

The eleventh meeting of the Committee of Six for the academic year 2021–2022 was called to order by President Martin via Zoom at 2:30 P.M. on Monday, November 29, 2021. Present, in addition to the president, were Professors Clotfelter, Manion, Martini, Schroeder Rodríguez, Umphrey, and Vaughan; Provost and Dean of the Faculty Epstein; and Associate Provost Tobin, recorder.

The meeting began with Provost Epstein, as a follow up to a question posed previously by Professor Vaughan, reporting back about what she has learned about progress on hiring staff within information technology (IT) at the college. David Hamilton, chief information officer (CIO), has informed her that, after a number of vacancies emerged in his area—due to staff members taking advantage of the voluntary retirement program and also leaving for positions elsewhere—IT reorganized several areas, including its leadership team and the service desk. As a result, one-to-one replacements will not be hired to fill all of the roles of IT staff who have left Amherst. In terms of raw numbers, D. Hamilton reported that, in the last year, IT has had eleven departures and now has four open searches (for the positions of associate chief information officer, IT specialist, high performance computing [HPC] administrator, and tech service operations manager). The two searches for the service desk positions (an additional IT specialist and tech services operations manager) should conclude in December. The associate chief information officer search is just starting and, given the role, is not expected to conclude until late spring. Four hires have already been made (for the positions of director of the service desk, multimedia services manager, IT specialist, and telecom specialist). In addition, the new position of chief information security officer has been filled. Approval of another new position (research computing specialist) is expected soon, as is a search for the assistant to the CIO position, which became vacant in December. In addition, IT is rethinking two positions and will then fill them. D. Hamilton also noted that vacancy dollars have been allocated to help fund the new positions. The committee thanked Provost Epstein for providing this information.

At 2:45 P.M., Susan Resneck Pierce, the consultant who is helping to develop proposals surrounding committee service and shared governance, joined the meeting, and the members welcomed her. S. Pierce discussed the results of the survey of the faculty that was conducted in October to gather feedback about matters related to service and faculty and shared governance. Ahead of the meeting, the consultant had provided the committee with [a memo about the survey findings and her recommendations going forward](#). In addition, Jesse Barba, director of institutional research and registrar services, had shared [a summary of the faculty's responses to the survey](#). Given the lack of consensus among survey respondents about many of the issues that the survey has raised, S. Pierce recommended that the committee focus on considering the following three areas: the college's committee structure, the question of whether the Committee of Six should become two separate committees (one focusing on reappointment, tenure, and promotion and the other functioning as an executive committee of the faculty), and issues surrounding faculty meetings. As a general matter, when trying to interpret the results of the survey, the members wondered whether an analysis that considered factors such as length of time at the college and career stage, discipline, gender, and ethnicity, for example, might reveal further insights into the divergent views of the faculty on a range of matters. Provost Epstein and S. Pierce said it is their hope that J. Barba will be able to conduct such an analysis, as time permits. It was agreed that it would be helpful to study the survey results further.

Continuing the conversation, S. Pierce asked the members for their views on the recommendations she had outlined in her memo, and about next steps. Discussion focused on whether the current committee structure—both standing and ad hoc—seems to be an effective and meaningful mode of governance and decision-making at the college, and whether service on committees appears to be the most productive use of faculty and staff time and expertise. The members commented that it is clear from the survey responses that some faculty are dissatisfied with the current committee structure. It was agreed that the members should consider whether the structure can be streamlined and whether committee charges should be refined. Many of these charges seem unclear in regard to the articulation

of purpose and areas of focus, and/or are dated, the members noted. They also concurred that the benefits of moving to a governance model that places greater reliance on staff expertise in domains that fall outside the academic mission should be considered, with a continuing emphasis on the importance of faculty consultation. In this vein, it was agreed that gaining greater clarity about the responsibilities for decision-making that are delegated to different constituencies at the college is an important goal. The members decided that it would be informative for the committee to engage in the “zero-based committee exercise,” described by S. Pierce in her memo, with her assistance, in December, and to develop some proposals surrounding committees that could be brought to the faculty in the spring. Professor Clotfelter wondered whether it might be optimal to adopt a structure in which there would be two or three standing committees that have broad charges, or perhaps one in which ad hoc committees with very specific charges would be constituted as issues arose. S. Pierce responded that she has seen ad hoc committees used effectively, particularly in recent years, as long as these bodies do not usurp the work of standing committees.

Some members suggested that it would be useful to explore alternatives to committee service that would allow faculty to continue to stay informed and to engage fully in all areas of college life in important and fruitful ways, without the time commitment that committee service often requires. As an example, Professor Manion commented that, while service on the Faculty Committee on Admission and Financial Aid (FCAFA) serves a valuable educative function for faculty members, professors have no formal role in making admission decisions. Instead of having faculty serve on the FCAFA and attend regular meetings, the staff of the admission office could hold open meetings to discuss their work and answer questions. Several members also expressed the view that, while committee service has proven to be a valuable way for faculty to get to know colleagues outside their departments, other means of building community should be developed that would offer the same or greater satisfaction, but would require less time. Some members noted that faculty who are in the early stages of their career at the college, in particular, seem to want to focus on their teaching and scholarship, rather than spending their time deliberating about issues of administrative policy that are outside the academic mission.

The members decided that the committee should also consider and articulate the pros and cons of splitting the Committee of Six into two separate committees, and think carefully about the role of the executive committee that would result from doing so. S. Pierce was asked to weigh in on whether a faculty senate model might be a good alternative for Amherst to consider. She responded that, in her experience, faculty senates at small colleges often spend a great deal of time considering various issues, only to have proposals that they bring forward voted down by the full faculty. She would not recommend adopting this model at Amherst, as it could be demoralizing and generate many of the same complaints that have been raised about committee work, in her view. The members agreed to develop a proposal to bring to the faculty to split the Committee of Six on a pilot basis for three years.

Turning to the topic of faculty meetings, the committee also decided to think about possibilities for improving the ways in which the meetings are conducted, including the style and processes used for decision-making, and to bring a proposal to the faculty. Professor Umphrey said that she can imagine changes that would continue to support rigorous debate during faculty meetings, but would also encourage greater engagement across the faculty ranks. The members then thanked S. Pierce for the work she has undertaken and the progress that has been made thus far and expressed enthusiasm for the important work ahead. The consultant left the meeting at 3:50 P.M., after which the committee turned to personnel matters.

Following that discussion, President Martin informed the members of Jackie Alvarez’s plans to retire at the end of the semester as director of the counseling center. An announcement will be sent to the community soon, the president noted. ([See the announcement that was later sent.](#)) The committee thanked J. Alvarez for her service to the college, particularly during the pandemic, when issues surrounding mental health have expanded. Darien McFadden, associate director of diversity, equity,

and training, has agreed to serve as director of the center, the president said. President Martin next informed the members that the search for the next chief diversity, equity, and inclusion officer (CDEIO) has not yet yielded viable candidates for the position. She said that she is pleased that Angie Tissi-Gassoway, associate dean of students for diversity and inclusion, will assume the role of interim chief diversity, equity, and inclusion officer, beginning December 1, while the search for a permanent CDEIO continues ([see the announcement of Angie Tissi-Gassoway's appointment](#)). The president expressed gratitude to Professor Hart, who has served since early July as interim CDEIO and who is currently on leave, and the committee also expressed its appreciation. Professor Manion asked if the parameters of the position should be rethought, given the challenges of finding someone to take the position as it is currently structured. Provost Epstein, who is co-chairing the search for the CDEIO with Liz Agosto, dean of students and interim chief student affairs officer, expressed the view that the structure of the position is fine, but that there is very high demand at colleges and universities for people to fill this position, and that some candidates have been concerned about the transition in the presidency, given that the successful candidate will report to the new president. Under the new timeline for the search, the hope is that the new president will be named prior to the finalist accepting the position, though there is no guarantee. The committee discussed other possible models for the CDEIO position, including one in which a faculty member or someone with a faculty background would assume the role. The provost emphasized that the CDEIO will need also to have expertise in staff and student issues, and that the current thinking is that it would be best to hire a senior-level administrator with expertise and experience in this work. The work of faculty equity and inclusion officers and Associate Provost and Associate Dean of the Faculty Dhingra is centered on faculty issues, Provost Epstein said.

The meeting concluded with a discussion of student mental health, a topic raised by President Martin. The president commented on the nationwide trend of more and more young people experiencing serious mental health challenges during the pandemic and said that she wants to gain a greater understanding of the level of distress among students at Amherst at this time—and the best approaches to help. She has sought the advice of experts in the field on this subject and has been consulting with the staff of the Office of Student Affairs and others, as well as some faculty, including the class deans, to try to learn more. President Martin has heard reports of some students feeling that they cannot gain access to the care they want at the college, but it appears that many students may not be aware of all the services that are available and how to navigate the system that is in place to get the support they need. The president has the impression that the college—including the faculty—is making every effort to identify students who are at risk and to provide the level of support that is needed. It is hard to know, however, how many students may be in need, and she is glad that the college will be surveying the student body to get a better sense next semester. The committee suggested that it would be helpful to enhance communication to students about how to get help with the challenges they are facing—through the Office of Student Affairs and the counseling center, for example. On the academic side, it was agreed that the faculty seems very aware of issues surrounding student mental health and has been very flexible in regard to workload and alerting student affairs when students are struggling. The committee felt that it would be helpful to remind all students of the ability to convert a class to pass/fail as an option, as some members understood that communications about this option were sent only to first-year students this week; all students might benefit from receiving this information, it was noted. Professor Clotfelter commented that, in his experience as a class dean, in some cases, faculty may be too flexible with academics at times—and that some students benefit from having more structure and support, rather than having repeated extensions, for example. Given the challenges students are facing, Professor Umphrey wondered if thought might be given to restructuring the semesters so that students can take fewer than four courses at once, a change that many seem to feel would help. It was noted that students could take three courses in the spring if they take a course in January. Provost Epstein noted that January-term courses are undersubscribed. It is her understanding

that more than one hundred slots are still available. Some members noted that some students might not want to take advantage of the January-term option because doing so would mean that they would not have a break between semesters.

Concluding the conversation, the committee expressed the view that finding ways to build community at the college, including through expanding the number of joyful collective experiences, could help address feelings of isolation and loneliness, in addition to continuing to provide robust mental health services, of course. President Martin concurred that such experiences are important and noted that efforts are under way to provide more of them for students, including keeping the Powerhouse open later, as a student gathering space, and providing snacks. She noted her plans to hold two community-wide social events outside—one for students and another for faculty and staff, after classes end.

The meeting adjourned at 5:00 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Epstein  
Provost and Dean of the Faculty