

The thirteenth 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, October 26, 2020. 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.

The meeting began with the president informing the members that [an announcement of the college's preliminary plans for inviting students back to campus for the spring 2021](#) would be made on Wednesday. The hope is to bring approximately 1,200 students back to Amherst, Provost Epstein commented. (The details of the plan, including the continuation of COVID-19 health and safety measures, are included in the email.) The president and the provost said that they would hold a virtual meeting with students and their families the day after the announcement.

Under “Questions from Committee Members,” Professor Trapani, on behalf of a colleague, asked whether the college is thinking about ways to engage and support students, faculty, and staff, as the presidential election approaches, on Election Day, and in the aftermath of the election. President Martin responded that [an email with information about all that will take place, and resources that will be available](#) was about to be sent to the Amherst community (this information went out during the committee's meeting). In addition to providing opportunities for discussion and other events on Election Day, there will be programming that focuses on reflection and analysis following the election, she noted. President Martin informed the members that the Office of Student Affairs will have staff on campus on election night and will be available, should students need resources or support. The Counseling Center will also have same-day appointments available on, and in the days following, November 3. The president said that more information is available on the website [2020 Election Support Programming | Student Affairs](#).

Turning to another topic, Provost Epstein apologized for the difficulty that had occurred when some faculty had tried to access one motion (shown below) on the October 20 faculty meeting agenda. (As a result of this technical problem, there had been a brief discussion, but a vote on the motion had been postponed.) The provost noted that the language being proposed by the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP) as a new pass-fail policy would, if passed, replace the current catalog language, which had been provided via a link in the motion. The motion, as presented on the agenda, read as follows:

Motion 3

That the flexible grading option (FGO) be eliminated and that the language describing it in the *Amherst College Catalog* be removed; that [a new pass/fail policy](#) be adopted and that the language describing this policy replace the current language [describing Flexible Grading and Pass/Fail Options in the Regulations & Requirements Section of the Amherst College Catalog](#). If approved, these changes would take effect on July 1, 2021, with the exception* noted below.

* By previous vote of the faculty, FGOs used in spring 2020 will not count against the maximum number of FGOs that students are allowed; the first FGO used in each term of the 2020–2021 academic year will also not count against this maximum.

Continuing, the provost asked the members if they wished to propose any changes to the motion, given that some substantive concerns and some confusion seemed to emerge during the brief discussion of the proposed policy at the faculty meeting. (To inform the members' discussion, prior to the meeting, Jesse Barba, director of institutional research and registrar services, provided some clarifying information about the proposal.)

Professor Kingston commented that, during the faculty's brief conversation at the faculty meeting, the question had been raised as to whether instructors should be notified when their students make the decision to take a course pass-fail. Another point to consider, in his view, is whether a declaration

of pass-fail should require the permission of the student's instructor, in addition to the student's advisor. Under the proposal, only the advisor's permission would be required for the declaration. In addition, Professor Kingston commented that, under the current proposal, the date by which such a declaration would need to take place would be the final day of the exam period. He proposed that the faculty be asked to consider whether the requirement should be that the declaration be made before the final day of classes. Finally, he suggested that separate votes be taken on these possible amendments to the proposal. The members discussed the challenges that professors face when students seem not to be intellectually engaged with course material, and/or appear to be struggling, and the professor is not permitted to know if the student is taking a course pass-fail. It was noted that students who decide to take a course pass-fail very early in the semester can dilute the intellectual rigor of a course, including through a lack of participation. On the other hand, it was noted that, if a student were permitted to delay declaring a pass-fail until the end of exam period, there would be an incentive for the student to try to do well in the course, until it becomes clear that doing well in the course is impossible. It was agreed that Professor Kingston should draft some motions that would permit the faculty to weigh in about possible options for a new pass-fail system to replace the FGO. The members would then decide what motions to bring forward to the faculty.

Most of the remainder of the meeting was devoted to finalizing the committee's proposal to amend the [Statement of Academic and Expressive Freedom](#), at the level of considering principles, goals, community values, tone, reach, acknowledgement of past harm—and engaging in intensive wordsmithing. As part of doing so, the members drew on their extensive conversations over recent months about the Black Student Union's request that the college revise the statement, experiences shared by Black alumni, the college's anti-racism plan, the history of systemic racism in the United States, issues raised during the committee-of-the-whole discussion at the October 6 faculty meeting, the policies of peer institutions, the relationship of the Statement of Academic and Expressive Freedom to other college policies that protect Amherst community members from discrimination and harassment, and the committee's own views on this important matter. After finalizing [the draft proposal](#), the committee discussed once again the most efficacious way to solicit feedback from faculty and staff. Given the challenges of engaging in discourse over Zoom, the committee decided to gather commentary about the proposal via a Google form. The members also agreed to urge colleagues to provide their names when sharing their views via the form, but also decided to provide an option for anonymous submission. It was agreed that the submissions would not be made public and would be used only to inform the committee's future deliberations about the proposal, the final version of which will be voted on by the faculty.

In the short time remaining, the members discussed whether the approach to minuting the committee's meetings should change. It was agreed that the committee, faculty, and staff could be better served if the minutes were to become less detailed, and had a greater focus on summarizing salient points made during the members' discussions, and the rationale for and impact of decisions. Some members expressed the view that direct attribution of speakers in the minutes can create barriers to engagement in free-and-open discourse during the committee's conversations, in the name of ensuring accountability and transparency, while others thought that a moderate level of attribution is important to transparency in faculty governance. It was agreed that making the minutes more focused and concise could also make them more accessible. At present, it was noted, tasks surrounding the minutes are placing a tremendous burden on the committee, the recorder, and the readers; it is questionable whether the attention that is being devoted is worth the cost, the members concurred. The committee also agreed that having shorter and less complicated minutes would also improve the efficiency of the approval process for the members, allowing for more timely distribution of the minutes and enhanced communication. While concurring with much of what was said, Professor Umphrey commented that the committee's minutes have served a valuable archival function over many years. She said that it is her hope that a record of the reasoning that leads to decision-

making is not lost in in the quest for concision. Professor Umphrey also raised issues surrounding transparency and fostering trust and suggested that the transition to a new approach to minuting not be too abrupt or shift to an extreme of brevity. Others concurred.

Just prior to the meeting, the committee had received a revised draft of the bias-reporting and response protocol and related documents. The meeting concluded with the members noting that they would discuss this topic at their next meeting.

The meeting adjourned at 5:00 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Epstein
Provost and Dean of the Faculty