

The eighteenth 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, April 24, at 4:00 p.m. Present, in addition to Professor Call, were Professors Hasan, Martini, Mattiacci, and Polk; President Elliott; Provost and Dean of the Faculty Epstein; and Associate Provost Tobin, recorder.

Under “Topics of the Day,” President Elliott said that he is interested in learning more about how students felt about the new April mini-break, which was designed to offer some breathing space during a very busy time in the semester, though it will be difficult to find ways to measure the impact, he recognizes. The members expressed enthusiasm for having a break at this point in the year. Provost Epstein said that the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP) is considering making an April mini-break a regular part of the academic calendar.

The members next discussed [a note that Professor Lembo, chair of the Faculty Committee on Admission and Financial Aid \(FCAFA\), had sent to the FEC](#), noting the FCAFA’s unanimous recommendation to extend indefinitely the college’s current test-optional policy regarding standardized testing. Professor Call, while complimenting the FCAFA on the thoroughness of its deliberations, commented on the importance of recognizing and addressing the stress being placed on students and faculty as result of some students’ gaps in preparation. While it is not clear what the causes are of the increase in the number of students who are less well-prepared, it is clear that more resources are needed to support students to ensure their academic success at the college, he said. Professor Call stressed the need to direct additional support to the Moss Quantitative Center, for example. More support is needed in the area of student writing, as well, Professor Hasan emphasized. Professor Hasan informed the members that some faculty have shared with him that they have been adjusting their teaching and expectations to accommodate less well-prepared students in ways that may not be sustainable. The members discussed, as did the FCAFA, the particular challenges of placing students in STEM classes that are appropriate to their level of preparation, in the absence of information from standardized tests. Professor Martini proposed that students be asked to take the SAT for placement purposes after being admitted to the college. The logistical challenges of this approach would create barriers to implementing it, other members felt. It was noted that some departments have developed other ways to determine placements for students, including some approaches that require a great deal of time.

Professor Mattiacci wondered if there might be additional approaches (beyond what was described in Professor Lembo’s note) that could be used to analyze the data related to the test-optional policy pilot, with the goal of yielding more information about the impact of the policy. For example, comparing the variance or the kurtosis of the two distributions might be more informative than comparing their central tendencies, given grade inflation. Professors Call and Martini commented that it would be difficult to tease out possible causes of differences in academic preparation and performance among some students in recent years, given how many possible factors have been going on at once—including the impact of the pandemic and the test-optional pilot. The committee asked if the college will continue to evaluate the test-optional policy and would be open to returning to requiring standardized tests in the future. The president responded that the college will continue to evaluate the impact of the test-optional policy and would be open to revisiting this issue, while also being responsive to the broader admission landscape.

Concluding the discussion, the committee also noted, and supported, the FCAFA’s recommendation that the Office of Admission continue to collect data (and that the FCAFA review these data) that are relevant to understanding how, among other things, a test-optional policy expands the college’s diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives at the point of admission. President Elliott commented that the upcoming Supreme Court decision on race-conscious admissions may have an impact on the college’s ability to gather and analyze such data. The college will be monitoring this issue closely, he said.

Under “Questions from Committee Members,” Professor Hasan, noting that some faculty colleagues from different disciplines have shared their concerns with him about the support being offered to faculty by the college’s Grants Office, and asked him to inquire about this issue. Provost Epstein first

commented that the Grants Office has been renamed the Office of Sponsored Research and Foundation Relations. She also noted that many faculty members are enjoying great success in winning competitive grant awards at this time. She explained that the search for the director of the Office of Sponsored Research and Foundation Relations has failed, and that she and colleagues in her office are thinking about interim solutions to support the staff in the office during this period. The members asked why the search failed. The provost responded that the market for professionals in this field is very competitive, and that some of those in the pool only had expertise in either sponsored research or foundation relations. In addition, some candidates wished to work remotely, and the college feels that the director should work in person much of the time. Provost Epstein explained that a search is under way for a new position in the controller's office, which will focus on post-grant award processes, which will be very helpful. Professor Martini responded that it is her understanding that many faculty concerns about the grants process revolve around the post-grant process, and that having a new position in this area will be appreciated. The provost said that she is eager to hear from faculty colleagues about their needs and experiences around the grants function, and she encouraged colleagues to send their thoughts on this matter to her.

Turning to another topic, Professor Polk noted that some tenure-track colleagues have shared with him that they voted for tenure-track positions on the committee with the understanding that those elected would serve as representatives for tenure-track faculty. It appears that some colleagues believe that the FEC functions more like a faculty senate than a faculty executive committee that represents the faculty as a whole. In his view, there seems to be some tension surrounding the purpose of the committee and the role of tenure-track members. The committee emphasized that, while tenure-track members of the FEC offer very helpful and welcome perspectives that are based, in part, on their personal experience at this career stage, all members are elected to represent the faculty as a whole. The following language from [the FEC's charge](#) offers clarity on this point and should prove helpful: "Members of the Faculty Executive Committee are elected to represent the interests of the entire faculty, not those of special groups. They are elected without restrictions of divisional or departmental affiliation. In the discharge of their duties, the various members participate equally in all parts of the deliberations of the committee and in all votes taken by it."

Professor Mattiacci next raised a question about the election process used for the Tenure and Promotion Committee (TPC). Noting that she finds it helpful to have the departments of the continuing members of the TPC listed on the ballot and in the email announcing the election, she wonders if it might also be useful to include the departments of those who will be considered for tenure in the next academic year. In this way, when voting, colleagues might consider the disciplines of those whom they are selecting in the context of those whom the committee will be evaluating. The provost said that, in her experience, colleagues from all disciplines are able to evaluate all tenure cases, relying heavily on the evaluations of the experts in the candidate's field who serve as external reviewers and using their own good judgment. Professor Call concurred. Beyond this, at a logistical level, it was also noted that, while the candidates for next year are known now, those who will be serving for two years will evaluate a slate of tenure candidates that has not yet been confirmed.

Kristina Reardon, director of the intensive writing program and lecturer in English, joined the meeting at 4:39 p.m. to speak with the committee about the intensive writing program. At the outset of the conversation, she shared information about her efforts, since she began her work at the college in the 2021–2022 academic year, to help professors (particularly those teaching first-year seminars) gain a better understanding of the goals and features of these courses, as well as her work to develop [definitions for writing intensive and writing attentive courses](#), and to streamline the tagging of them. (K. Reardon noted that, this year, the Committee on Educational Policy [CEP] approved the definitions she had just referenced, which were developed with input from the Writing Center, the CEP, and other faculty.) In addition, K. Reardon now reviews proposals for intensive writing courses and approves them

based on the new definition. She welcomes discussing with interested faculty members the features of an intensive writing course and to thinking about whether their courses are consistent with the definition. K. Reardon noted that she has also created [a website for faculty, students, and advisors](#) about intensive writing courses. The members found this summary to be informative and helpful.

Continuing, K. Reardon discussed what is known about the history of the intensive writing program, commenting that there are few records of what was done before her arrival, and then shared some enrollment trends for intensive writing courses. She attributed a decline in enrollments in 2022–2023 in comparison to 2021–2022 largely to the fact that fewer intensive writing courses were offered this year, and to a number of other factors outlined in her summary. On the positive side, while fewer students took intensive writing courses this year, more of those who were recommended for the courses enrolled in them, K. Reardon noted. K. Reardon attributed this result in part to her efforts to invite all recommended students to advising meetings and group sessions and to the success of a diagnostic self-placement survey that was piloted in 2022 during the college's Summer Bridge Program. K. Reardon then shared the following data: traditionally, recommendations have come only from faculty who are teaching first-year seminars. Last year, 46 percent (seventeen out of thirty-seven students) of the students who were recommended for intensive writing courses by first-year seminar instructors enrolled in the courses. This year, 33 percent (twelve out of thirty-six students recommended by first-year seminar instructors enrolled in the courses. An additional forty-seven students were recommended for intensive writing courses during the Summer Bridge Program this year after taking the diagnostic self-placement survey. Of those students, 62 percent (twenty-nine students) went on to enroll in an intensive writing course. K. Reardon commented that these results indicate that students seem to respond more positively to the recommendation that they take an intensive writing course when they have a voice in their own placement process. Only a fraction of first-year seminar instructors recommend students for intensive writing courses (this year and last year twelve to fifteen did so out of more than thirty), for a variety of reasons, K. Reardon noted. On the other hand, the diagnostic self-placement survey captures all students who should be invited to take one of these courses, she said. Since both the recommendations from faculty and the survey are useful tools, both will continue to be used in the future. K. Reardon informed the members that the diagnostic placement survey will be offered to all incoming students during their orientation this summer. Recommendations will be communicated to advisors and posted to Workday, as math and language recommendations are. K. Reardon also shared her plans for the next academic year, during which she will work to strengthen connections with faculty teaching first-year seminars and with advisors, increase fall advising by the intensive writing program, continue to move toward a strengths-based approach (and away from a remedial approach), and recruit and train faculty to teach intensive writing courses under the new model. The members applauded these efforts.

Continuing the discussion, K. Reardon said that she has found that, when being advised to take an intensive writing course, many students take this recommendation more seriously if it comes from a peer. As a result, K. Reardon will offer the option of meeting with her or a student for advising appointments in fall 2023. Interestingly, the diagnostic tool often reveals that students may want to pursue writing in other venues, for example, through pursuing creative writing or by writing for the *Amherst Student*. A goal is to remove the stigma that has sometimes surrounded intensive writing courses, by offering both support and opportunities such as the ones she had just mentioned. In addition, K. Reardon noted the importance of not limiting the invitation to take an intensive writing course to one moment (traditionally the spring of the first year). She will continue to reach out to students who have been recommended for an intensive course in the sophomore or even the junior year, she said.

Conversation turned to some of the reasons why some first-year seminar instructors don't recommend students for intensive writing courses. K. Reardon noted that some faculty have said that they are not comfortable doing so, or do not assign much writing, or are not comfortable with recommending students for the courses, and feel that doing so signals an academic warning, while others hold the view

that making a recommendation is punitive. K. Reardon said that it is her hope that offering presentations for first-year seminar instructors and advisors will help to change these views. Some members commented that it is not necessarily clear what is meant by “intensive writing,” noting that some have thought that “intensive” means that the courses are taught at a very high level. K. Reardon agreed and said that she would prefer a title such as “Academic Writing,” and has created a class called Introduction to Academic Writing for fall 2023. The members and the president agreed that this would be a helpful change that would make the purpose of the courses more transparent and could draw more students to them. K. Reardon also noted that it is clear that students are most attracted to the intensive writing courses that are listed in the English department, as the connection makes sense to them. Courses listed in other departments and taught by their faculty have not been as attractive to students, she has found, while noting that intensive writing courses could be cross listed in English and another department. Professor Hasan wondered if it would be useful to offer more sections of intensive writing courses. K. Reardon said that it would be helpful, and that she believes that there would be more students who would enroll in these sections, but that there is a shortage of faculty who want to teach them and/or of departments that are able to offer them, due to other curricular commitments. Some members suggested hiring more colleagues with expertise in intensive writing to teach additional sections. Professor Martini wondered if a class on writing scientific papers could be an intensive writing course and whether such a course would be attractive to STEM majors who are not ordinarily drawn to writing. K. Reardon said that this would certainly be possible. Professor Polk asked if the introductory sequence in the Department of Black Studies, which takes a highly structured approach to teaching academic writing, would meet the criteria for an intensive writing course. K. Reardon said that she would be happy to discuss this possibility and that it sounds as though the course might meet the requirements. The only issue might be that, in regard to enrollments, intensive writing courses must prioritize students who have been recommended for such a course, including first-year students, reserving space for the latter. The courses must also feature writing as their main focus, and the instructor must teach writing in more than 50 percent of the classes. The members expressed their appreciation to K. Reardon and thanked her for her efforts.

After K. Reardon left the meeting, the members turned very briefly to [a request from Professor Fong](#) that voting on the motion to change the faculty meeting time be done online and that remote participation in the meeting be allowed. The committee stressed that it has sought a balance between prioritizing in-person discussion and voting, and has taken steps to expand access by reordering the faculty meeting agenda so that the vote on the motion is the first item, and encouraging those who need to leave after the vote to do so.

The meeting adjourned at 5:30 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Epstein
Provost and Dean of the Faculty