

The thirty-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, May 24, 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.

Under “Questions from Committee Members,” Professor Trapani commented that, in the aftermath of the discussion at the last faculty meeting and the vote to change the GPA value of the grade of A-plus to be the same as that of an A, he has been thinking further about the issue of grade inflation. Noting his own challenges in assessing work and assigning a range of grades to students, particularly because so many Amherst students perform at such an exceptionally strong level, he suggested that it would be informative for the Center for Teaching and Learning to offer some workshops on the topic of grading. Professor Trapani wondered if the college will be tracking the number of honorific A-plus grades that are awarded and whether these grades might need to count in some way. Such a situation would be useful for determining Latin honors and the Woods-Travis Prize (currently awarded to the student with the highest GPA in the graduating class). Professor Kingston commented that it would be beneficial to award the prize based on criteria beyond the GPA alone. It was noted that the prize description provides sufficient flexibility to make it possible to do so. (“The Woods-Travis Prize, an annual gift in memory of Josiah B. Woods of Enfield and Charles B. Travis of the class of 1864, is awarded for outstanding excellence in culture and faithfulness to duty as a scholar.”) Provost Epstein said that she would check in with Jesse Barba, director of institutional research and registrar services, about these issues. The Committee of Six can take up the issue of the criteria for the Woods-Travis Prize next year, she commented.

On behalf of a colleague, Professor Trapani next asked the question of whether the college plans to undertake educational outreach efforts that might be aimed at members of the Amherst community who may have fears or different comfort levels about receiving the mandated COVID-19 vaccine. He expressed that it would be valuable for the college to find ways to educate community members as to the importance of the vaccine, much the way it did for the mask mandate. President Martin said that some efforts of this kind are under way. Ultimately, however, all members of the college community will be required to be fully vaccinated by August 1, unless they have an exemption for medical or religious reasons that has been approved through the college’s petition process.

Discussion turned to considering a small number of remaining committee assignments. The members agreed that the provost should extend invitations to the nominees to serve. The members then made some final revisions to the draft of a survey that the provost intends to send to all tenure-track faculty members at the college, with the goal of learning more about challenges assistant professors have faced during the pandemic, and informing the ways in which the college can continue to support pre-tenure colleagues. Provost Epstein thanked the members for their suggestions and said that she would next seek feedback from the Consultative Group for Tenure-Track Faculty about the survey. It was decided not to include a question about mental health, specifically, as another broader question on the survey would provide an opportunity for those who wish to comment on this topic to do so.

The committee next reviewed a proposal that had been forwarded by the Committee on Educational Policy to expand eligibility for participation in an approved study-away program (either domestic or international, and either in person or remote), for the fall 2021 semester only, for students who have a compelling medical or other reason for not being able to return to campus. Provost Epstein explained that, for international students, these reasons may include challenges obtaining a visa for entry into the United States. She noted that this change would not apply to second-semester seniors. Professor Manion asked why second-semester seniors would be excluded. The provost responded that there are concerns that study away during the final semester could make it difficult for students to complete all academic requirements at Amherst in time for graduation, including finishing capstone requirements for the major and securing their study-away transcripts.

Continuing with the conversation, Provost Epstein explained that the purpose of the proposal is to provide an option, in the aftermath of the pandemic, for students who cannot come back to campus in the fall, so that they do not fall behind in their academic programs. It is expected that a small number of students would take advantage of this opportunity to study away and transfer credits toward their Amherst degree (restrictions on how many such courses can be counted [half of a student's courses must be taken at the college] would remain in place). Some students in this situation might choose to take a leave instead of doing so, Provost Epstein said. Offering this option would allow maximum flexibility for students, however, and would mean that faculty would not need to teach courses in a fully remote or hybrid format in the next academic year, in order to accommodate students who cannot return to campus. Provost Epstein said that she is aware that the approach described in the proposal is being taken by a number of peer institutions.

Professor Umphrey asked who would determine if a student's "compelling reason" justified allowing a student who ordinarily would be ineligible (i.e., first-year students and students who have not yet declared a major) to study away to do so, and whether any additional burdens would be placed on advisors as part of the approval process. The provost said that, as noted in the proposal, students who would not normally be eligible for study away would consult with their class deans as a first step toward pursuing this option. Other students who are considering it would probably do so as well. No documentation surrounding medical or other issues would be required. All students pursuing this option would go through the regular, existing study-away process, which is managed by the Office of Global Education. This process always involves a sign off by the academic advisor, the provost noted. If the proposal is approved, students will be allowed flexibility in regard to when and how they register for study away, which could take place over the next several months, Provost Epstein noted. Some international students, for example, may not learn that they cannot get a visa until it is close to the time that they would come to campus. The members expressed support for the proposal and agreed to review the related draft motion later in the meeting, when the committee considered the draft agenda for the commencement faculty meeting on June 8.

At 3:00 P.M., Susan Resneck Pierce, the consultant who has been engaged to think through issues surrounding service at the college, joined the meeting for a discussion about the next steps in her work. She described the steps she is proposing and asked for the committee's feedback. S. Pierce noted plans for a survey to be sent to the faculty, either from the provost or the Committee of Six, in early June. A variation of the instrument would be sent to Amherst staff members who regularly work with faculty on committees. She reviewed the draft survey questions, and the members, after some discussion, suggested some revisions to some items. Overall, the committee found that the survey questions focused on central issues surrounding service. It was agreed that Jesse Barba, director of institutional research and registrar services, would help create and administer the survey and would also be responsible for compiling the results. S. Pierce said that she would provide an analysis of the data that are gathered. Professor Manion expressed concern that undertaking the survey might delay the process of bringing proposals for change forward. S. Pierce said that she expects to have the results of the survey by mid-summer, and that she feels that what can be learned from a survey of this kind is important. In addition, she plans to gather and share information on the practices of other institutions in regard to service.

Continuing the conversation, S. Pierce said that she will come to campus in the fall to give workshops that focus on shared governance, as well as service practices at some NESCAC (New England Small College Athletic Conference) and Research-1 institutions. She would offer the same workshop separately to interested groups of faculty, the senior staff, the board of trustees, and interested staff, she noted. The committee expressed support for the process, as outlined.

The consultant next noted that she also plans to engage interested faculty members (perhaps former members of the Committee of Six and, perhaps, the provost and another senior administrator who works closely with a faculty committee or committees) in what she calls the "zero-based

committee exercise.” Participants in the exercise would imagine a committee structure from scratch, rather than reconfiguring the current structure. When considering the need for committees, the following questions would be asked as part of the exercise: Where does the faculty have the primary responsibility? Where does the faculty need to be consulted? Where does the faculty need to be informed? Professor Manion noted that it would be important to ask specifically about what faculty expectations for their committee service are, such as whether they believe they are setting policy, advising policy-setters, or merely there to become informed on behalf of the faculty. Provost Epstein commented that committees have different roles—for example, some have a focus on policy (e.g., the Committee on Educational Policy); some have a more informational focus (e.g., the Committee on Priorities and Resources); and some are more advisory. In a similar vein, the consultant noted that many committee charges appear not to be clear, according to some faculty. As a result, different chairs may interpret the role and work of the committee differently. After concluding the exercise, S. Pierce noted that participants will elicit feedback from the faculty, perhaps through town halls and/or in other ways. A process would then be created by which a proposal for a new committee structure could be brought to the faculty as a whole. Most committee members found this approach to be intriguing.

The topic of the role of provost and dean of the faculty, and how this role has changed in recent years, was also raised in relation to college governance. The consultant noted that only a small number of peer schools have a separate provost and dean of the faculty. After the meeting, she sent the Committee of Six the [attached document](#) that describes the organizational structure for provost and/or dean at a number of institutions with which Amherst often compares itself. S. Pierce thanked the members and left the meeting at 3:35 P.M.

Discussion turned to the draft faculty meeting agenda for June 8. The members reviewed a draft motion to adopt the study-away proposal for the fall 2021 semester. It was agreed that some minor refinements should be made to the language, and that the committee would then vote electronically later in the week on the substance of the motion and whether to forward it to the faculty. The members then voted unanimously to forward the faculty meeting agenda to the faculty, with the final motion added once it is approved. (The members later voted unanimously on the substance of the motion and to forward it to the faculty.)

In the time remaining, the members continued their discussion about clarifying the criteria for tenure, turning to a draft of revisions to Amherst’s current *Faculty Handbook* language about the criteria for tenure ([Faculty Handbook, III., E., 3.](#)) that Professor Umphrey had drafted as a starting point for the conversation. The committee members felt that the proposal was moving in the right direction, thanked Professor Umphrey for her efforts, and offered feedback. Professor Umphrey agreed to incorporate the committee’s thoughts and revisions and to prepare a second draft for discussion at the members’ next meeting.

The meeting adjourned at 4:00 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Epstein
Provost and Dean of the Faculty