

The twenty-first meeting of the Committee of Six for the academic year 2019–2020 was called to order by President Martin via Zoom at 3:00 P.M. on Monday, March 23, 2020. Present, in addition to the president, were Professors Basu, Brooks, Goutte, Horton, Schmalzbauer, and Sims and Provost and Dean of the Faculty Epstein. Professor Horton served as substitute recorder.

The meeting began with an acknowledgement of the challenges that many Amherst students and faculty are facing at this time, as a result of the impact of the COVID-19 virus. Provost Epstein outlined two proposals for changes in grading policy that have come to her primarily from students, but also from some faculty. The goal of both options would be to support students during these uncertain and challenging times. The first proposed policy would have all spring 2020 courses move to a flexible grading option (FGO) in which students have the option of receiving a grade or a pass/fail, which they would decide after classes are completed and grades are submitted by faculty. The second proposed policy would move all courses to a mandatory pass/fail grading scheme. Many colleges and universities have adopted or are considering these options. The provost also described possible approaches that might allow the faculty to vote electronically on changes to grading policy for spring 2020.

The committee had a wide-ranging discussion about the potential process to make a decision, and about the pros and cons of the two proposals. All members agreed that a change is warranted and necessary, given the circumstances that the Amherst community is experiencing, and that a decision must be made quickly. As Provost Epstein explained, moving to mandatory pass-fail for all courses would likely provide some potential equity advantages; students who find themselves in more difficult circumstances would not be disadvantaged in comparison to those finding themselves in less difficult circumstances. In addition, faculty members who fall ill would not have to worry about grading students who are learning in very unusual circumstances. This option has been adopted by some institutions, including MIT and Smith. Some members recognized the benefits of a mandatory pass-fail system. Other members worried that there were potential unintended consequences of moving all grades to pass-fail that the faculty might not be able to fully determine in advance. These might include substantial work already done by students, including honors students, that would not receive graded credit, and a lack of grades that are needed to demonstrate preparation and mastery for other courses or for graduate programs. Some members were concerned about how to sustain student and faculty engagement under a mandatory pass-fail option in which only a minimum level of work would be sufficient to pass. Others noted that the FGO proposal appears to offer the most flexibility, as it would allow students a pass-fail option for all courses if needed, but would retain the option for student achievements to be recognized as much as possible. Members commented that adopting the flexible grading option for all courses would not preclude a later decision to move all courses to pass-fail, if doing so proved to be warranted at a later date. There was general agreement that, no matter which option was adopted, it will be important that the criteria for what constituted a *pass* not be made more restrictive at this time. Some members hoped faculty could discuss the merits of the FGO option with their colleagues before voting. However, they agreed with President Martin that the college has an obligation to let students and faculty know if a change to grading policy will be made, and her view that time is of the essence.

The committee concluded that the arguments for the flexible grading option were compelling and provided a useful way to support student learning. Professor Brooks, who had also presented compelling reasons for pass-fail, drawn from her conversations with other faculty, said that she did not yet have enough information to conclude whether FGO or mandatory pass-fail would be the best option. She said that she would not vote against the FGO motion in the Committee of Six, but that she wants more time to consider the options. After discussion of alternative ways to proceed with making a decision, the members agreed to bring a motion to the faculty to adopt the proposed flexible grading option, once the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP) had endorsed a motion to do so. The faculty vote would be taken electronically. If the motion failed, then the Committee of Six and the CEP would consider other options. Provost Epstein agreed to circulate the proposed motion on Tuesday to the full faculty with an announcement that an electronic vote would be conducted on Thursday. (The Committee of Six later voted electronically on the motion. On March 24, 2020, the members voted six in favor and zero opposed on the substance of the motion and six in favor and zero opposed to forward the motion to the faculty.)

President Martin next updated the committee on the sanctions imposed on the lacrosse team and her offer to meet with other groups, including the Black Student Union, to discuss ways that the college takes these allegations very seriously. The committee expressed concern about the impact of these incidents, particularly during a period of upheaval, and noted its support for community-wide conversations about how to address racism on campus at an appropriate time. Several members of the committee noted that this incident presents opportunities for faculty engagement, including revisions of the honor code and the use of restorative justice approaches to engage the Amherst community in education focused on race and racism.

The president also updated the committee on financial planning that is under way. Chief Financial and Administrative Officer Kevin Weinman has been engaged in preparing for a recession for several years and is updating those plans for the current environment. The president noted that Amherst's financial liquidity is good, and that she is committed to a financial-planning process that includes all constituencies of the college. The members noted that they had received emails from faculty and staff regarding a desire for communication around the challenging financial issues and thanked the president for her attention to these concerns. Some members noted that the reports of the special committee (the Advisory Budget Committee, or "ABC" committee) formed during the 2008 crisis may be helpful documents in this process. The members then turned briefly to a personnel matter.

The meeting adjourned at 4:05 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Epstein  
Provost and Dean of the Faculty