

The twenty-second meeting of the Committee of Six for the academic year 2019–2020 was called to order by President Martin via Zoom at 2:30 P.M. on Thursday, March 26, 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.

The meeting began with the members describing their experiences teaching remotely; each felt that, given the circumstances, all of their classes had gone well. Provost Epstein said that she had heard of only one technical glitch with Zoom connectivity, while many faculty members had reported that they had had largely positive experiences with teaching remotely. Professor Horton commented that the upcoming two-week period of advising promises to be an enormously useful time, during which faculty can get a sense of what individual students are experiencing.

Under “Topics of the Day,” Provost Epstein informed the members of plans to hold a virtual faculty town-hall meeting that will be hosted by President Martin, Chief Financial and Administrative Officer Kevin Weinman, and herself. The event will take place via Zoom on Tuesday, March 31, 2020, at 7:30 P.M. A town hall for staff has also been planned, the provost said. The event on March 31 will provide an opportunity for faculty members to ask questions in two formats. The provost explained that colleagues will be invited to send questions via email to Associate Provost Janet Tobin in advance of the meeting. Another option will be to submit questions via Zoom-chat the evening of the event. It was agreed after the committee’s meeting that Professor Horton should serve as the moderator of the event. Given the nature of virtual meetings, it will not be practical for viewers to have their video and microphone options on, Provost Epstein said. President Martin, K. Weinman, Professor Horton, and she will be on camera, however, the provost noted. Professor Goutte asked if virtual attendance at the event is optional for faculty. The provost said the town hall is not a regular faculty meeting, and faculty are not required to participate.

The members discussed the timing of the committee’s annual meeting with all tenure-track faculty members. The committee agreed to meet with untenured colleagues soon after the faculty town hall, as there might be follow-up questions after the event. The members decided to hold the meeting via Zoom on April 6, from 4 P.M. to 5 P.M. This meeting will provide an opportunity for tenure-track faculty to share their views and questions. The members acknowledged that, during this very challenging and highly unusual time, colleagues will likely have much to discuss that is unique to this situation. The members said that they hope that this occasion will offer a forum that will be helpful, though much remains unknown.

Under “Questions from Committee Members,” Professor Sims asked, on behalf of some members of her department, why a decision was made to retain the timeline leading to the original schedule for commencement, when commencement will not be taking place. Provost Epstein responded that, given the uncertainty about the duration of the COVID-19 crisis, it is prudent not to extend the semester any longer than it needs to be. Though graduation was originally set for May 24, it is now hoped that the vote on degrees will take place on May 28. Extending the original date became necessary because of the extension of other deadlines, in order to provide more flexibility for students. Provost Epstein noted that students may have summer plans or may be starting jobs, another reason for not making the semester longer. Professor Sims thanked the provost for this explanation and noted that she agrees that Amherst should not have a longer semester.

Continuing with questions, Professor Basu commented that some students have informed her that their study-away programs have moved to a mandatory pass/fail grading system because of the virus. Ordinarily, her department would not accept such courses toward the major, and she wonders if all departments and programs are now being asked to do so at this time. Provost Epstein said that it is her hope that all departments will be flexible in this regard this semester, particularly if the faculty votes to extend the flexible grading option (FGO) to all courses this semester. (As the committee’s meeting was under way, the faculty was voting electronically on the motion below, which the committee had approved the day after its most recent meeting. [On March 24, 2020, the Committee of Six 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.] Later that evening, Provost Epstein announced via email that the motion had passed by an overwhelming majority.

Given the grave emergency posed by COVID-19 and the virus’s impact around the globe, the college is doing whatever it can to provide additional support to faculty, students, and staff. In this spirit, the Committee on Educational Policy and the Committee of Six propose that the faculty vote to provide additional flexibility to students and faculty by revising

specific grading policies for the spring 2020 semester only, as described in the motion below.

### **Motion**

That the Flexible Grading Option (FGO) policy be revised immediately so that, as the default, all classes during the spring 2020 semester be treated as though the FGO had been elected, and that the following also be approved for courses during this semester only: that any FGOs used in spring 2020 not “count” as one of the four FGOs that students are permitted to use during their time at the college; that students who are not in their final semester at the college have until June 15, 2020, to decide whether or not to accept their assigned grade, or in the case of any passing grade, elect to receive a pass (“P”); that second-semester seniors have until May 22 at 5 p.m. to decide whether or not to accept their assigned grade, or in the case of any passing grade, elect to receive a pass (“P”); and that, in cases in which students are granted extensions this semester, they have five days after the grade is posted to select a pass/fail option. There are no extensions for graduating seniors.)

Professor Goutte next inquired about the timing of the decision regarding whether summer research programs will take place this summer. It is her understanding that many students are counting on having housing, as well as research experiences, during this time. Provost Epstein responded that the decision will not be made by April 10, as had been announced earlier, because of continuing uncertainty about the timeline for the virus to be under control. The new deadline for making the decision is May 1, she noted. Turning to another topic, Professor Goutte asked if it is expected that the pandemic will have an impact on the college’s admission cycle. She wonders whether the deadline by which admitted students must make a commitment to Amherst has been extended, for example. President Martin confirmed that the deadline has not been changed. It is difficult to know the ways in which the virus situation might affect the admission process at this point, the president said.

Professor Horton commented that projections suggest that more might be known about the trajectory of the virus in about three weeks. He emphasized the importance of supporting students on all fronts at this time, noting the anxiety that many feel, not only about present circumstances, but about the impact that the virus may have on their pathways to their future careers. Many will enter the job market during what may be the worst economic downturn in decades, and most will find it challenging to find an internship this summer. Provost Epstein commented that Emily Griffin, director of the Loeb Center for Career Exploration and Planning, is focusing her efforts on networking with Amherst alumni to develop virtual internships and to help students with strategies for finding jobs during this difficult time. President Martin emphasized that it is important to remember that all students are facing the same circumstances all over the world. Whenever it becomes possible to compete for jobs and internships, Amherst students will be on a level playing field—and she is confident that they will do well.

Professor Basu asked whether plans call for moving forward with searches for faculty FTEs for the next academic year, given the stresses on the college’s budget. Provost Epstein said that it is possible that searches will be delayed, but the decision about whether to take the step will not be made for several weeks. Searches for visiting positions may be cancelled, she said, but she is discussing individual searches with departments to learn more about their needs. (After consulting with the departments involved and the president, the provost later decided to cancel the searches for visitors, due to the impact that the pandemic is having on the college’s finances.)

Continuing with questions, Professor Schmalzbauer said that she has learned that some faculty members, particularly in STEM fields, are struggling with the transition to remote teaching and with finding ways to support students. Some untenured faculty members are particularly worried about the impact that the virus situation is having on their research programs, which in most cases have been shut down. President Martin commented that the COVID-19 situation is uncharted territory, and that it is very difficult to predict what will happen and how long the college will need to operate remotely. Everyone should do the best that they can right now, Provost Epstein said, and noted that the college will continue to be as flexible and understanding as possible. Professor Horton suggested that faculty members focus on one or two learning outcomes in their courses for the remaining weeks of the semester and take as much pressure off students, and themselves, as possible. Professor Brooks commented that everything is in a state of transformation right now, and she expressed the view that things will not return to the way they were before. She predicts that some faculty members’ research agendas will shift permanently in new directions, for example. Some colleagues will receive recognition for being able to do so, Professor Brooks feels.

Professor Sims noted that, in her view, staff members have been feeling anxious about the impact that the virus may have on the college's budget, and the possibility that previously anticipated pay increases will not happen, and/or that there may be layoffs. President Martin said that the world is living through a catastrophic occurrence. It is impossible to offer any sense of certainty about most things at this time, however, the college will do all that it can to continue to support the community.

Concluding the part of the meeting that was devoted to questions, Professor Basu asked if there will be flexibility about the timing of sabbaticals, given that the future is so uncertain. Faculty who were/are planning to be away might not be able to travel, potentially for all or part of next year. Can colleagues decide to delay their leaves and teach next year instead? Knowing that the college will be flexible on this front will help faculty organize their lives, she noted. Provost Epstein later noted that she intends to be flexible with leave schedules, while reminding colleagues that, if they delay, they should consult with their departments about another time to take a leave that will not result in additional costs to the college, such as the hiring of visitors. The remainder of the meeting was devoted to personnel matters.

The meeting adjourned at 4:30 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Epstein  
Provost and Dean of the Faculty