

The twenty-eighth 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 Monday, May 11, 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 members began the meeting with a discussion of whether it would be preferable to have the citation for a retiring faculty member read at the May 28 faculty meeting, which would take place via Zoom, or to wait to have the citation read at the next in-person faculty meeting. It was agreed that the retiring faculty member should be given the choice. Associate Provost Tobin said that, on the committee's behalf, she would contact the chair of the department and ask that he reach out to the retiring colleague about this matter.

Under "Questions from Committee Members," Professor Basu noted that the Committee of Six had had an informative and productive meeting with the Presidential Task Force on Diversity and Inclusion. She commented that the committee is impressed with the steps that the college has taken to address issues of diversity and inclusion, and the work that is under way by the task force to develop proposals for bias-reporting and restorative practices. She also recognized that much work remains to be done. Professor Basu stressed the importance of ensuring that a member of the Committee of Six serves on the task force and noted that Norm Jones, chief diversity and inclusion officer, has expressed support for having a member do so. Options might include having a current member of the Committee of Six serve until the time of transition to the new committee, when a member of the incoming committee would then join the task force; asking one of the new members to begin serving on the task force now, along with a current member of the Committee of Six; and/or having a new member of the committee begin serving now. Professor Horton said that he had found the meeting with the task force to be very helpful, and was pleased to learn more about the work of the body. Maintaining a connection with the Committee of Six would be beneficial to the work of the task force and of the committee, in Professor Horton's view. Professor Basu commented that the committee had discussed with N. Jones whether it might be more helpful to him to have an advisory body with a different structure. The president and provost agreed to discuss this matter with N. Jones to learn more about his ideas about the most effective structure going forward.

Continuing the conversation, Professor Brooks expressed support for the work that the task force is doing surrounding restorative practices. While the college has made progress on addressing issues surrounding diversity and inclusion, Professor Brooks feels that more education is needed for faculty, students, and staff, particularly since the capacity for exchange and constructive conversation on difficult topics such as racism, erasure, and inequality is uneven across the campus. Over the course of her time at Amherst, students have shared experiences with her that demonstrate the need for the combined bias response protocol and restorative practices that the task force has been working to develop. The provost commented that any bias reporting system that includes classroom activity will need to be very carefully considered. Unless there is a widely shared conception of what is and isn't covered by such a system, such a mechanism could have a chilling effect on intellectual discourse. Some members expressed concern about putting a system in place that would include pathways for students to report faculty members or other students who make comments in class that are seen as insensitive or racist. Professor Brooks commented that such chilling effects already exist in many Amherst classrooms and that restorative practices show real promise, even for addressing incidents that occur in the classroom. Noting the complexities of this issue, Professor Schmalzbauer said that she would find any reporting system that only "calls out" individual students or faculty members to be problematic. She worries that students could become inhibited about speaking about complicated issues related to race, class, or gender, or might not even take particular courses, out of the fear of saying something that might be perceived as being racist, for example. She favors a formalized bias-response protocol with an educational orientation, which would frame any feedback that is provided to individuals within a restorative framework, and is inspired by the groundwork the task force has laid to make this possible. The members agreed that it will be helpful for the leadership of the Black Student Union to discuss at the May 21 faculty meeting their experiences with racism and its impact. Some faculty members may not be aware that incidents of racism are taking place on campus, the members agreed.

Professor Sims next asked the president and provost if they would update the committee on planning efforts for the fall semester. Provost Epstein noted that the recently constituted Ad Hoc Faculty Committee on Academic Structures during COVID-19 (ASC) began meeting the previous week. Plans call for the ASC to begin meeting with members of the community beginning this week, for example faculty members, class deans, and Jackie Alvarez, director of the counseling center. The ad hoc committee will continue such meetings in the weeks to come, including with the group of faculty and staff that had recently developed [some ideas regarding faculty and staff with significant caretaking roles that Professor Trapani had forwarded to the committee](#). The provost noted that Jesse Barba, director of institutional research and registrar services, had consulted with the Consultative Group for Tenure-Track faculty recently to inform a survey of the faculty that will be sent out later in the week. The purpose is to gain more information about the faculty's experience with remote teaching this spring. The results will be shared with the ASC, Provost Epstein said. Professor Sims expressed support for the efforts to consult with groups such as these that will convey the concerns of faculty who have had to assume new full- and part-time caregiving roles (mainly of young children) due to the COVID-19 crisis.

Continuing, Provost Epstein said that it is her hope that the ASC will complete its work by the end of this month. While it will not be possible to make firm decisions about students returning to campus until later in the summer, most likely in July, the provost expects that, by end of May, the committee will develop recommendations for how best to structure the academic year. It is the provost's hope that these recommendations might be discussed as part of the agenda for the May 28 faculty meeting. At that point, senior staff will also have made significant progress on exploring a number of different scenarios that the college may consider—and the financial impact of each—depending on how the pandemic unfolds. Provost Epstein said that she realizes that faculty and students want the college to make firm plans now, while noting that doing so won't be possible for some time, in order to have the information that is needed to make final decisions. What seems clear is that the need for social distancing will require that some classes, in particular large classes, be taught remotely in the fall, even if students can return to campus. There could be smaller sections of such classes taught in person, Provost Epstein noted, but it is not yet known whether this will be possible, and enrollments will have an impact on whether this approach is viable. Having faculty teach under a reduced course load, giving colleagues more time to prepare their courses and more time to engage with students in the fall, is another option that is being considered. Ultimately, departments will need to decide how to mount their curricula most effectively under the circumstances—which are themselves uncertain.

The provost next discussed with the members the upcoming schedule for reviewing the theses and transcripts of students recommended by their departments for a summa cum laude degree and having an overall grade point average in the top 25 percent of the graduating class. She explained that the committee would also review the theses of students who had received summa cum laude recommendations from their departments and whose overall grade point average was likely to land below the top 25 percent but within the top 40 percent of the class, since these students would qualify for a magna cum laude degree. Professor Goutte asked if the committee would also review information about the distribution of grades and summa honors across departments. The provost said that this information has been examined in the past and could be studied again in the future, but that such a review is not part of the committee's regular process. Professor Horton agreed that this seems like a longer-term issue that could be a topic of future conversation.

The members devoted most of the remainder of the meeting to a consideration of the agenda, individuals who would be giving presentations, and format of the May 21 faculty meeting. Conversation then turned to some questions of particular relevance to tenure-track faculty. With the recent message to the community that discretionary spending should be curtailed, Professor Sims noted that some faculty members are unsure whether they should curtail spending from their start-up funding or grants. The provost replied that colleagues should continue to spend their start-up and grant monies for research purposes, as necessary. A member asked how new faculty would be welcomed this fall, given the need for social distancing. Provost Epstein responded that Austin Sarat, associate provost and associate dean of the faculty, is developing a remote orientation program for new faculty, as it is likely that such a format will be needed, depending on how the pandemic unfolds. Professor Goutte, raising a question on behalf of tenure-track colleagues, asked

whether they might speak with the Committee of Six after the plan for the fall is known. Colleagues are always welcome to engage with the Committee of Six, the provost said.

The members then discussed concerns that some tenure-track faculty members had voiced during a meeting with the Committee of Six that took place via Zoom on April 6. Professor Brooks noted that some colleagues had expressed concern about the evaluation of their teaching this spring, in light of the COVID-19 situation. Provost Epstein commented that the “opt-in” system for having end-of semester evaluations and retrospective letters solicited for this spring’s classes, which was put in place after the meeting, likely alleviated this worry. In addition, faculty members who agree to have evaluations solicited also have the choice of whether they will be included in their reappointment and/or tenure dossiers. Professor Brooks also shared a concern from an untenured faculty member, who suggested it might be challenging to find scholars who are willing to serve as outside reviewers, due to the impact of the pandemic. Provost Epstein commented that no department has brought a concern of this kind to her attention, and she is aware that some departments of candidates standing for tenure have already completed this process, without experiencing difficulties. Professor Sims noted that some colleagues have asked whether it might be possible or advisable to extend reappointment clocks, in case caring for young children or closure of laboratory work, etc. during the pandemic has had an impact on their scholarly trajectories. Provost Epstein said that she would be open to discussion about changing pre-tenure colleagues’ leaves, but that she does not think that extending reappointment clocks would be necessarily helpful. While some faculty members, depending on their fields, may not have produced a great deal of scholarship at the time of reappointment, they most often complete projects and increase their scholarly productivity and accomplishment by the time of tenure.

Continuing the conversation, the members noted that many pre-tenure colleagues expressed ongoing anxiety about how their research productivity might be judged at the time of tenure, given the amount of research time that they have now lost due to the COVID-19 situation. As some faculty members had noted, the shelf-life of experiments means that some of their research—often started well before March 2020—would now have lost its relevance or need to be completely restarted. Professor Brooks reiterated her view that the pandemic, while closing some avenues of research (e.g., by constraining necessary travel), may also afford opportunities to move in new and important scholarly directions. She noted that one of Amherst’s strengths has been its strong support for faculty who change their scholarly course, and expressed the view that this support should extend to untenured faculty, particularly during this time, when diverse kinds of innovative research may be needed. Professor Goutte relayed concerns about the long-term impact on laboratory research teams, as the lab shut-down has meant a loss of training of future research students, especially as advanced students, whom they had trained, will not be available to help with the training of new students once the labs open up again. The committee agreed that, for these and other reasons, COVID-19 is likely to have consequences that will continue to be felt many years from now. The Committee of Six noted the importance of conveying these kinds of concerns to tenured members of departments, who might not otherwise be aware of the anxieties felt by pre-tenure colleagues. One member of the committee emphasized that when colleagues stand for tenure, it will be important that they document in their letter to the Committee of Six the impact that COVID-19 had on the candidate's teaching and research. Finally, some members of the Committee of Six commented that some lecturers feel high levels of anxiety, believing that if the college were to cut faculty positions, lecturer positions would be among the first eliminated. The provost reassured committee members that there are no plans to eliminate any faculty positions.

The meeting adjourned at 4:15 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Epstein  
Provost and Dean of the Faculty