the members of the Committee of Six—and some administrators, as part of the initial stage of her work. The goal of this exercise, it was noted, is 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. The premise of the effort is that faculty time is precious. In addition to sharing what she has learned and identifying some issues to consider, Ms. Pierce asked for the members' thoughts about possible processes and structures that the college might use to set priorities and effect change—once Ms. Pierce shares her full findings and offers recommendations.

Ms. Pierce informed the members that a consistent narrative has emerged from her discussions. Most with whom Ms. Pierce spoke commented on the impact on associate professors of the abrupt shift that occurs after faculty receive tenure—a transition from focusing mainly on teaching and scholarship and being largely “protected” from time-consuming service obligations, to assuming the “burden” of playing more robust roles in terms of service. Many noted the negative impact that service obligations have had on their scholarly productivity. Another theme was that these colleagues saw the sudden change in their role vis-à-vis service as a prelude to a commitment to a lifetime of service. Ms. Pierce commented that the perspectives that were shared with her are consistent with the most recent results of the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE) survey. She noted that Amherst associate professors conveyed more concern about their service obligations than faculty at this rank at peer schools.

Continuing, Ms. Pierce said that some of the colleagues with whom she spoke commented on the need to distribute service more equitably at the college, noting, in particular, in this context advising and equity and inclusion work. Some said that, while they support the college's efforts surrounding equity and inclusion, this commitment has created a disparity in regard to service, particularly when it comes to invisible and uncompensated labor—notably for women faculty and faculty of color. In some departments, it appears that some assistant professors are spending a great deal of time on this form of service, whereas those in other departments may be discouraged from doing so. Some expressed concern that this work might have a negative impact on faculty recruitment and retention. At the same time, Ms. Pierce noted, some faculty commented on the absence of data about the ways in which faculty are spending their time. Some were skeptical that there is a disparity in the amount of service performed by faculty, and some were also skeptical that faculty members' research productivity is reduced because of service obligations. Some also commented that service is not acknowledged or rewarded sufficiently and does not play a significant role in decisions about tenure and promotion. In particular, some faculty noted, promotion to the rank of professor appears to be pro forma.

Another theme that emerged, Ms. Pierce noted, was that time spent working on faculty committees is often inconsequential. Some faculty commented that it is not uncommon for colleagues to spend a great deal of time developing proposals and reports, only to have them voted down by colleagues. In regard to the idea of finding ways to streamline service, Ms. Pierce commented that some faculty supported taking steps to do so, while a few worried that this approach could weaken the faculty's role in governance at the college. Although expressing confidence that the current administration values the faculty's role in governance, two of those with whom Ms. Pierce spoke feared that a subsequent administration might use any changes to reduce faculty autonomy.

The generational shift that has occurred within the faculty was another topic that was raised with some frequency, particularly in relation to the Amherst faculty's strong tradition of faculty governance,

Ms. Pierce commented. According to some, it can appear that the values and attitudes regarding service of newer faculty differ from those of what some referred to as the “old guard.” Some feel that there are traditions of doing things in a particular way that have worked well and should not change. Yet, with the generational shift, many individuals’ lives are structured differently and the ways in which they spend their time may have changed, according to what Ms. Pierce heard. In her experience, faculty at other institutions are typically not as involved as Amherst faculty are in some areas—for example, benefits, course scheduling, and admission—and rely on professional staff to a greater degree. While many said that the college has benefitted from President’s Martin’s efforts to professionalize the administration, some faculty noted that the work of faculty committees largely has remained the same. Ms. Pierce noted that most administrators commented on how much they enjoy working with faculty. At the same time, President Martin said, she is aware that some staff at the college do not believe that faculty consistently respect or make use of the expertise of staff, a view that was also shared with Ms. Pierce. Ms. Pierce noted that another theme that emerged was that elaborate processes at the college can prevent nimbleness when it comes to decision-making.

Continuing, Ms. Pierce said that, in order to gather more information and to gain more insight, it might be helpful to survey the faculty. She suggested a number of questions and said that she welcomed the Committee of Six’s ideas. For example, Ms. Pierce thought it would be informative to ask the faculty whether the college should continue to “protect” tenure-track faculty members from service. She noted that some of those with whom she has spoken felt that it would be helpful for tenure-track faculty to serve on committees, for example, as a way of informing them about Amherst and introducing them to colleagues across the college. Others expressed the view that tenure-track faculty should not serve until they have been at the college long enough to understand the culture. Some felt that associate professors and senior faculty who are new to the college should not serve on the Committee of Six.

Other possible questions include asking whether all committees involving faculty have value, or whether some should be discontinued. In this vein, Ms. Pierce said that it is important to ask what the college really needs and to develop a structure that allows the faculty’s time to be put to the best use. In regard to the question of whether committee charges should be more specific, Ms. Pierce noted that, if charges are too vague, the focus of a given committee can become reliant on the individual who serves as chair. Since committee membership rotates regularly, she suggested that greater clarity about the specific responsibilities of committees could ensure continuity over time. Re-writing some committee charges might be a helpful step to take, she noted.

Continuing, Ms. Pierce commented that, when she had asked whether the faculty should be more focused on the larger strategic issues facing the college, rather than dealing with tactics, some had suggested the following questions:

1. How can Amherst retain its commitment to being a research college over the arc of a faculty member’s career? In particular, what should be the balance among teaching, scholarship, and service for tenured faculty?
2. Why is the open curriculum of value to Amherst’s students? What is working and what is not?
3. Is there enough clarity about who is responsible for what in terms of diversity, equity, and inclusion?
4. To what extent should the college be striving for greater transparency in departmental practices and more standardization?
5. Should the college continue its practice of having the faculty come together in meetings of the whole to conduct faculty business? If so, how often? For how long? How can the culture of

faculty meetings be changed so that members of the faculty would welcome participating in them?

Some members then discussed their own experiences as members of faculty committees that focus on work that is very complex and technical—and questioned whether they had made meaningful contributions and whether serving had been the best use of their time. In regard to identifying the issues that might be the most important to address first, the committee agreed that a faculty survey could be a valuable tool for making a determination. Professor Trapani suggested that, as part of the survey, it would be helpful to ask respondents to rank-order a set of possible issues that might be addressed. In this way, the priorities that are most important to faculty could emerge.

It was agreed that it would be important for Ms. Pierce to continue to speak with staff members who support the academic mission. In particular, the issue of some staff feeling that they are excluded from the business of the college is relevant to the question of the make-up of committees. It was agreed that another issue to discuss is the distinction between service and governance, as many faculty members seem to equate service with governance. A related issue is what is meant by faculty autonomy, which some equate with individual autonomy. Professor Trapani commented that, coming from a large public university, he has not understood some of these distinctions and feels that other faculty may not as well. Educating faculty in this realm would be helpful, in his view. As an overall approach to considering many of the issues that had been raised, Professor Umphrey suggested that examining them with a structural lens might lead to solutions that would allow faculty to make the best use of their time.

Conversation turned briefly to the *Faculty Handbook*. Ms. Pierce noted that, in her experience, the authority that handbooks carry at institutions varies. It was agreed that, at Amherst, the *Faculty Handbook* has the status of a constitution. Some felt that the handbook is in need of refinement to offer greater clarity and to reflect the present time. Another approach might be to start from scratch and create a new handbook, it was noted; it was agreed that this would be a significant undertaking.

Professor Umphrey suggested that, when Ms. Pierce completes her next set of conversations and after the faculty is surveyed, it might be helpful to constitute an ad hoc committee to consider recommendations that are made and proposals that might be brought forward. Professor del Moral expressed support for taking this approach, commenting that the Presidential Task Force on Diversity and Inclusion (now the Committee on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion), which was created in 2016 as an outgrowth of the Amherst Uprising, has been a very successful vehicle for effecting change over the past five years—in this case, in making Amherst a more inclusive campus.

Concluding the discussion, the committee agreed that Ms. Pierce should speak with additional faculty and staff in small groups—among them some chairs of academic departments and programs, chairs of key faculty committees, other faculty at all ranks, some administrators who support the academic mission, and others who request to meet with her—and that it would also be helpful to survey the full faculty. The committee thanked Ms. Pierce for her efforts, and she left the meeting at 4:30 P.M.

Conversation returned to the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP)'s proposal that the college discontinue use of the current 14-point grading scale and adopt a 4.33 grading scale. Jesse Barba, director of institutional research and registrar services, who ahead of the meeting had provided the members with data about the use of A-plus grades at some peer institutions, joined the meeting at 4:45 P.M. to answer the members' questions. It was noted that seven schools (Barnard, Columbia, Cornell, Oberlin, Stanford, Trinity, and Vanderbilt) give an A-plus that is worth 4.33. Seven schools (Duke, Pomona, Rice, Swarthmore, Chicago, the University of Pennsylvania, and Washington University) give an A-plus that is worth 4.0, the same value as an A. Thirteen other colleges don't give A-plus grades at all.) Discussion focused on the implications of moving to a 4.0 scale and continuing to offer the A-plus, but making this grade worth 4.0 and thus an honorific grade; to stop giving A-plus grades all together; or to give the A-plus grade and make it worth 4.33, which would mimic the current 14-point grading scale (the CEP's proposal).

J. Barba explained that, if the A-plus is taken off the scale or becomes worth 4.0, and this change takes effect immediately, it would be necessary to archive the GPAs of current students and alumni, since individuals may have earned A-pluses that would have been factored into their GPAs. In this vein, he noted that, if either of these changes were to be made, he would recommend having the new GPA scale take effect with the class of 2025, so that the GPAs of current students would not be calculated using two different scales. There would still be a need to create an archive for these students and alumni in this scenario. J. Barba noted, in addition, that those who were admitted under the current policy should not be subject to a change that would not be equivalent to the current scale (the only scenario that would be comparable would be a transition to a 4.33 scale, which would mean retaining the A-plus). J. Barba also commented that, if a 14-point scale continues to appear on the transcripts of current students and alumni, these individuals will not receive the benefit of having a GPA that is easily translatable for graduate schools and fellowship and internship applications. Basically, if this course is taken, the CEP's proposal of adopting a grading scale that would be standardized for all students, creating greater equity, would not come to fruition for a number of years.

Continuing, J. Barba noted that eliminating or reducing the value of the A-plus would have the greatest impact at the GPA margins—for students with the highest GPAs—in terms of the cut-offs for Latin honors and the determination of the winner of the Woods-Travis Prize (which is awarded to the student each year who attains the highest GPA). J. Barba noted that 5 percent of grades at Amherst are A-pluses at present. If the A-plus were not awarded, there would be less separation among students with the very highest GPAs, he explained. Noting that the awarding of honors is unequal across departments, a member asked if no longer giving A-plus grades would have the effect of leveling this discrepancy across the college. J. Barba said that it could. A member wondered whether the .33 of an A-plus has more meaning (that is shift the GPA more) on a 4.33 scale than on the current scale. J. Barba said that this would not be the case, as the gaps between grades remain the same under both systems. A member also expressed concern that external audiences might regard an Amherst GPA (e.g., a 3.5 GPA) in a 4.33 grading scale as less than (e.g., a 3.5) in a 4.0 scale.

Most members expressed a preference for retaining the A-plus grade (as a way of acknowledging a student's extraordinary performances in a course), but making the A-plus worth 4.0, and truncating the grading scale at 4.0. Some members suggested giving an A-plus worth 4.33, but only if doing so would not enable a student to have a GPA over 4.0. If a 4.33 grade would have that effect, the grade should be rounded down to ensure that the GPA did not exceed 4.0, they proposed. J. Barba said that this approach would create challenges, from an administrative perspective. A couple of members wondered whether the CEP had considered the question of the A-plus and the 4.33 scale in depth, apart from issues surrounding the continuity of practice and ease of converting the 14-point GPA to a new scale. It was agreed that the CEP should be asked about this question.

To inform further conversation, the members asked J. Barba to provide the following information: the percentage of students who receive A-plus grades at Amherst and the proportion of A-plus grades given by departments. J. Barba agreed to share these data. In conclusion, he noted that another decision is needed in regard to implementing the change to a new grading scale, be it a 4.0 scale or a 4.33 scale. While the GPAs in the Workday system must be numerical, it is an independent decision as to whether the GPA should continue to appear on transcripts as a letter value (based on a rounded average). The members thanked J. Barba, and he left the meeting at 5:00 P.M.

The meeting adjourned at 5:15 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Epstein
Provost and Dean of the Faculty