

The fourteenth 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 6, at 4:00 p.m. Present, in addition to Professor Call, were Professors Martini, Mattiacci, and Polk; President Elliott; Provost and Dean of the Faculty Epstein; and Associate Provost Tobin, recorder. Professor Hasan was absent.

The meeting began with President Elliott noting that he was pleased with the quality of the engagement at an event held on campus on March 2 that focused on the implications of upcoming decisions (expected in June) by the U.S. Supreme Court regarding race-conscious admissions. The conversation involved 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*. The president commented that, while the college is hoping that the court will uphold the use of race-conscious admission, Amherst is also preparing for the impact of possible negative decisions.

Continuing his remarks, President Elliott said that he had recently had an informative conversation with the provost, associate provosts, and class deans about issues related to negotiating academic expectations and instruction at this moment, a topic that he had raised with the FEC earlier (see the FEC minutes of February 20, 2023). It was agreed that many students have benefited from the flexibility that professors have provided to help mitigate the serious challenges that the pandemic imposed in spheres that included student learning. At the same time, the class deans shared that, increasingly, there is a need for faculty to engage in conversations about how best to convey academic expectations to students—with an emphasis on clarity and accountability. There is growing recognition, the president noted, that it can be difficult to determine how to be fair and not to disadvantage students, while also being honest with them about the responsibility professors have for their students’ intellectual growth during the college years. Many faculty are facing a challenging dichotomy that has emerged; a good number of students now position and convey their concerns surrounding academic rigor as being in opposition to their mental health. At the meeting with the president, it was noted that it is important to help students understand that their academic growth is a crucial element in developing resilience.

It would be helpful, the members agreed, to encourage faculty to consider these issues within departments and other small groups so that there is as much consistency as possible regarding academic standards and student accountability across the college—while maintaining faculty autonomy. Professor Martini noted that the issues in question predate the pandemic, commenting that, when she served as a class dean from 2015 to 2018, similar concerns had been raised. As an example, she said that there was a high degree of variability among professors when it came to practices for determining when to grant extensions to students for the completion of academic work, and the duration of those extensions. President Elliott noted that it appears that, as early as 2010, many colleges and universities experienced a shift in students’ focus on meeting academic standards. He commented that some have attributed this shift to pessimism about the future, fueled in part by the state of the world and time spent on social media. Professor Call noted that he has found that there has been a dramatic increase in students conveying to him that illness has prevented them from completing academic work. Professor Mattiacci concurred. Professor Polk commented that he has seen a decline in the quality of students’ academic preparation and academic work, noting that, in his experience, the quality of theses within a department can provide a useful baseline for what excellence should look like—and a guide for thinking about ways to address this problem.

Conversation then turned briefly to [an FAQ document that the Committee on Education and Athletics \(CEA\) prepared for faculty](#), and shared with the FEC to disseminate to colleagues more broadly via these minutes. The CEA noted that, with so many new faculty at the college, it is its hope to provide, via the FAQ, information about policies surrounding athletics that address a variety of issues. The FEC reviewed the document, noted that the FAQ represents an excellent idea that was well executed, and offered its

thanks to the CEA for compiling such helpful information. Professor Call noted that professors will appreciate receiving the FAQ, whether it contains useful reminders for them or information new to them—or both.

The committee next discussed [a note from Professor Reyes](#), in which she shared the view that plans to hire two new assistant football coaches are inconsistent with the college's commitment, during this time of economic hardship, to filling only those positions that are critical to Amherst's core mission. Provost Epstein responded that these two positions are not being funded from the college's budget, but through funding from donors that has been designated to support the athletics department. In addition, they are also casual positions that are not subject to the same hiring restrictions as full- or part-time staff positions. President Elliott noted that the college will continue filling positions that are funded through endowed funds.

The provost then responded to other questions about some recent appointments related to the work of athletics. These include an associate athletic director for diversity, equity, and inclusion and compliance (Jennifer Chuks-Crahill), who was hired last spring, and the faculty athletics representative (Professor Leah Schmalzbauer). She informed the members that the NCAA mandates that member institutions designate a faculty athletics representative, though the position at Amherst and at most peer institutions has traditionally been underutilized. Following the recommendation of Amherst's Ad Hoc Faculty Committee on Athletics, Provost Epstein said that she has expanded the position's responsibilities, with the hope that the faculty athletics representative will have greater impact at Amherst and across Division III. Provost Epstein noted that both positions will play an important role in helping the college to make progress on strengthening the culture and educational mission surrounding athletics at Amherst.

Continuing the conversation, Professor Call asked why some new initiatives are going forward, given that the college is asking all departments to cut their budgets by 15 percent—a question that some colleagues have raised. He offered as an example hiring staff for the new Center for Strategic Learning, noting that he is aware that a center of this type has been greatly desired for many years. Provost Epstein noted that the position in the new center for which a search is under way was allocated last year; the college waited to begin the search until the timing was right to draw the best possible candidates, based on the field's hiring cycle. The president and provost said that the college will continue to undertake some new efforts, even during this time of economic uncertainty. The priority will be to invest in endeavors that are the most central to the college's mission, President Elliott said, though he recognizes that not everyone will agree on what the priorities should be. Some departments have indicated that the exercise of reducing the budget has revealed to them that some programs are no longer serving the college well, and that they should have, perhaps, been discontinued earlier. President Elliott commented that it is important to remember that Amherst cannot take on new costs without being willing to redistribute some resources. He emphasized that it is not necessary to eliminate everything that brings the community joy and pleasure, while noting that not all decisions about what should be undertaken will be easy.

Under "Questions from Committee Members," Professor Mattiacci asked if the college might consider adopting the Smith College model of housing faculty from different disciplines in offices within the same building—and by doing so, create further opportunities for interdisciplinary dialogue. President Elliott said that he will be tasking Mike Thomas, the new chief financial and administrative officer, with thinking about the use of space at the college—including the consideration of possible ways in which some space that is currently being used for administrative purposes might be converted to academic spaces. He emphasized that this would not be an easy or quick process, as decisions about space need to be made with better systems and information if the college is going to meet the needs of the faculty.

Professor Mattiacci next noted comments by the president that had appeared in the [March 6, 2023 \(and earlier online\), of the New Yorker](#) titled "The End of the English Major," a piece that focused on the decline in enrollment in the humanities. President Elliott said that the experience of being interviewed

had been an interesting one. He noted that Amherst hasn't seen the precipitous drop in humanities enrollments that many other institutions have, commenting that students are attracted to courses with intellectual excitement. He noted that there is further work that the college can do to translate how studying the humanities leads to different career pathways.

Concluding her questions, and referencing the note that the provost had recently sent to the faculty asking that professors consider not assigning students work over spring break, Professor Mattiacci asked if a similar note should be sent to committee chairs about not meeting during advising week. The provost said that this information has been provided to committee chairs previously, and that some committees may choose to meet while others may not.

In response to questions about some recent emails that had been sent to chairs of academic departments from the admission office, the provost said that she had not been informed about these messages before they had been sent. She understands now that there was a request that all classes be open to accepted students when they are on campus for accepted student days. This is a problematic request, the provost noted, as some classes may not have the necessary capacity to allow this, and some professors may have plans that are not consistent with having visitors on particular days. In addition, she said, she has been told that chairs were asked to hold five hours of time for meetings with accepted students. This also does not seem reasonable, she noted. The provost said that she would be in touch with Matt McGann, dean of admission and financial aid, to express her concern about this matter.

Turning to another matter, Professor Call noted that a chair of a STEM department had asked for clarification about a comment made by Provost Epstein in regard to the request that departments reduce their budgets by 15 percent. The chair had understood that the provost had said that such cuts will not affect lab supplies and lab-related materials. The provost said that she is sorry for any misunderstanding. Departments should find ways to protect the budget lines that support these costs, which may require reducing spending in other areas of their budgets, she said. Budget cuts are being considered at a divisional level as well, and if departments are finding it impossible to reduce their budgets sufficiently, they should be in touch with Steven Hegarty, director of academic finance. All departments should make a good-faith effort to reach the 15 percent goal, however, the provost said.

The members next briefly reviewed a revised draft of the FEC's questionnaire for committee chairs about committee service and agreed to forward the document to Jesse Barba, director of institutional research and registrar services. He has agreed to create an electronic survey, which will be distributed to this year's committee chairs, last year's committee chairs, and staff who work closely with faculty committees.

Conversation turned to [information about the growth and distribution of lecturers and visitors over the past two decades \(see table 4\)](#), which was provided by J. Barba, per the committee's request. The members pointed to the significant growth in the number of tenure-line faculty during this period in all departments and divisions, and a similar pattern of increasing numbers among visiting and lecturer positions. In particular, growth in STEM between 2005 and 2021 was noted, and the provost explained that these positions have been allocated to address increasing enrollment pressures, reducing the number of additional FTEs that have been allocated in STEM departments without having to allocate lab space, which is scarce. In general, conducting research is not an expectation for lecturers, she noted. The provost also said that she had been very sparing in hiring visitors for the next academic year, and that she had approved visiting positions based on enrollment pressures, and not to provide coverage. This trend will continue, she noted. Professor Call asked about the current FTE cap. Provost Epstein said that it stands at 192 tenure-line positions. She explained that some of the additional lines that have been created with funding from the Promise comprehensive campaign can already be allocated while others will be available soon. There will be twelve overall. After reviewing the [data provided by J. Barba on tenure-line FTE demographics \(see pages 3 and 4\) and enrollments \(see pages 5, 6, and 7\)](#). Professor Mattiacci said that she would find it helpful to have clarification about how co-taught courses and joint

appointments are counted. For example, she posed, if a professor has a joint appointment in, say, the social sciences and STEM, would enrollments in the individual's class count for both divisions? She also wondered how enrollments would be counted in a class co-taught by professors who belong to different divisions, say humanities and STEM. Would enrollments in that class count for both divisions? She then asked how enrollments would be counted if a professor has a joint appointment in, say, two departments in the same division. Would enrollments in the faculty member's class count twice toward that division? Finally, she wondered how enrollments in a class that is co-taught by professors in the same division, say humanities, would be counted; would such a class count for that division twice? If time permits, it would also be interesting to consider what percentage of classes offered each year at Amherst (2005–2021) are co-taught by professors belonging to different divisions, Professor Mattiacci said, commenting that she is interested in interdisciplinary pursuits. It was agreed to ask J. Barba if he could research some or all of these questions.

Noting a related issue, the provost said that the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP) is concerned 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 enrollment caps of between eighteen and twenty-two students. Having such caps often discourages students from registering for courses that can then end up being under-enrolled. All faculty should aspire to teach a total of eighty students a year, which they can do through offering a mix of courses with different enrollments.

Professor Call next asked for the members' views about a suggestion from the CEP that consideration be given to asking the Committee on Priorities and Resources (CPR) to review the proposal from colleagues in film and media studies (FAMS) to create a FAMS department at Amherst. Professor Call informed the members that, in the past, it was standard practice for the CPR to review proposals to form new departments, due to the associated costs involved. While this has not been the process in recent years, the provost said, she supports having the CPR review the proposal. Professor Call noted that the CEP has been working with FAMS faculty on this proposal since February 2020. According to Professor Benedetto, chair of the CEP, concerns that have been raised previously appear to have been addressed. Many of these issues revolved around resources, including physical space, FTE allocations, and ADC hours. While the allocation of FTEs will be considered by a future CEP, what is perhaps more important for the short term, Professor Benedetto suggested, is that increased space or ADC resources are not likely to be forthcoming under the current circumstances. The CEP will continue to be busy with FTE requests and course proposals for some time this semester and does not expect to consider the FAMS proposal until later this month at the earliest. If there were then a further step in the process—a review by the CPR—that could start only after the CEP has been able to consider the proposal, it would be unlikely that the proposal could be brought to the faculty this year, Professor Benedetto fears. Professor Benedetto suggested that, while the CEP is occupied with other matters, the FEC consider sending the proposal to the CPR now. If the CEP does endorse the proposal on educational grounds this spring and then forwards it to the FEC, Professor Call said that he thinks that it would be helpful to have the benefit of the CPR's review of the proposal's financial and budgetary impact, before the FEC begins its own review. In this way, the CPR's review and the last stage of the CEP's review could move forward simultaneously, he noted. The members concurred and agreed to forward the proposal to the CPR.

The committee next discussed how best to move forward with the faculty's consideration of [the proposal from the CEP](#) that faculty meetings be shifted from Tuesday evenings to Fridays between 3 p.m. and 5 p.m. The committee agreed that this proposal should be paired with a proposal to set the dates for faculty meetings for the year (a September convocation meeting; dates in October, November, December, February, March, and April; and a May commencement meeting) before the start of the new academic year. After considering different options, the members agreed to have a committee-of-the-whole conversation at a faculty meeting to be held on April 4 to learn more about the faculty's views on this subject. An electronic vote on the matter could then follow.

The meeting ended with further discussion of the CEP's proposal to modify the college's pass/fail policy. Following the committee's conversation on February 27 (see those minutes for details), at the members' request, Professor Call had reached out to Professor Benedetto for clarification about some points; he informed him that some members of the FEC have very different interpretations of the CEP's proposal and, in particular, different predictions for what the impact of the proposed changes would be on the students who use the existing policy, and the faculty who teach large classes and often also have large numbers of advisees.

Professor Benedetto responded by noting that, as with any proposed policy change, it is difficult to know for certain what the effects will be. He said that the CEP is proposing revisions to the current policy with the goal of reducing the number of more frivolous requests to take a course pass/fail, and thus reducing the burden of processing such requests on faculty members—without raising barriers for students in more serious need. Professor Benedetto noted that the new policy has been designed to help the very faculty members whom he understands Professor Mattiacci is concerned about. Indeed, he explained, the impetus for the proposed policy change was complaints that have been shared by multiple colleagues, most of whom are in this subset of the faculty that has more students and more advisees. In the creation of this proposal, there was a lot of direct and indirect input from these faculty members, who would be most affected if the proposal is approved.

Professor Benedetto offered further explanation. If approved, it is hoped that the new policy will reduce the burden of processing pass/fail requests on those faculty members, as follows. Under the current policy, late in the semester, many students in no academic trouble at all have been asking their instructors for their current (or expected) grade in the course. Often mere days before the deadline for submission for pass/fail requests, these same students submit an electronic request to their advisor to have a pass/fail request approved. In particular, since the current policy was implemented, faculty who teach many students and have many advisees have received unreasonable numbers of out-of-the-blue requests from students in no academic danger to know their expected course grade in the closing days of the semester. This is followed by many emails from advisees asking for approval of their pass/fail requests.

Professor Benedetto also said that, in the CEP's view, it is currently too easy for students to get a pass/fail request approved without a real conversation, leading to a significant number of GPA-managing requests that amount to hiding a B+ or even an A-, something for which the pass/fail policy was never intended. The CEP recognizes that students seek pass/fails for different reasons; some requests are in keeping with the intentions of the current policy (e.g., to encourage curricular exploration and to provide a way of supporting students who are struggling academically), and some are not. The physical signatures and paper forms that would be adopted if this proposal is approved would force students who are trying to hide a non-A grade to acknowledge their intention, in an in-person conversation, not only to their advisor but also to their instructor who knows their likely grade, Professor Benedetto noted. After multiple conversations with the class deans, the CEP believes this would discourage a significant number of less desirable pass/fail requests from being made in the first place, while not creating barriers for those students who are in actual trouble or distress.

Professor Benedetto noted that Professor Mattiacci is correct about the separate groups of students who seek pass/fail. He said that the CEP began by seeking to design a policy that would bar or at least strongly discourage the "enhance-their-GPA" group of students from pursuing the pass/fail option. The problem with that goal, he said, is that it is effectively impossible to tell which group a given student requesting pass/fail belongs to. If a student comes to a class dean at the last minute, describing an issue necessitating a pass/fail, then—with no way to tell whether or not the student is exaggerating and no time to investigate further—the class deans said they would be effectively forced to approve the student's request. The class deans, however, do not want the Office of Student Affairs involved in pass/fail approvals as a matter of policy. Such a policy would increase the burden on their already

overburdened office, while not actually creating much of a discouragement for a student trying to engineer their GPA. Faced with a desire to filter out less-than-legitimate pass/fail requests—but having no way to identify them—the CEP came up with the proposed policy Professor Benedetto noted. He concluded by noting that the CEP considered some other more radical ideas. The deans argued that some would have made the policy too inaccessible to the students who legitimately needed it (e.g., an idea to revert to the old policy in which all pass/fail requests had to be made before the end of add/drop), and that others would have been such huge changes that the deans worried about unexpected side effects (e.g., an idea to make pass/fail declarable only after the semester was over). The CEP settled on the proposed policy as being the most realistic way to achieve the desired goals for now, and to leave any more radical changes to the future, if this proposal doesn't work as well as it is hoped that it will.

Professor Mattiacci said that she would like to have some data about pass/fails from two periods—a couple of years before the current policy was implemented and a couple of years later. Ideally, she said, it would also be interesting to have data from one to two years before the pandemic and not just the pandemic years, while noting that she is not sure when the current policy was implemented. Data by semesters would be particularly helpful, which would perhaps reveal whether students are under greater pressure in the spring, or perhaps less pressure, because some students are abroad. She wonders how this information might reflect on faculty and the deans. Provost Epstein said that it may or may not be possible for J. Barba to undertake this work at this time, if it is too time-consuming due to its complexity. It was agreed that the questions should be conveyed to J. Barba so he can let the committee know what will be possible.

The meeting adjourned at 5:30 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Epstein
Provost and Dean of the Faculty