

The sixteenth 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 3, 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.

The meeting began with President Elliott sharing the slate of honorary degree recipients who will be celebrated at this year’s commencement—and plans to announce [the recipients at the upcoming faculty meeting](#). Under “Topics of the Day,” the president noted that, at the invitation of the Association of Amherst Students, he had recently given a “state-of-the-college” talk, with a small group of students in attendance. His remarks had focused on a number of themes: the fact that the campus and its community is continuing to recover from the challenges of the pandemic; continuing to find ways to rebuild the campus culture and to strengthen community for students; Amherst as a workplace in which faculty and staff have the material and other support they need to have successful careers here; and strategies for furthering the ways in which Amherst contributes to the public good, including through engagement with the local community and support for students who want to pursue public-interest careers.

Continuing his remarks, the president noted that, at his meeting with the students, they had raised topics surrounding residential life and Title IX, and had also wanted to learn more about the town of Amherst’s reparations movement. In addition, some students, expressing a desire to continue to create new traditions at the college, had proposed that Amherst adopt a Mammoth Day, the equivalent of what other institutions call a Mountain Day. The idea, which has been floated before, would be to cancel classes on a day with good weather as a surprise. Provost Epstein noted that, when this idea has been proposed in the past, many faculty members have been opposed to it. Canceling classes without much notice would be very challenging for faculty in the sciences, she has been told, in particular for those who teach the same labs over the course of the week to multiple sections of a course. If classes were to be canceled for a Mammoth Day, some students would have the lab before others, and it would be difficult to set up a lab again for those who had missed it. While it was noted that it would be fairly easy to predict which of several days could be used for a Mammoth Day, due to particular parameters that would need to be met, the committee felt that many professors would continue to object to the disruption that a sudden cancellation of class would cause. Professor Call commented that the upcoming mini-break in April, a new feature of Amherst’s academic calendar, will provide some respite during a demanding time in the semester. Provost Epstein noted that the college’s mini-break aligns with the public school calendar, which is helpful. In addition, the senior staff chose the Monday of the mini-break as the additional day off that had been promised if responses to the staff survey met a certain threshold, so the college will actually be closed that day, she said. Professor Martini asked whether plans call for Amherst to offer programming on April 17. The provost said that there is no intention to do so, as it is expected that many members of the community will be away from campus. Since this is the first time that a day off at this time has been part of the calendar, the college will evaluate the experience afterward.

Turning to another topic, President Elliot noted that the Health Readiness Group (HRG) has continued to monitor the COVID-19 situation and to assess the college’s current pandemic-related policies. The HRG’s recent conversations have been informed by the federal government’s decision to end the COVID-19 national public health emergency in May, as well as the Broad Institute’s decision to conclude its testing program (of which Amherst has been a part since its inception) in June. The president informed the committee that the HRG has recommended two changes to current policies that it believes should go into effect no later than at the end of this academic year. One is to no longer require the COVID-19 vaccine for all community members; instead, the HRG feels, Amherst should strongly encourage students, faculty, and staff to be vaccinated. The president said that this recommendation is based on the following factors: the decision to require the vaccine had been based on hospitalization and mortality

rates, lack of effective and available treatments, and relatively poor primary immunity from disease at the time the policy had been adopted. Many of these factors have changed, the HRG has noted. In addition, requiring the vaccine represents an exception; it is the only vaccine that the college requires of students (and others) that is not mandated by the state. Moving to “strongly recommend” would align this vaccine with standard practice, in the HRG’s view. Continuing, the president said that initial vaccines that were developed to protect against early strains of COVID-19 were thought to have higher efficacy in terms of preventing transmission. The HRG has noted that the evidence is not compelling that this is the case any longer, which greatly lessens the argument for requiring individuals to give up their individual rights for the greater good.

Continuing, President Elliott noted that the HRG has pointed out that, while the vast majority of individuals had not had COVID during the early years of the pandemic when the college required the vaccine, the vast majority of the population has now had the virus at least once, providing some protection against recurrent disease. In addition, the risk of severe disease and hospitalization for Amherst’s general student population is now very low; some studies show that as few as one in forty thousand cases lead to hospitalization at this time, and that mortality worldwide for people eighteen to twenty-nine is fairly low. The HRG has also noted that, for many people, the potential side effects from the vaccines may be greater than the benefit they provide, in terms of protection from severe disease. In addition, minor mild side effects from the vaccines can affect students in terms of missed classes and activities. The president noted that studies continue to show significant waning protection, even within a few months after vaccination, making the additional protection transient. In addition, there is no clear guidance on the timing of the vaccines. The HRG has noted that another reason that the college chose to require the vaccine in the past was to decrease the strain on the local hospital system, which is currently not seeing a high volume of COVID-related hospitalizations, the president explained. He noted that, if the college were to accept the HRG’s recommendation, Amherst would retain the ability to put the vaccine requirement back in place, if the course of the pandemic warranted doing so.

President Elliott next shared that the HRG has also recommended that Amherst close its on-site testing program and make at-home antigen tests available to community members. The HRG has noted that the college established its testing program at a time when PCR tests were almost impossible to obtain elsewhere. Both PCR and antigen tests are now available from healthcare providers and at local pharmacies, the HRG has pointed out. Another factor that led to the HRG’s recommendation is the decision by the Broad Institute, which has been a key provider of the college’s testing program, to use Color to administer the testing process (the Broad continued to run the lab that tested the samples). If the college chose to continue to use Color going forward, Amherst would need to FedEx the samples to Color’s lab in California (making it a slower and more costly program). President Elliott noted that Health Services can work with UMass or Quest to process PCR tests for Amherst students, as needed. The Testing Center administered about one hundred tests per week in February, the provost said, and is currently seeing seventy to eighty people a week (the college is unable to track whether these are faculty, staff, or students, but anecdotal reports indicate the users are primarily faculty and staff). In addition, antigen tests are available at the Amherst College Police Department (ACPD), and the supply is replenished regularly (indicating that they are being used). The HRG feels that this distribution location should remain in place, in addition to adding another at Keefe Campus Center potentially, the president noted. (The recommendation is that KN95 masks also be distributed at the test distribution locations.) The college will continue communicating the importance of masking and testing at the sign of symptoms, President Elliott said.

The committee, which agreed, generally, that the proposed plans seem to have been thought through carefully, asked the president if peer institutions are considering similar changes. President Elliott responded that he is aware of several schools (Columbia and Emory, for example) that made announcements along these lines recently. He suspects that many others are making these kinds of

changes without making big announcements about them. Professor Martini expressed regret that the college may no longer offer PCR testing, commenting that antigen tests have a high rate of false negatives. The president responded that the college will continue to offer PCR tests through Health Services to students with COVID-like symptoms. Faculty and staff will need to get testing through their healthcare providers, he noted. In response to a question about what faculty and staff should do if they are experiencing COVID-like symptoms, Provost Epstein said that reasonable precautions should be taken. These include wearing a mask, social distancing, and testing. When asked if the college expects to offer COVID-19 vaccines in the future, the president said that this is possible, particularly if a vaccine becomes available that individuals would have annually, much like the flu vaccine. The president said that plans call for some further conversation about the HRG's recommendation, which would be followed by an announcement about any changes. In this way, the community would know what plans will be in place for the fall. ([An announcement of the COVID-19 policy changes](#) was sent to the community on April 12, 2023.)

Under "Questions from Committee Members," discussion turned to [views expressed by Professor George in a note](#) that he had written to Ron Lembo, chair of the Faculty Committee on Admission and Financial Aid (FCAFA) and Matt McGann, dean of admission and financial aid, after attending a listening session that the FCAFA had held on March 28 with interested faculty. The purpose of the event was to discuss the college's test-optional admission pilot. Professor Hasan conveyed his sense that a number of faculty share Professor George's concerns, and his own observations, that a significant number of Amherst students in introductory courses seem underprepared at this time, particularly in regard to writing and reading closely, and are struggling academically. In some cases, this pattern is creating a challenging, bifurcated classroom environment that is not serving students well. Professor George had noted that the skills of students in his introductory philosophy class vary widely, and Professor Call said that he has observed that a substantially larger proportion of his students now lack the preparation that they need to succeed in introductory calculus. It was noted that some colleagues feel that the college's test-optional admission pilot, and issues related to the pandemic—such as grade inflation and the quality of the educational experience that some students had in high school—may account for this situation. Concern was also raised that some students who are encouraged by their first-year seminar instructors to take writing-intensive courses are choosing not to do so. It is also unclear how many instructors are actually identifying students who would benefit from such courses and sharing this information. Professor Hasan stressed the importance of addressing this issue. It is unfortunate, he noted, that the college has put resources in place to help students who need to bolster their skills, but that many students seem not to take advantage of this support. Professor Polk wondered if the purpose of writing-intensive courses is made clear to students, and whether they are aware of what the college offers to help them succeed.

Provost Epstein commented that, for many years, there were no guidelines for faculty who taught writing-intensive courses, and that for some time, several lecturers and a small group of faculty taught most of them—using different practices. Two years ago, the college hired Kristina Reardon, a lecturer in English, to direct the Intensive Writing Program, the provost noted. K. Reardon has established criteria for what constitutes a writing-intensive course and shares best practice with other faculty. She herself teaches up to four writing intensive courses a year. K. Reardon also reaches out to first-year seminar instructors to encourage them to forward the names of students who would benefit from these courses. Professor Hasan thought it would be useful to ask K. Reardon about the number of instructors who share this information and the number of students who respond, and about the experiences of students who take these courses. The members agreed to invite K. Reardon to meet with the FEC.

Concluding the discussion, Professor Polk said that he wonders about some of the claims being made about the impact of a lack of standardized testing; he emphasized that finding ways to support the students who are struggling should be the primary focus in this moment. Professor Mattiacci concurred,

while stressing the importance of gathering additional data to try to disentangle the factors that may be contributing to the admission of some students who seem to lack the preparation that is needed to succeed at Amherst. Several members felt that it would be useful to know whether students who were recommended for writing-intensive courses submitted SAT scores, for example. Professor Martini recalled that many years ago, there had been a period in which many Amherst students seemed less well-prepared than their peers. Over time, with support from the Writing Center, she saw a great deal of improvement in students' skills. If the current dip in skills is a result of remote learning during high school and grade inflation, due to COVID, she wonders if it is temporary, she said. It would be valuable, in her view, to be able to use SAT scores for placement in courses (e.g., math), even if provided after admission has been decided. Other members concurred. President Elliott commented that only a very few peer institutions have announced that they will return to requiring standardized testing for admission, and that the admission landscape has shifted in this regard.

Under "Questions from Committee Members," Professor Martini said that she has heard that the college is considering discontinuing its institutional Dropbox license as a cost-cutting measure. Provost Epstein said that the senior leadership team has been discussing this possibility, but that no decision has been made. The provost noted that she is aware that some faculty and staff rely heavily on Dropbox and are very concerned that the college might not renew its license; she is interested in hearing from anyone who shares this opinion, and why. Professor Call said that his department uses Dropbox extensively and finds it quite useful, and Professor Martini said that the same is true of faculty in her department.

Conversation then turned very briefly to the subject of returning to the use of clickers for voting purposes at faculty meetings. Provost Epstein said that Information Technology does not have the staffing at this time to maintain and coordinate the operation of clickers in the evening. Associate Provost Tobin informed the members that David Hamilton, chief information officer, has said that he has sufficient staffing to assist with clickers during business hours. If faculty meetings take place during the day in the future, clickers could be made available.

Pawan Dhingra, associate provost and associate dean of the faculty, joined the meeting for the last thirty minutes to discuss possible approaches to recognizing the burden of hidden and invisible labor that is assumed by many women and underrepresented faculty at Amherst, and across higher education more broadly. The members expressed appreciation for the readings (["Retaining Women Faculty: The Problem of Invisible Labor"](#) and ["Addressing Hidden Workloads"](#)) that Associate Provost Dhingra had shared with the committee prior to the meeting.

Associate Provost Dhingra began the conversation by noting that there has been change among many faculty of color and women in regard to invisible labor. Some find the work meaningful and are strongly committed to engaging in it; others have made clear that they simply don't want to be discouraged from doing it. (The first article includes a description of invisible labor as "student-initiated mentorship, in which faculty provide 'hands-on attention' to 'serve as role models, mentors, and even surrogate parents' and engage in caregiving and emotional work, especially pertaining to student diversification and inclusion. This time-consuming work often is overlooked and undervalued because it is considered unnecessary and voluntary.") Associate Provost Dhingra commented that, based on available literature, a key to recognizing and rewarding hidden labor is to document it. This can be difficult, because this form of labor can be hard to measure. A common way of doing so, he noted, is to create dashboards to make service loads more transparent. This approach asks faculty to keep track of their invisible labor alongside more recognized forms of service. Such an approach would require a decision about what a normal amount of service should be within a department (e.g., the expected number of advisees and the expected number of students that faculty should teach), and a willingness to document it. Progress on this front has been made via the departmental handbooks, Associate Provost Dhingra noted. For faculty who go over and above in a year in regard to service (including hidden service) or do extremely

good work for a couple of years, the college could consider additional compensation in the form of stipends or course releases, for example. At Amherst, taking this approach may be a challenge, in his view, as some would view tracking this and other forms of service as a form of “bean-counting.”

Continuing his remarks, Associate Provost Dhingra explained that another approach to supporting those who engage in invisible labor is to reduce other work that they have within the department, in this way freeing up their time to do this and other work. He suggested that it could be helpful to create opportunities for faculty to share with their chair what they are doing in regard to hidden labor, and how it feels to carry this burden. The hope would be that doing so would lead chairs and departments to gain a better understanding of this work, and to appreciate and value it. The question of whether there is other labor from which the individual can withdraw would then be discussed. While other faculty would have to pick up these tasks, this shouldn't be objectionable, if the work that is now invisible labor is seen as work that the department values and needs. Under such a scenario, it would be critical for the faculty member who is doing the invisible labor to be given the agency to propose what the other service from which the person would withdraw would be, in discussion with the individual's chair.

Professor Martini commented that the geology department has discussed such matters, including in tenure-track faculty members' annual conversations, but welcomes more standardization and guidelines. Associate Provost Dhingra said that it is his understanding that many departments do not consider what it means to carry work beyond the tasks that are “counted” in formal ways at the college, or what burdens might be placed on a faculty member who is the only person of color in a department. Developing greater recognition of the importance of invisible labor to students is necessary, he stressed. Many students report that having experiences with faculty who share their identities is very meaningful to them and supports their learning at the college. Associate Provost Dhingra commented that the college currently doesn't have a vocabulary or space for conversations about the work that faculty of color do, how emotionally draining it can be, and how important it is.

Recognizing that each department at the college has its own culture, the members discussed possible ways of opening up a broad conversation about invisible labor—including the activities that fall under this rubric—and possible changes that could be made to address this issue. For example, many departments charge the tenure-track faculty member who has been at Amherst for the shortest time with taking notes at department meetings. If a faculty member is spending a great deal of time on hidden work, perhaps this should not be an expectation, he said. Professor Mattiacci said that many tenure-track faculty members are asked by students to attend co-curricular events, for example. She noted that faculty should feel that it is fine to say “no” to such requests, as they can involve evening work, for example, and are not academic in nature. Tenure-track faculty might prefer engaging in other forms of service that they may consider more rewarding instead, Professor Mattiacci noted. If tenure-track faculty are only given the message that invisible service matters, without also knowing that it is okay to say “no” to some of these requests, they may think that there is an expectation that some subset of the faculty attend co-curricular events, while others do things such as participating in searches and the like. Associate Provost Dhingra said faculty who are representing an identity carry additional expectations and often empathize with students from different perspectives. Some will say “no,” but others may choose to say “yes” to a student's invitation because of how meaningful it might be to the student, while also feeling that the college would not necessarily value what they are doing—even though support for underrepresented students is often expressed as important to the college. One suggestion is to collect information from faculty about their hidden labor and to share some of their stories at a chairs' meetings. Chairs could then be encouraged to share these stories with their colleagues, which would then lead to opportunities for faculty to convey the hidden labor they are doing. Some members wondered whether the issue of equity across departments should be considered when it comes to recognizing invisible labor. Associate Provost Dhingra said that getting at equity across

departments often requires accounting for how much service individuals do, which is not part of the college culture. For the most part, service is experienced through the lens of departmental culture, which varies when it comes to the value that is placed on it. The members agreed that gaining a better understanding of hidden labor at the department level, and finding solutions for the burdens that it creates, can also be a useful starting point for a broader conversation about the labor that faculty do outside their recognized activities as teachers and scholars.

Concluding the discussion, the committee noted possible ways of recognizing what is now invisible service as part of faculty personnel processes, for example at the time of the tenure review. It was agreed that asking candidates to include information about this work on their CVs would send an important message. Some faculty members already choose to mention this service, and the Tenure and Promotion Committee places value on this work, the provost said. At the same time, she noted, the tenure criteria make clear that the candidate's record of scholarly and/or artistic accomplishment and ability to teach effectively are of primary consideration in the tenure decision.

The meeting adjourned at 5:37 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Epstein
Provost and Dean of the Faculty