

The fifteenth 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, March 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,” the president informed the members that he would be hosting a town hall for staff the following day. Staff were invited to submit questions and comments in advance of the meeting, he said. Some of these submissions focused on possible implications of the request that budgets be reduced by 15 percent, while others conveyed concerns about interactions with some faculty members. In addition, some staff wrote that they feel that the staff’s status relative to that of the faculty is deeply unequal, and some noted that the staff is not valued at the college. The members, president, and provost were distressed that some staff colleagues have had experiences that have led them to feel this way. Getting to the root of these issues, and finding ways to address them, can be challenging, the committee agreed. It is difficult to know if certain departments and/or certain faculty treat staff in these ways, or if these patterns of behavior are pervasive at Amherst. The members also wondered if staff who work in certain areas, and/or who occupy certain positions, have experienced more negative interactions with faculty members. President Elliott informed the members that a survey of the staff is ongoing at this time; it is hoped that the results will provide more information about this issue, he said. The committee noted that, at the institutional level, the college has made efforts to express appreciation to staff, e.g., through the [Amherst Appreciations Program](#)—initiatives for which the members expressed support. At an individual level, some members commented that they try to be particularly sensitive to concerns that some staff have raised, for example, about being contacted about work-related matters after business hours on weekdays and on weekends.

President Elliott emphasized that everyone at Amherst deserves to be valued and respected; he will prioritize efforts that seek to build community and bridge divides, he said. Provost Epstein commented that she is aware of troubling incidents in which faculty members have been extremely rude to staff members. When she learns of such interactions, she contacts the faculty member involved to convey how inappropriate and hurtful such behavior is, and the impact that it has. The provost said that she is concerned that some faculty at all ranks have been treating staff members in ways that are disrespectful, and noted that there is no excuse for doing so. The members agreed.

On a related note, the members discussed the importance of providing opportunities for social interaction among members of the college community, particularly given the impact of the pandemic. Some members commented that not having meals in Lewis-Sebring has been a big loss in regard to developing and sustaining connections among faculty and staff. The provost commented that, even before the pandemic, use of Lewis-Sebring was declining. She wonders if maintaining a space such as this—a faculty and staff commons, in essence—is the best approach to addressing the problem at hand. She also noted the related expense, which is not insignificant, and the challenges in regard to staffing. Alternatives might include offering regular opportunities to gather over snacks and coffee in the library, for example—or in town at venues such as the Drake or the Archives, a local speakeasy, the members suggested. Professor Call said that he had an enjoyable experience grading papers while having tea and cookies with colleagues at the drop-in hours at the Center for Humanistic Inquiry (CHI). Some members commented that they prefer to spend their free time focusing on their work, rather than engaging in social activities. They often eat lunch at their desks, for example, and would not make use of a facility such as Lewis-Sebring, they said. The president and provost commented that learning more about the range of views on possible options will be helpful when developing strategies to address the community’s needs. Professor Call suggested that emphasis be placed on publicizing opportunities that are already offered for colleagues to gather together, as he has found that getting the word out is essential. The committee agreed that a return to having food available in the Converse lobby after faculty meetings will be helpful for reestablishing connections among

colleagues. Some also felt that the Lyceum's new gathering spaces hold promise as a venue for building community. A morning community coffee hour was also suggested, as was a campus pub.

Under "Questions from Committee Members," noting the recent collapse of Silicon Valley Bank (SVB), as well as the crash of Credit Suisse, and the financial consequences, Professor Mattiacci asked President Elliott about the possible impact on the college's finances. She asked if there is potential for a return to the serious financial challenges that occurred in 2008. The president responded that Amherst has no meaningful direct exposure to SVB and has no equity or debt investments in the company. There is indirect exposure, primarily through Amherst's venture and growth equity managers and their underlying portfolio companies, which may have invested in SVB, he said. Thus far, there has been no impact on the college's endowment. More generally, the situation is fluid in regard to the effect on financial markets, and Letitia Johnson, the college's chief investment officer, is monitoring this closely and keeps in contact with the president and the board. The president said that, despite the current inflationary pressures, thus far, the current economic climate is not as dire as what was experienced in 2008.

Professor Mattiacci then asked a series of other questions. Noting that she and others have enjoyed [Between Two Mammoths](#), she asked the president about his vision for this video series. President Elliott said that the goal of the series is to offer a snapshot of the Amherst community and life on campus. Plans call for more episodes, and the president said that he looks forward to speaking with more students and staff and to expanding the conversations to include faculty. Turning to another topic, Professor Mattiacci asked Provost Epstein if she had learned more about the emails from the admissions office that had been sent to chairs of academic departments, about having a department representative be available for six hours on Tuesday, April 11, and to all faculty, about the expectation that all classes be open to accepted students when the students are on campus for accepted student days, and that faculty who did not want to have their classes open would need to fill out a form to opt out. Provost Epstein said that she and Dean McGann will be discussing these and other practices surrounding programs with admitted students that involve faculty, some of which are of long standing. Professor Mattiacci next asked Provost Epstein whether minutes of the Tenure and Promotion Committee (TPC)'s discussions about the criteria for promotion to full professor will be taken and shared. The provost responded that plans call for doing so; the TPC has not yet begun its consideration of this topic. Professor Mattiacci asked if faculty who have a large number of major advisees are assigned fewer or no college advisees, as a way to balance advising loads. Provost Epstein said that it is her understanding that the practice of many years has been to endeavor not to assign college advisees to faculty who have sixteen or more advisees, unless such a faculty member makes a request to be assigned college advisees.

Continuing with questions, Professor Mattiacci inquired whether there are plans to bring faculty and staff together to discuss classroom-related issues. She noted that she had attended a lunch hosted by Associate Provost and Associate Dean of the Faculty Pawan Dhingra to introduce Becky Catarelli, interim registrar, to faculty. During the event, some colleagues had expressed frustration about the classroom shortage, and faculty are often between a rock and a hard place when choosing the times when to teach: early mornings are challenging for some students, and in the afternoon, students are often over scheduled with extracurricular activities, including athletics practice, she noted. Provost Epstein commented that conversations about this topic occur on a regular basis. A contributing factor when it comes to the classroom shortage is that many faculty members prefer to teach at the same times (e.g., between 10:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m. on Tuesday and Thursday, or in the afternoons on Monday and Wednesday), the provost said, creating more demand for classroom space in the same time slots. Thus far, the college has taken a "soft" approach to addressing this bunching problem. For example, departments are not required to use all time slots before scheduling additional classes in a given slot; as a result, the problem remains, the provost said. One solution might be to extend the academic schedule into the late afternoon and the evening; spreading the schedule out in this way could help. When this

suggestion has been made in the past, however, concern has been expressed that doing so would have a profound impact on rehearsals and performances that the music department and theater and dance department hold, as well as on athletics practices and competitions. Provost Epstein commented that, at present, a very small number of courses are offered in the evening, with her permission. These are largely sections of courses with small enrollments that also have sections during the day, she explained. Professors Polk and Hasan commented on the desirability of allowing more courses—perhaps those that are not core requirements—to be taught in the evening. Provost Epstein noted that a change to this model would represent a big cultural shift at the college. Professor Martini informed the members that Jack Cheney, associate provost and associate dean of the faculty, and Jesse Barba, director of institutional research and registrar services, had met recently with the Science Faculty Steering Committee (a body that comprises the chairs of the science departments). They discussed ways of coordinating the scheduling/use of classroom space in the science center, which may lead to better outcomes in determining the use of those spaces, she noted. President Elliott commented that it will be difficult to justify building new classrooms, as some have suggested is necessary, until it is certain that existing classrooms are being used effectively. The president said that he has not yet seen data on classroom usage, but that he plans to review this information. Plans also call for constituting a space committee at the college.

Discussion turned to the upcoming meeting that the Faculty Committee on Admission and Financial Aid (FCAFA) will hold with interested faculty to discuss the college's test-optional admission pilot. Several members expressed the view that it would be challenging for faculty to weigh in on this topic without having data on the academic performance of students who have been admitted to the college during the pilot. Provost Epstein noted that Dean McGann does have such data, while also explaining that it is her understanding that the purpose of the meeting is largely to discuss this topic in a broader context—specifically in regard to the current admission landscape. Professor Martini commented that having these data would be useful when considering ways to support students.

The members returned briefly to a topic that had been raised at their March 6 meeting, the concern of the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP) about the number of courses that are being co-taught by two faculty members in different disciplines, particularly at the 300 and 400 level, that have very small enrollments. Some members said that they had been surprised to learn that, to achieve balanced teaching loads across the college, each faculty member should teach a total of eighty to ninety students a year. This can be done through offering a mix of courses with different enrollments, according to the provost. Professor Hasan said that he had been surprised to learn about this information and felt that other faculty would be interested in it. Professor Martini suggested that it would be helpful to provide this information to the faculty. Provost Epstein said that she has taken the approach of contacting individual faculty who co-teach advanced classes with small enrollments to discuss the matter with them. She encourages colleagues to balance such a class with another with larger enrollments and to limit the co-teaching of such classes to once a year, at most. This approach has been effective, the provost said.

The committee next reviewed some [initial responses from J. Barba](#) to questions that the committee had forwarded to him. Professor Mattiacci said that she remains concerned about the possible impact of the proposed changes to the pass/fail policy on faculty who teach large classes and have many advisees—fearing that their workload will increase. She wonders if additional data should be gathered to try to gain a better understanding of the ways in which students are using the current pass/fail policy, before moving to a new policy. Professor Mattiacci said that it appears that the information on which the proposal is based seems largely anecdotal and might fail to contribute to a balanced assessment of the pros and cons of the proposed policy. Other members expressed the view that the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP) developed the proposal to address the concerns of the very group of faculty about which Professor Mattiacci is most concerned, some of whom had shared their experiences.

Professor Martini said that other data might be useful, but that it might prove challenging to make conclusions from any additional information, because there would be so many threads that would need to be disentangled (e.g., patterns related to grade inflation, curricular exploration, and students who struggle academically with courses). She said that she favors a return to the policy of allowing two pass/fails, rather than four. The members also discussed briefly the ways in which enrollments are counted and tracked when courses are cross-listed. Since hiring decisions are often based on enrollment numbers, Professor Mattiacci argued that it is important to make sure data on enrollment are accurate, possibly triangulating across a number of metrics.

On the motion below, the committee then voted five in favor and zero opposed on content, and five in favor and zero opposed to forward the motion to the faculty.

That the proposed changes to [the college's pass/fail policy](#) be adopted and that the language regarding this policy be revised accordingly in the *Regulations and Requirements* section of the *Amherst College Catalog*, as indicated in red text and with strike-outs below. If approved, this policy change would be effective July 1, 2023.

The aim of the pass/fail (P/F) option is to encourage students to take intellectual risks, to explore the breadth of Amherst's open curriculum, and to reward students for engaging fully in all their courses. Under this option, students may elect to ~~declare~~ **TAKE AT MOST** one course per semester, ~~and no more than four courses over four years,~~ pass/fail. **TO DECLARE A COURSE PASS/FAIL, STUDENTS MUST OBTAIN WRITTEN SIGNATURES FROM THEIR ADVISOR(S) AND FROM THE COURSE INSTRUCTOR AND SUBMIT THE A COMPLETED** ~~declaration of pass/fail~~ **FORM TO THE REGISTRAR'S OFFICE** ~~requires the permission of the student's advisor(s) and must be made before the first day of the exam period.~~ **THE INSTRUCTOR, CLASS DEAN, AND ADVISOR(S) WILL BE NOTIFIED AFTER A PASS/FAIL DECLARATION HAS BEEN FILED.**

If a student designates a course pass/fail, the student's transcript will have a "P" recorded in the case of passing grades ("D" or higher). No grade-point equivalent will be assigned to a "P." If the letter grade assigned by the instructor is an "F," an "F" will be recorded on the student's transcript and will count toward the student's GPA and class rank. Once students have declared a course pass/fail, they cannot later opt for the grade. Students admitted as first-year students may elect the pass/fail option four times during their Amherst College career. Transfer students admitted as sophomores shall have three pass/fail options, and those admitted as juniors shall have two.

Students may not take a first-year seminar pass/fail. Departments and programs may decide not to accept courses taken on a pass/fail basis in fulfillment of major requirements. Each department's and program's policy on accepting pass/fail grades toward major requirements must be included in the Amherst College Catalog and in other departmental and program materials.

The members then voted five in favor and zero opposed to forward the faculty meeting agenda to the faculty.

Discussion then turned to a draft of a simplified nomination form for the Jeffrey B. Ferguson Memorial Teaching Prize, which the members approved. The committee then also approved the questionnaire that will soon be sent to the chairs of committees and staff who work closely with them.

Prompted by [an email focused on academic freedom from Professor Sitze](#) and [some articles he had provided](#) (there is a link to one article in his email), the members noted the strength of the [Amherst College Statement of Academic and Expressive Freedom](#), the threats to academic freedom in this moment, and the importance of promoting discourse on campus about this issue. The members asked the provost to contact Professor Sitze to see if he would be interested in participating in a CHI salon or another event. She agreed to do so.

The meeting adjourned at 5:30 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Epstein  
Provost and Dean of the Faculty