

The twelfth 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, February 20, 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 informed the members that the recent meetings of the board of trustees, which had taken place the previous Thursday through Saturday, had been productive. The president thanked the committee for meeting with the trustees as part of the board’s annual Instruction Weekend. One of the highlights of the meetings, the trustees had shared, were the individual dinners that had been held with several members of the board and a small group of faculty members. While the gatherings had taken place in a modified form last year, due to modifications surrounding COVID-19, this was the first year in some time that these annual dinners were back in full swing, the provost commented. The board had also been impressed with a faculty panel (comprising Professors Brenneis, Engelhardt, and Martini), moderated by Sarah Barr, advisor to the provost on campus initiatives. Discussion in that meeting had focused on the ways in which the professors incorporate community engagement into some of their courses, and in one case into a department’s major. Conversations about the budget process, the student center project, and recent transitions within the administration had also taken place at the board meeting. President Elliott informed the members that a [summary of the meetings](#) would be shared with the community in the days to come; these brief reports will now become a regular practice as a means of increasing transparency about the ways in which the board carries out its work.

Continuing President Elliott reiterated that the ongoing process of reducing the college’s budget by 15 percent is focused on costs that are not related to personnel. The goal is to exercise greater fiscal discipline to protect the college’s resources, particularly during this time of significant inflationary pressure; a priority is to have the capacity to provide salary increases to faculty and staff. He offered reassurance that the athletics department would not be exempt from efforts to try to find ways to cut spending by 15 percent, as some have suggested. This will be the case despite the department having some fixed operational costs (e.g., transportation) that have risen significantly, which is also true of dining services. The president also noted that, on the academic side, he expects that using departmental endowed funds more fully will reduce the impact of needed cuts. The president stressed the importance of not allowing misinformation to circulate in the absence of information during this challenging time; he plans to continue to communicate regularly to keep the community informed.

Turning to another topic, President Elliott conveyed that some faculty members have spoken with him about the challenges involved in negotiating academic expectations and instruction in this current stage of the pandemic/endemic. While the pandemic had a clear starting point, determining its end point is proving to be more of a challenge. While faculty were asked to be compassionate and flexible with students and to modify their academic expectations during the pandemic, some colleagues wonder if it is now time to return to pre-pandemic standards. Complicating this issue, the president said, is the impact the pandemic has had on some students’ academic and emotional preparedness for college. President Elliott said that he is interested in what others think about how best to navigate this unique moment. Professor Hasan said that his impression is that grade inflation has been happening for a long time at Amherst, but that it has grown even more extreme in recent years. He wonders whether there are data to support what he has observed. Provost Epstein said that it is clear that there has been an upward trend in regard to grades at Amherst for some time, but that things have been particularly acute since 2020–2021. Professor Call pointed to the challenge of grade compression at the college. While grades increased at other schools as well, the provost said that she believes that Amherst’s open curriculum exacerbates grade inflation; students tend to avoid courses in which they feel they will not earn high grades.

Continuing the conversation and expressing concern, Professor Polk commented that, in his experience, many students are challenged by workloads that were fairly standard only a few years ago; Professor Hasan concurred. Provost Epstein shared plans to resume what has been an occasional practice of sharing with all faculty members data about the individual's grade distribution, their department's distribution, and the college's distribution. The president noted that practices designed to provide flexibility on student assignments and related policies are within the purview of the faculty. It was agreed that the FEC can play a leadership role in supporting and encouraging conversations about the issues that had just been discussed.

The president, commenting on the importance of sharing with the Amherst community the possible implications of upcoming decisions (expected in June) by the U.S. Supreme Court regarding race-conscious admissions, noted an event that would be taking place on campus on March 2. Discussing the past, present, and future of affirmative action will be Solicitor General of North Carolina Ryan Park '05, who argued at the Supreme Court for the University of North Carolina, which practices race-conscious admission, in the case of *Students for Fair Admissions v. University of North Carolina*, and Amherst trustee Paul Smith '76 P'09, professor from practice at Georgetown Law School and vice president for litigation and strategy at the Campaign Legal Center.

Concluding his remarks, President Elliott informed the members that he is in the initial stages of thinking about ways in which Amherst might more deliberately claim and advance its work in educating students for the public interest—and in doing so, fulfill its mission to "link learning with leadership." He asked the committee if it would be willing to serve as a sounding board during this formative stage of his consideration of this matter. The members said that they would be delighted to do so.

The provost next offered some remarks. Turning first to the topic of the budget process, she re-emphasized what the president had said about athletics also being subject to the request to reduce departmental budgets by 15 percent. She then shared some plans that have been in place for some time, she explained, regarding moves involving an academic department (history) and some administrative offices. The provost noted that the Center for Humanistic Inquiry (CHI) will relocate to the new Lyceum building on South Pleasant Street, as will the history department. All of the CHI's activities will be held in that space, beginning in fall 2023. The CHI's vacated space in Frost Library (which will not be usable over the summer) will become a new teaching and learning commons, housing the Center for Teaching and Learning, the Writing Center, and the college's new Center for Strategic Learning, which will focus on supporting the development of students' metacognitive skills (e.g., study skills). The Center for Sustainability will move into the space vacated by the writing center in Charles Pratt Dormitory. Professor Call noted the substantial need for more and, in some cases, better faculty office space on campus, and said he hopes information will be forthcoming soon about plans to meet these needs. The other members strongly concurred with him. The provost responded that faculty office space is a challenging issue, and that her office is exploring different options.

Continuing with her announcements, Provost Epstein noted that she would soon announce two faculty administrative appointments. Professor Bishop will be named associate provost and associate dean of the faculty, beginning his term on August 1, 2023, and succeeding Jack Cheney, who will serve as a senior advisor to her on a half-time basis in the next academic year. In addition, the provost said that Professor Rangan has been named interim faculty equity and inclusion officer. She has already assumed the position and will continue in the role through June 30.

Turning to another topic, the provost noted that she had received a request from a faculty member that the FEC provide some guidance about matters relating to ChatGPT. The committee agreed that there are complex issues surrounding this A.I. tool and different perspectives. The members considered whether it might be helpful to appoint an ad hoc committee to explore this topic and provide some guidance for faculty, while recognizing that any guidance that might emerge could generate concerns surrounding academic freedom. Some members stressed that what would be most helpful would be to learn more about the different faculty perspectives on ChatGPT. Colleagues could then set their own guidelines, it was noted. Wary of charging an ad

hoc committee that would take up faculty time, Professor Mattiacci wondered if an existing committee, for example, the Committee on Educational Policy, might take up this matter. Professor Martini suggested bringing in a consultant who is an expert on this subject to help answer faculty and staff questions. Ultimately, the members felt that departments would have different views. It was agreed to continue this discussion at a future meeting, as some members planned to attend the faculty panel on this topic that would take place soon after the FEC meeting concluded, and looked forward to learning more about the implications of ChatGPT.

Discussion returned to next steps in the committee's work on the faculty governance project, focusing first on the members' plans to gather more information about the work of faculty committees and the experience of those who serve on them. The committee reviewed a draft of a questionnaire that the members plan to send to this year's chairs of committees, last year's chairs, and staff members who work closely with faculty committees. After considering some refinements, the members agreed to approve a finalized version of the document at their next meeting.

The meeting ended with a continuation of the committee's discussion about the time of faculty meetings and possible approaches to improving the ways in which the meetings are run. Professor Call noted that some colleagues with whom he has spoken would like to dispense with the practice of having remarks by the president and provost (potentially replacing the remarks with written reports that are provided ahead of the meetings) and reports from administrators at the meetings, focusing instead on faculty business. Another suggestion that some have put forward is to reorder the agenda, so that votes on motions come first and reports come afterward; this would ensure that faculty business is prioritized. Professor Call expressed his own appreciation for the remarks and reports, which he finds serve both an informational and community-building purpose. No consensus was reached about these ideas, but some members felt that prioritizing the elements of faculty meetings that colleagues feel are most important, and enhancing efficiency, is a worthy goal.

The members then considered further details regarding the proposal for a daytime faculty meeting with rotating times, which Professor Call had put forward at the last meeting and had refined further since then. His central idea was that, each semester, one day of the week would be chosen as the day when all faculty meetings (except possibly the convocation and commencement meetings) would be held. The meetings would then be scheduled at different times of the day throughout the term so that, ideally, no class would be canceled more than once. After some discussion about this plan, the committee ultimately decided that, while the proposal is a very creative idea and was an attractive option, the system might be too complex—particularly as an initial approach to implementing change. Under the system, there would be a need to have another vote on the academic calendar, and there would be implications for science departments, in particular, as well as for those teaching some three-hour seminars. The members were intrigued by the proposal that was expected from the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP) that faculty meetings be held on Fridays at 3:00 p.m., noting that, perhaps, the Tuesday-evening meeting time could be kept in reserve if a need for an emergency meeting arises. Provost Epstein said that she anticipates that the CEP will be sending the proposal to the committee imminently. The members expressed support for adopting this time slot—coupled with changing to a system in which the dates for faculty meetings for the year would be set in the summer prior to a new academic year—and bringing a proposal to the faculty. Knowing the dates of the faculty meetings would allow faculty to make plans well ahead, which would be most welcome, the members noted.

The meeting adjourned at 5:30 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Epstein
Provost and Dean of the Faculty