

The eighth 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, December 5, 2022, at 4:15 p.m. Present, in addition to Professor Call, were Professors Coráñez Bolton, Martini, Mattiacci, and Polk; President Elliott; Provost and Dean of the Faculty Epstein; and Associate Provost Tobin, recorder.

A good portion of the meeting was devoted to a conversation with Jesse Barba, director of institutional research and registrar services, and Kate Harrington, chief human resources officer, about data that the committee is seeking about trends in regard to the growth of the college—including identifying increases in staff by divisions and offices over the past several decades. The members reviewed data they had previously received related to the growth of the faculty, which was provided by J. Barba, and are now interested in similar aggregated information about the staff. It is hoped that a review of these data will provide a historical context and shared understanding of trends at Amherst that will serve as a useful foundation as the FEC undertakes its work. Since data about staff growth are within the domain of the Office of Human Resources (HR), K. Harrington said that she and her colleagues will work to assemble the desired information, while also noting the technical barriers involved. This information is accessible in Workday beginning in 2021, she said; gathering data before this time will involve a good deal of manual work and will take several weeks, K. Harrington believes. She noted that, in the future, Workday will offer a centralized data source that will be very useful when exploring issues such as this one. The members expressed appreciation to HR for undertaking this effort.

Continuing the conversation, Professor Call conjectured that much of the growth is concentrated in the areas of student affairs, to which health services transitioned over the period under discussion (medical services had been offered through the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, for many years), finance (where transactions have increased and become more complex), academic/instructional support (e.g., in the latter case, lab technicians in STEM departments, Writing Center and Quantitative Center staff, and Center for Teaching and Learning staff), and communications (with the shift to different media to communicate to Amherst’s constituencies). Professor Call commented that, at times, when key staff members have left the college over the years, they have been replaced with multiple individuals—another factor that has led to growth. In addition, K. Harrington noted the recent conversion of twenty-six casual staff positions to FTEs last year, and that some positions have been funded in the past through “soft money,” which may account for some spikes and declines over time.

Professor Call asked the president what interested him most about trends in staffing over time. President Elliott responded that he understands that, for many years, Amherst was understaffed in key areas relative to its peers; in relatively recent times, the number of positions at the college has been expanded—with the goal of offering greater support in some critical areas and professionalization. For example, he noted, significant needs were identified in the area of support for students (for example, meeting student mental health needs), many of which were/are part of national trends, and numerous positions were added to the division of student affairs as a result. The regulatory environment has also become far more complex, with a greater need for staff members in compliance-related roles, President Elliott commented. On a related note, the more robust scientific research that is taking place at the college means that a greater number of professional and technical staff are needed to support the faculty’s work. President Elliott also noted the flat fiscal environment that is expected over the next year or two. This trend means that the college will most likely need to pause expansion in many realms, including staffing, and to continue to examine closely the resources and trade-offs that are associated with what is undertaken.

Discussion turned to IPEDS (the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System) data that J. Barba had provided ahead of the meeting. He noted that, while the federal categories for staff that are used do not map well to the college’s staff categories, making the data of limited use for the committee’s purposes, the numbers from 2012 through 2020 do show significant growth in staffing (approximately 30 percent). He informed the members that a COFHE (Consortium on Financing Higher Education) survey that is conducted

every three years, and which will be done next in 2023, can be helpful in comparing staffing levels at Amherst with those at peer schools. At the same time, he cautioned that the information can be a challenge to rationalize, due to the differing categories in which staff are assigned across institutions. J. Barba also pointed out that the size of the student body and the faculty has grown significantly at Amherst during the period under consideration. The college's physical plant, on the other hand, has remained about the same. Related to space needs, J. Barba also commented on the imbalance in student enrollment between fall and spring, due to study away, which has been a vexing problem. Around one hundred more students study away in the spring than do so in the fall.

The members asked K. Harrington to provide data that will enable the committee to review five-year intervals of staff growth over the past twenty years—offering the information by divisional/departmental categories that will be understandable to those at the college. It would be helpful, it was noted, to try to understand how current titles that might have changed—as a result of restructuring, for example—relate to past titles. In this way, the committee would hope to gain a better understanding of the most significant areas of growth over the past twenty years, particularly in regard to the last decade.

The discussion concluded with a brief conversation about challenges surrounding the availability of space at the college. It was noted that it is a struggle to meet needs around pedagogically appropriate classrooms for certain content areas, as well as offices, conference rooms, and spaces for professional development activities. Pointing to the shift to hybrid and remote work for some individuals and resultant opportunities that have arisen for rethinking how office space might be allocated, K. Harrington informed the members that listening sessions with small groups of staff about this topic are under way. Professor Coráñez Bolton asked about the growth in college programs over the time period under discussion. Provost Epstein responded that there are not many costs and space needs associated with new academic programs, for the most part, with the exception of the allocation of fractional hours for an academic department coordinator. Programs often wish for dedicated space, but this has been difficult to accomplish. The members thanked J. Barba and K. Harrington, who left the meeting at 4:56 p.m.

In the time remaining, President Elliott provided a brief update on the progress of the search for the college's next chief financial and administrative officer. While now at a stage in which candidates are being identified, confidentiality is essential, he said. While he could not provide information about any individuals, the president described the status of the process. He noted that numerous virtual interviews have been conducted, and that promising candidates will soon be brought to campus to meet with the search committee. Plans also call for possibly having candidates meet with a small group of faculty members, beyond those on the search committee, at this stage.

President Elliott also shared plans to constitute a task force, to be led by Associate Provost and Associate Dean of the Faculty Jack Cheney, to explore systems that the college might adopt to ensure that students on financial aid use support from Amherst to purchase textbooks. He noted that some students who receive funding from the college to purchase textbooks instead use the funds for other purposes, including, in some cases, sending money home to their families. Some of these students end up choosing their courses based on whether a textbook must be purchased, which is a great concern from an educational perspective. President Elliott said that he is aware of models that have been used successfully at other schools, including giving all students a credit at the college bookstore, where they must go to buy books. Solutions to this problem involve trade-offs, including constraints that could be placed on the faculty. These include, for example, the lead time needed to submit book orders and the kinds of materials that can be requested—depending on the model. It is hoped that the task force will recommend one or two ways to move forward and then forward their ideas to the FEC. An open conversation with the faculty would follow.

The meeting concluded with a short discussion about the current masking policy, including the committee's decision to make masking optional at the faculty meeting to be held the next day.

In [a December 5 note to the FEC](#), Kevin Donges, lecturer in statistics, shared concerns about masking being optional at the meeting, due to the risk of transmission of the COVID-19 virus, and about the college's COVID policies more broadly. Some members also expressed concern about what they believe to be indicators of a rise in the number of COVID cases in the area. After some discussion, the members decided that the FEC should recommend that those attending the meeting wear masks out of respect for colleagues, and the members agreed that a note would be sent to the faculty the next day to communicate this decision.

The meeting adjourned at 5:30 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Epstein
Provost and Dean of the Faculty