

The second 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, September 19, 2022, at 4:00 p.m. Present, in addition to Professor Call, were Professors Coráñez Bolton, Mattiacci, and Martini; President Elliott; Provost and Dean of the Faculty Epstein; and Associate Provost Tobin, recorder. Professor Polk was absent.

Under “Topics of the day,” the president asked the members for their views about the possibility of relaxing the college’s COVID-19 protocols if case levels at Amherst remain as low as they are now, or become lower still. Plans call for evaluating the college’s current set of COVID policies at the end of September, he said, noting that Amherst continues to monitor the COVID response in the local area. Among the ideas being considered during this endemic stage is making masks optional during classes, at the discretion of students and faculty. Under this system, anonymous polling would be conducted for each class, and the instructor and students would vote on whether to make masks optional. If even one person objected to a mask-optional policy, masks would still be required. If there was a vote to require masks, the instructor could still be unmasked when more than six feet away from the students.

Professor Martini commented that such a system might become too restrictive eventually, though all agreed it could be a good interim measure. The possibility of when the campus might become mask-optional was discussed, including what the tipping point should be for making this transition. It was agreed that, while it will be impossible to accommodate the comfort level of every individual within the community, developing a sense of that level, and the COVID-case count in the weeks to come, will be a good guide for making the decision to shift to making masks optional on campus. Professor Mattiacci, commenting on how disruptive it is when faculty must isolate after they become infected with the virus, suggested that the college err on the side of caution and continue to require masks in classrooms further into the semester.

Continuing the conversation, Professor Call recommended that the administration continue its efforts to educate the college community about public health experts’ current thinking about the permutations of the virus, and the strategies that are most effective in reducing its spread. He appreciated, for example, learning from the college that surveillance testing is no longer considered to be the best approach, given how transmissible current variants are. Having more knowledge about the science that will inform the college’s decision-making would make him feel more comfortable with loosening restrictions, he said. Professor Martini agreed, while suggesting, as Professor Rosenbaum did recently ([see his note of September 1, 2022](#)), that the college conduct randomized mandatory testing (using small samples of community members) or pool testing, as both approaches would provide information about the prevalence of the virus on campus. On a related note Provost Epstein said that many students who are symptomatic are choosing to be tested for COVID, which has come as something of a welcome surprise, and which has been helpful in gaining some sense of the infection rate among students.

Professor Coráñez Bolton wondered where Amherst resides on the spectrum of restrictiveness among colleges and universities, when it comes to COVID protocols. President Elliott said that Amherst is on the conservative end, though the college is not a complete outlier among its peers. Protocols among schools range from requiring masking, to not allowing masking to be required. Some institutions are loosening restrictions after requiring the new booster, he noted. Though there is not a wealth of data on this subject, it is hard to find a correlation between schools’ policies and the rate of infection on their campuses, the president noted. This doesn’t mean, however, that the policies don’t have an effect, he said.

On a related note, Professor Mattiacci asked if the college plans to require the newest COVID booster. President Elliott said that no decision has been made about this question yet, but he pointed out some of the complexities surrounding instituting such a requirement; 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, President Elliott noted. Plans call for setting up clinics on campus, if it is possible to do so, so that members of the community will have easy access to the booster, as they do to the flu vaccine. President Elliott thanked the members for their helpful advice.

Discussion turned to [a proposal from the provost's office to introduce protocols for departments to follow when faculty searches include internal candidates](#). Provost Epstein asked for the committee's feedback on the proposal and also informed the members of her plans to share the proposal with the chairs of academic departments and programs on September 30. The members agreed that searches with internal candidates require special attention, and that putting practices in place to encourage further sensitivity and transparency would be very helpful for all involved; they viewed the proposed protocols as thoughtful and useful. Professor Mattiacci, who had high praise for the proposal, also offered some possible additions to the document. She suggested that there be a recommendation that departments take care not to include internal candidates in general departmental emails about the search—for example, communications that convey information about other candidates' job talks and meeting schedules. It would be helpful to keep emails about other departmental business separate from those about searches, in other words, she noted. Perhaps, the chair might discuss with internal candidates which emails they want to receive, it was noted.

Professor Mattiacci also commented that she understands that, in some departments, tenure-track faculty who participate in the search process are not given access to internal candidates' teaching evaluations that are part of the individual's application, while tenured members are. It was agreed that both tenure-track and tenured members of the department who are involved in searches should have access to all application materials.

Professor Martini noted that it is inevitable that department members will have close personal knowledge of internal candidates, for example, about the quality of these individuals' teaching. She believes that such information should not be withheld. For this reason, in Professor Martini's view, there is no way around the fact that the internal and external candidates are unequal in this way. Other members agreed. Concluding the conversation about this topic, President Elliott expressed support for the proposed protocols, commenting that they convey—and attempt to address—the challenges and awkwardness that are often a part of searches that include internal candidates. Provost Epstein thanked the members for their comments and said that she would share the committee's suggestions with the chairs when discussing the document.

At 4:30 p.m., David Hamilton, chief information officer, joined the meeting to discuss some options for holding faculty meetings in a hybrid format, including approaches that might be used for voting—and the advantages and disadvantages of each. Prior to the meeting, he provided the members with [a summary of this information](#). Provost Epstein thanked D. Hamilton for preparing this document, which conveys the complexities surrounding hybrid meetings—including the range of resources that would be needed to implement various approaches. Beginning the discussion, Professor Call asked if there is an appetite for developing a dedicated space on campus for hybrid meetings. Provost Epstein said that she does not recommend moving in this direction. Putting cost aside, though it could be substantial to create such a space, she feels that, in keeping with Amherst's mission, the business of the college should happen in person. In the provost's view, the college would not be well served by investing in hybrid facilities. President Elliott asked if there are existing spaces on campus that would lend themselves well for hybrid faculty meetings. It was agreed that Stirn Auditorium might be a possibility, but is likely not viable due to the cost of modifying the space to make it possible to hold high-quality hybrid meetings. It would also take some time to obtain the necessary equipment, which would be true of trying to modify Cole Assembly Room. As noted in the document, a number of the approaches that D. Hamilton presented for consideration would also require additional staff to implement.

After reviewing the possible options, the committee focused its consideration on the model for offering a remote option at this time that is the least complex and that requires the least investment in regard to costs and staff time. It was agreed that faculty meetings should be livestreamed, so that those eligible to attend the meetings have the option of watching and listening. The members decided that, given that the expectation and preference is that those eligible to attend faculty meetings do so in person, and the inherent technological challenges and impact of remote participation, those watching the meeting remotely should not be provided with a mechanism to speak or send in comments. In addition, the committee agreed that a production company should not be engaged (one of the options in the area of technology), due to the costs involved; instead staff from Information Technology should make simple modifications to broadcast faculty meetings. These will include focusing a camera on the president and provost when they speak. In addition, microphones will be stationed on two sides at the front of the room, with cameras there; faculty will need to move to the microphones to speak. The members also agreed that voting for the anticipated October 18 faculty meeting, during which no motions regarding substantive issues will be on the agenda, will be limited to in-person attendees. Those voting in person will do so by unanimous consent, by voice vote, by a show of hands, or by written ballot if requested. Finally, given some concern about social distancing at this time, the members decided that the October 18 faculty meeting should take place in Johnson Chapel.

In terms of future hybrid faculty meetings, the members felt that a mechanism should be developed to allow those watching the meeting remotely to vote—combining these votes with voting that would take place in person. Some members expressed the view that hybrid faculty meetings should not limit faculty sovereignty and exclude some faculty from participating in the democratic process. Professor Martini wondered if voting could be done on phones. D. Hamilton commented that training faculty to use clickers had taken some time, also noting that some faculty have expressed apprehension about electronic voting. He imagines that allowing electronic voting outside the meeting might make this concern more pronounced. While D. Hamilton expressed some worry that allowing in-person as well as remote voting could be cumbersome, the committee felt that combining the votes of those inside and outside the meeting should be possible, and should be tried while hybrid faculty meetings are offered. The members noted that, if a time can be found for holding faculty meetings during the day, the committee would revisit the idea of holding hybrid faculty meetings. At this time, patching together a hybrid option seems to be desirable, the committee agreed, while also encouraging a return to in-person meeting. The members thanked D. Hamilton, and he left the meeting at 5:00 P.M.

The meeting concluded with a discussion of [a proposal forwarded by the Committee on Educational Policy \(CEP\) to revise the college's policy on awarding Latin honors](#). The committee offered its appreciation for the thoughtfulness of the proposal, thanked the CEP for its hard work, and expressed general support for the proposal—particularly the recommendation to replace the current class rank/GPA-criterion for summa and magna honors with a median-grade requirement, as well as a proposed academic breadth requirement (see below). Professor Mattiacci, who was enthusiastic about the CEP's recommendations, asked a couple of questions as points of clarification. She offered support for the CEP's proposal that a new academic breadth criterion be introduced as a requirement for honors at the summa and magna levels, viewing the recommendation that students take and pass at least one course in the arts, humanities, sciences and mathematics, and social and behavioral sciences as being in keeping with the philosophy of the liberal arts. At the same time, Professor Mattiacci wondered why this requirement should not be adopted as a criterion for honors at the cum level, or even for all students. Provost Epstein responded that this approach could be seen as a de facto distribution requirement that would not be in keeping with the open curriculum.

Continuing the conversation, Professor Mattiacci asked about the proposal that the Faculty Executive Committee not read theses that are recommended for summa honors, as the Committee of Six did for many years. It seems useful to have a body review all theses that are recommended for summa

honors—thus providing a perspective beyond individual departments—in her view. Under the proposal, the FEC would only review the departmental recommendations for summa theses. Provost Epstein said that the CEP feels that a requirement that advisors write recommendations that are read by the FEC will provide a hurdle that is sufficient to offer a disincentive to departments to recommend theses for summa honors when the work does not warrant this distinction. In addition, she noted, reading all theses recommended for summa honors, during a very busy time of year, placed a burden on the members of the Committee of Six, who only occasionally asked departments questions about a thesis, and never overturned a departmental recommendation, in her experience. Professor Call, who observed that, in his experience, there were real benefits to having the Committee of Six review theses recommended for summa, supported retaining this practice by giving members of the Faculty Executive Committee access to these theses.

Professor Martini next asked whether there are differences among departments in regard to the number of summa recommendations they typically make. Provost Epstein said that, in her experience, there are some significant differences. Professor Martini requested that the committee be provided with data about the number of summa recommendations by discipline. Provost Epstein said that she would ask Jesse Barba, director of institutional research and registrar services, to gather this information for the committee. The members noted that, if the proposal is implemented, the number of students receiving summa and magna honors will rise, significantly so for magna honors. Some members commented that, at present, many students would not satisfy the proposed breadth requirement. Professor Call said that he anticipates that, if the proposal is implemented, students who want to be considered for magna and summa honors will certainly change their course-taking patterns to meet the breadth requirement.

This last point raised questions about whether there would be a sufficient number of faculty and/or courses in the arts to enable students to meet the breadth requirement, if the proposal is implemented. It was noted that many studio courses have caps to keep enrollments small, which could create challenges in terms of meeting student need. Provost Epstein wondered whether creative-writing courses could, perhaps, be categorized as being in the arts rather than the humanities; this seems appropriate, in her view, while noting that the faculty and CEP would need to be consulted before moving forward with this change. Increasing the number of larger lecture courses in art history and/or music by a small number could also help provide more offerings in the arts, she noted. President Elliott said that he would like to gain a better sense of how many more arts courses/faculty would be needed to provide enough courses in the arts so that students wishing to pursue magna and summa honors could meet the breadth requirement. Provost Epstein said that she would ask J. Barba to provide an estimate.

Concluding the discussion, Professor Martini expressed some concern that, under the proposal, Latin honors are tied to thesis work, as well as to grades (as is true now). She would prefer a system in which there would be two parallel systems, one that recognizes excellence across the curriculum, and another that recognizes departmental distinction (thesis work). Provost Epstein said that she fears that, under such a system, the number of students writing theses would decline significantly; she considers writing a thesis to be one of the most important intellectual experiences students can have. Professor Martini responded that she does not disagree that completing a thesis is a significant accomplishment, but she sees it as one that might not meet the needs of all students. Professor Martini noted, for example, that, at times, students take three fewer courses as a result, which could have a significant impact on their intellectual experience. Professor Call said that he would also prefer a system that recognizes departmental and college-wide academic achievement with separate honors. At the same time, Professors Call and Martini expressed the view that the CEP's proposal represents an improvement over the current honors system. Professor Call asked if the members wished to meet with the CEP and/or to convey questions to its members at this time. The committee did not feel that it would be necessary to

do so. It was agreed that there should be a faculty meeting on October 18, and that there should be a committee-of-the-whole discussion about the CEP's proposal, in order to gain a sense of the faculty's views.

The meeting adjourned at 5:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Epstein
Provost and Dean of the Faculty