

The third meeting of the Faculty Executive Committee (FEC) for the academic year 2022–2023 was called to order by Professor Call, chair of the committee, in the president’s office on Monday, October 3, 2022, at 4:00 P.M. Present, in addition to Professor Call, were Professors Coráñez Bolton, Mattiacci, Martini, and Polk; President Elliott; Provost and Dean of the Faculty Epstein; and Associate Provost Tobin, recorder.

Under “Topics of the day,” the committee briefly discussed the college’s COVID-19 protocols. At the moment, President Elliott said, it appears that most individuals are becoming infected with COVID-19 off campus; staff members are experiencing the highest number of cases at this time, though the number of these cases is quite small. He noted that the case level overall at the college is also very low. Many students continue to take advantage of the college’s testing program, which is useful. The committee noted the new masking policy in classrooms and teaching laboratories and instructional spaces that will take effect on October 17 ([see the September 29 announcement of this policy that was sent to the community via email](#)). Beginning then, these spaces will either continue to have required masking or will be mask-optional, (depending on the outcome of an anonymous survey conducted in each class or lab by the instructor about the preferences of the class regarding masking). Concluding the conversation about the new masking policy, President Elliott commented that some negative feedback has been received from a faculty member, who felt that the college was an outlier in regard to its masking policy, and from some parents, who favor a mask-optional policy and feel that the college is being too restrictive in its policies. As a general matter in regard to communications about COVID protocols, Professor Mattiacci commented that she finds the updates from the college that are more capacious to be the most effective; providing the reasoning behind the adoption of new policies in such messages leads to greater understanding, she noted.

Discussion turned to whether Amherst plans to require the new bivalent Omicron-specific COVID-19 booster for students, faculty, and staff. President Elliott said that the college recommends that members of the community receive both the flu shot and the booster. No decision has yet been made, however, about requiring the booster, though the college is considering whether to take this step for students. When asked why such a mandate would potentially be limited to students, the president responded that, because they are in residence on campus, the college has a particular responsibility to take whatever reasonable steps it can to minimize transmission of the virus. President Elliott pointed out again some of the complexities surrounding instituting such a requirement for faculty and staff. Some members of the community won’t qualify for the booster, and others will need to make a decision about whether to have the vaccine that is based on their health and their doctor’s recommendation. Concerns about compliance issues, if the booster were to be required, would also make mandating the shot a challenge.

Continuing the conversation, President Elliott informed the members that a booster clinic will be held for students on October 6; he understands that students have already signed up for the three hundred available doses of the Pfizer bivalent vaccine. The college is continuing to work on securing additional doses and would like to be able to hold other clinics in the coming months. It is hoped that the shots can be in as many arms as possible by January, he noted. Professor Call asked if plans call for offering similar clinics for faculty and staff. The president said that the first priority is to make sure that as many students as possible are able to get the booster on campus, as a good number could have trouble gaining access to it off campus. If it becomes possible to have clinics for faculty and staff, which will be dependent on the availability of the booster, the college will certainly do so.

On a related note, the members discussed [concerns that Professor Park raised in an email](#) that he asked Professor Coráñez Bolton to share with the members. Professor Park was notified that his email was also forwarded to the Health Readiness Group. In the communication, Professor Park described his experience with a student, who was clearly ill, who had come to meet with him during office hours. When asked, the student reported that he had not been tested for COVID-19. Professor Mattiacci

commented that this kind of situation, which is very unfortunate, can put tenure-track faculty under some pressure. It is possible that colleagues may worry that, if they move meetings with students to Zoom in this or another circumstance, for example, they might comment in their teaching evaluations that the professor was unavailable to them. This possible reaction on the part of students might decrease the accuracy and precision of their comments in teaching evaluations, something that could create challenges for the Tenure and Promotion Committee when evaluating a teaching record for a candidate, she suggested. It would be helpful if faculty could point to a policy, such as that suggested by Professor Park, when students come to meetings when they have symptoms of illness. Provost Epstein explained that, while all classes must be taught in person, and that it is hoped that most meetings with students can happen in person as well, the college has not been proscriptive about the modality in which faculty hold office hours and other meetings with students outside class; it is up to the faculty member to decide this. It is certainly acceptable to hold such meetings on Zoom, and it should be understood that faculty will not meet with symptomatic students, she noted. The members concurred. Some members noted that they have found it more effective to meet with students on Zoom, in some cases. Under other circumstances, such as when reviewing homework with a small group or making use of a blackboard to illustrate a point for a student, being in person is ideal, it was noted. Professor Polk commented that, during this time of wearing masks, he has found that both he and many students prefer to meet on Zoom, so that they can see each other's faces and get to know each other better—without the barrier that masks can create. It was suggested that the provost reiterate the policy she had described about one-on-one meetings at the next meeting of the chairs of academic departments and programs. She agreed to do so.

Provost Epstein next informed the members that the *Amherst Student* has shown interest in [the report of the Ad Hoc Committee to Evaluate the January Term](#) and is planning to run an article about January term. (The report was completed in May of 2022; the ad hoc committee decided not to bring a motion forward to have a January term in 2023. Its members proposed that a January Term pilot be considered for three years [2024–2026]). Following the release of the report, the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP) decided to discuss the suggestions of the ad hoc committee in the next academic year, the provost said. This year, however, the CEP appears to have little interest in doing so. Last year, the Committee of Six suggested that the members of the Faculty Executive Committee (FEC) also take up this issue. Provost Epstein said that, if the FEC would like to discuss this matter, it can be placed on the committee's agenda.

Under "Questions from Committee Members," Professor Mattiacci asked when the college intends to allow members of the college community to bring their family members to Valentine for meals and to use the gym. The provost said that doing so is already allowed. Professor Mattiacci, who had missed the announcement of the shift in policy, said that she is delighted to know of this change.

At 4:30 P.M., consultant Susan Resneck Pierce joined the meeting, after which introductions followed. Provost Epstein commented that S. Pierce was first engaged in 2020–2021 to help develop proposals surrounding committee service and shared governance at the college; she continued that work during the last academic year, with a focus on the college's committee structure, including the question of whether the Committee of Six should become two separate committees (which it later did, of course). The members welcomed the consultant, who then provided a brief overview of her work at Amherst over the past nearly two years, and offered some ideas of topics that the FEC could undertake this year, if it chooses to do so. Her understanding is that the next step is for her to meet with FEC members individually to hear their thoughts about this work, she said.

S. Pierce conveyed that it is her understanding that long-standing concerns surrounding service at the college, including those that stood out in the results of the 2019–2020 Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE) Faculty Job Satisfaction Survey, prompted Amherst to consider how service might be reimagined at the college. (The COACHE program is housed at the Harvard

University Graduate School of Education and offers one of the best-known, and longest running, surveys exploring the job satisfaction of faculty. Amherst has participated in the COACHE survey since 2013.) A significant number of Amherst COACHE survey respondents raised concerns about service obligations at the college, and associate professors reported lower satisfaction than faculty at other ranks, S. Pierce noted. It is her understanding that, at Amherst, faculty members are largely protected from service until they return from their post-tenure leave, when many professors with whom she spoke reported that they had to assume significant and time-consuming service obligations. The consultant also noted that COACHE survey results suggest that discontent about service is more pronounced at Amherst than at peer institutions. S. Pierce commented that, underpinning the work of considering service at the college is the premise that faculty time is precious and should be consequential. She noted that a survey on faculty governance and service that the college conducted in October of 2021, based on her recommendation and with questions approved by the Committee of Six, indicated that slightly more than half of the Amherst's faculty members who responded (54 percent) judged committee service to be an effective use of their time. Continuing the discussion, S. Pierce noted that many institutions operate with the view that faculty time should be devoted to considering important questions that require strategic thinking, rather than being spent "in the weeds." Professor Martini commented that, at Amherst, there are strong feelings on both sides when it comes to this issue.

Continuing the conversation, Professor Mattiacci questioned some of the inferences that have been based on the October 2021 survey, since the response rate was only 52 percent, and because a random sample was not used. Based on the data, seven out of ten tenure-track faculty were effectively silent, she noted, commenting that this is far from a majority. S. Pierce noted that the findings are also based on her conversations with more than sixty faculty members at the college, many lasting for at least an hour. She commented that she found the faculty with whom she spoke to be candid, noting that many raised concerns that were consistent with the survey results. Professor Mattiacci added that, since the survey responses are anonymous, it is not known whether the same individuals who filled out the survey also participated in those conversations, though such a thing is certainly possible. Given this fact, coupled with the relatively low response rate for tenure-track faculty members, Professor Mattiacci cautioned that care should be taken not to make broad statements such as, "Tenure-track faculty at Amherst college think that..." Such statements, she noted, would only be based on the available data. Professor Polk said that he understands the concerns to which Professor Mattiacci had pointed out, but feels that it is still useful to examine closely the data that have been assembled. He sees value in learning more about what faculty have to say about service. It seems clear that a significant number of colleagues are unhappy about service, which is important. The members discussed a pattern at the college that some have observed, which can vary by department, of early-career faculty feeling pressure to devote themselves fully to scholarship and teaching; after earning tenure, colleagues worry that they will have to spend much less time on both core pursuits because of service demands post-tenure. Some departments seem to encourage tenure-track faculty to serve on college committees; others convey that service is not taken into account at the time of tenure and thus is not important, it was noted. S. Pierce commented that some faculty with whom she spoke said that there is a divide between the "old guard," which is highly engaged in faculty governance, and early-career faculty, who are engaged in being highly productive scholars in their pre-tenure years and may feel that faculty governance is not part of their role and should be left to senior colleagues. Perhaps the importance of faculty governance is not being conveyed to tenure-track faculty, some senior colleagues noted.

Continuing the conversation, Professor Call expressed the view that, while the focus of the consultant's work on service at the college appears to have been on the committee structure, the burden of service is heaviest in departments, in his experience. That burden has increased

significantly over the years, he noted. Service on committees, with only a few exceptions in any given year, is not as substantial a time commitment for most faculty. In regard to proposals that have been brought forward to streamline committees, Professor Call expressed grave concern about the idea of eliminating the Faculty Committee on Admission and Financial Aid (FCAFA). He noted the importance of this committee and the essential role that faculty have played over the years when it comes to informing decision-making about significant questions of admission policy. The faculty's voice has been critical, he explained, particularly when the college has been faced with competing interests, and there has been a need to restore greater balance in admission policy. S. Pierce said that some of those with whom she met had expressed the view that it would be useful to consider ways for the faculty to continue to weigh in on important matters, without having to spend as much time attending frequent committee meetings.

In regard to considering the college committee structure, S. Pierce recommended that the FEC engage in what she calls the *zero-based committee exercise*. This approach would involve starting out with a blank slate and building a committee structure from scratch, rather than examining the current structure and trying to refine it. As part of this work, the committee could identify those matters for which the faculty has primary (albeit recommending) responsibility, those matters about which the faculty should be consulted, and those matters about which the faculty needs to be informed. The committee could then try to determine which committees would best enable the faculty to fulfill its primary responsibilities and which committees and other mechanisms the college could establish to ensure that the faculty is appropriately consulted. President Elliott asked if other institutions with which S. Pierce has worked have found the zero-based committee exercise to be useful. She responded that it has worked well and has encouraged creative thinking.

Turning to another topic, S. Pierce noted that some faculty members with whom she spoke commented that, as a general matter, the degree to which some committees are effective depends on the individual who is chairing it. As a result, there can be periods when the chair is deeply enthusiastic about the committee's work and during which a good deal is accomplished. During other periods, this may not be the case. She noted that the staff with whom she spoke said that they have enjoyed working with faculty members on committees, though, it has been noted that, at times some faculty have not been as respectful as they should be to staff members. Provost Epstein commented that respondents to the college's staff surveys conducted in 2017 and February 2020 also mentioned this kind of behavior.

Concluding her remarks, S. Pierce said that she looks forward to working with the committee to consider next steps. The members thanked S. Pierce and said that they look forward to speaking with her further, and she left the meeting at 5:04 P.M.

The committee said that it would be useful to learn more about the results of the various surveys that were referenced in the conversation that had just taken place. The committee wondered whether it would be useful to conduct another faculty survey, now that the pandemic is at a different stage, and now that all teaching is being done in person.

In the time remaining, the committee returned to the topic of the CEP's [proposal to revise the policy on Latin honors](#). As the members had had a full discussion of this topic at their last meeting, the conversation focused on the committee's understanding of a number of issues, about which the members had requested some data. Jesse Barba, director of institutional research and registrar services, provided this information prior to the meeting. Discussion began with Professor Polk expressing concern that, under the proposal, when it comes to "counting" courses toward the breadth requirement, a single subject code (corresponding to a subject, department, or program) could not be in multiple categories, and the category of a course would be completely determined by its subject code. The rigidity and limitations of this system would not reflect or support the college's commitment to interdisciplinarity, in Professor Polk's view. This approach would not encourage students to spread

their courses across disciplines, he feels, and Professor Polk suggested that there should be more flexibility in the system, if it is approved. Provost Epstein commented that Professor Polk had raised important questions about the administration of the proposed system, and it seems that some faculty may not feel comfortable with this form of classification. An alternative might be to have departments make a designation for each of their courses. President Elliott expressed some concern that tagging every course with a divisional identity could affect how students view the curriculum. Doing so, in his view, could send a signal about how students should think about intellectual differences. These and other matters could be discussed during the upcoming committee-of-the whole conversation at the October 18 faculty meeting, the provost suggested. Professors Mattiacci and Coráñez Bolton wondered if the proposed time limit of sixty minutes for that discussion would allow sufficient time for all voices to be heard at the faculty meeting. The members agreed that the time could be extended at the October 18 meeting, or that the conversation could continue at a subsequent faculty meeting, if necessary.

The members then discussed, from a comparative perspective, [data that J. Barba had provided regarding departmental honors recommendations and honors outcomes for the classes of 2017 to 2021](#). It was noted that the data indicate that there are differences among departments in regard to the percentage of summa recommendations that they made during this period, as well as the percentage of those recommendations that resulted in Latin honors. These outcomes have been affected by the current GPA requirement, the members acknowledged. The committee noted that, if the CEP's proposal is implemented, it is anticipated that the number of students receiving summa and magna honors will rise, significantly so for magna honors, as a consequence of moving away from the GPA requirement.

In response to the committee's request for additional information about how many more arts courses/faculty might be needed to provide enough courses in the arts so that students wishing to pursue magna and summa honors could satisfy the breadth requirement, J. Barba suggested that a modest expansion of one to three FTEs in the arts could be helpful, but that it is possible that no additional FTEs will be needed. The members noted that, based on what J. Barba reported, it appears that adding a small number of large- to medium-sized introductory courses to the curriculum in music and art history, and some other departments, for example, should make it possible to offer sufficient courses in the arts to meet anticipated enrollments. It was noted that, under the proposal, half courses could be used to meet the arts requirement.

The members reviewed a draft agenda for a faculty meeting on October 18 and voted six in favor and zero opposed to forward the agenda to the faculty.

The meeting adjourned at 5:30 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Epstein
Provost and Dean of the Faculty