

The sixth 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, November 14, 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.

Under “Topics of the Day,” Professor Call commented on how much he had appreciated and enjoyed the presidential inauguration, including the ways in which this celebration had brought the community together. He also expressed admiration for President Elliott’s inaugural address, noting, in particular, the remarks that the president had directed to students at the conclusion of his speech. The other members concurred. President Elliott thanked the committee and praised the staff of the college for their extraordinary efforts to plan and run the inauguration.

The president next raised the topic of [the November 11 announcement that, as of November 16, masks will be optional in all on-campus locations except the Keefe Health Center and the COVID-19 Testing Center—with individual faculty members being permitted to choose to maintain the mask requirement in their classrooms.](#) President Elliott noted that he had listened closely to the conversation at the October 18 faculty meeting about masking, and that [a student survey](#) had been conducted in response to interest in doing so that was expressed at the meeting. Despite what the timing of the communication about the survey results (it was sent on November 8) might have suggested to some, the results were not a primary factor in the decision to change the masking policy; it was simply a way of learning more about student views on the subject, the president said. It was noted that, at the faculty meeting, Professor Sanderson had argued that the current mask policy in classrooms is based on anonymous voting rather than science, and she had expressed the view that most faculty members wanted the mask requirement to end. President Elliott reiterated that student survey results were one of many factors taken into consideration when making the decision about updating the masking policy, and he said that the instrument was also a useful tool to inform students about the diversity of views that their peers hold about masking—including some students’ anxiety about moving away from masking. The president said that the transition to the new policy is being made largely because the number of COVID cases has been low for some time, and because of the high vaccination rate on campus. At the same time, Amherst is prepared to pivot to other policies, if necessary. The college is continuing to monitor the course of the pandemic closely, he assured the members.

Professor Call informed the president that some colleagues had spoken with him after the release of the survey, expressing concerns that the way in which the survey had been conducted and formulated could have led to a biased sample that could have had an impact on the results (81 percent of students said that they would choose not to wear masks if given the choice, and 19 percent said that they would continue to do so). These colleagues also were troubled that the new policy will be going into effect right before many students leave campus for Thanksgiving break, and, most importantly, will be in effect when those students return from their travels after break. Professor Martini noted that the survey results seem to align with in-class polls that have been conducted. She stressed that the most important message for the community should be that those who feel even a hint of an oncoming cold, whether or not they test positive for COVID, should wear a mask to protect others. Concluding the discussion, Professor Mattiacci said that she worries that some tenure-track faculty members may be concerned that the masking policy that they set in their classrooms could have an impact on students’ evaluations of their teaching, if whatever a faculty member has chosen to do is unpopular with some students. She wonders if a question could be added to the common teaching evaluation form that asks students whether they were comfortable with the professor’s masking policy. Knowing this would aid in interpreting students’ views. The committee agreed that it would be preferable if, at the time of reappointment and tenure, candidates and departments discuss this issue as part of their COVID-19 statements within the letters that they write at these times, which are included in the dossiers.

Concluding “Topics of the Day” President Elliott reiterated his concern that, due to significant inflationary pressures, the college is facing a very challenging budgetary environment. As examples, he noted that Amherst’s natural gas costs may double next year, potentially increasing by \$1 million, and that the cost of food is also increasing significantly. He worries about the impact of rising costs on staff and faculty at the lowest salary levels, in particular, he said. While there are no action items to discuss with the committee at this time, President Elliott said that he wants to flag this issue. He explained that it is possible that various trade-offs will need to be weighed going forward, depending on what happens with the economy, and that he will be consulting with the Committee on Priorities and Resources to inform decision-making. Faculty and staff salaries will be a top priority, the president said, which may necessitate constraints in other areas. The provost noted that funding for the allocation of visiting faculty in the coming year will be tight, and that decisions about visitor requests will likely need to be based largely on enrollment pressures.

Under her remarks, the Provost Epstein informed the members that consultant Susan Pierce has agreed to meet with the members virtually on November 28 and to come to campus to meet with the committee and others at the end of January.

Under “Questions from Committee Members,” Professor Mattiacci asked whether the proposal to standardize mentoring programs within departments that the provost had shared with the committee previously, and which most members of the FEC support, will be implemented. The provost said that some departments have raised some concerns, which her office is considering before moving forward with the envisioned program. It is her hope that the mentoring protocols will be put in place in the next academic year.

The members next reviewed responses that the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP) had provided to the questions that the FEC had posed to the CEP about its Latin honors proposal. It was first noted that classes taken at other Five-College institutions and at institutions where students are studying away will not count toward the proposed breadth requirement for students seeking Latin honors. The members expressed appreciation to the CEP for the responses that appear below.

Does the CEP want to make any refinements to the proposal based on feedback offered at the faculty meeting?

No, the CEP does not wish to refine the proposal after hearing feedback from the faculty. Most of the points raised in the committee-of-the-whole discussion had previously been considered during the CEP’s discussions last year and hence had already been taken into account in the process of formulating the proposal.

Will the CEP please offer clarification about transfer students and the breadth requirement?

The CEP believes that transfer students should receive credit toward the breadth requirement for courses taken prior to Amherst on a case-by-case basis, using the registrar’s assigned equivalences at the time the student arrives at Amherst. Given the small number of transfer students each year, and given that the registrar’s office already makes this determination for all incoming transfer students, the CEP does not believe this solution would be difficult to implement, and it is only fair to transfer students who may have already completed some distribution requirements at their previous institutions. Furthermore, transfer students who wish to meet departmental requirements to undertake honors work often face significant challenges posed by their compressed schedule. As an aside, by contrast, the CEP does not believe similar policies should apply to Amherst students taking courses taken at other institutions in the Five College Consortium or during Study Away. Amherst students taking such courses will have had plenty of time to plan their breadth requirements around those Five College or Study-Away plans, whereas transfer students would not have had corresponding foreknowledge of Amherst’s expectations when they selected courses at their previous institution. In addition, the number of

transfer students each year is a tiny fraction of the number of Amherst students who take Five College or Study Away courses, making it logistically feasible to check incoming transfer students as individual cases, but not Five College or Study Away courses.

Will the CEP articulate further the argument for having a breadth requirement for honors students only, rather than for all students?

Extending the breadth requirement to all students would effectively end the open curriculum, which was not the committee's goal. Moreover, the proposed breadth requirement does not even apply to all honors students, as it is not needed for *cum laude* honors. The goal of the proposal is not to impose a distribution requirement; it is to recognize *outstanding* achievement, at the level of *magna* or *summa* honors. The committee believes that high grades, breadth, and depth in coursework all constitute aspects of academic excellence, and that it is appropriate to expect such excellence from candidates for the highest levels of honors that the college awards.

Why is the proposal to have such a modest breadth requirement, if there is to be one?

The committee considered requiring two courses per division but concluded that this would be overly onerous. The committee also considered a more modest requirement of one course in three of the four divisions but was persuaded by the data showing that most students already take courses in three divisions, avoiding courses in only one divisional area. Thus, the proposed requirement of one course in each of the four divisions was meant to be a reasonable compromise between these two more extreme possibilities, to establish a meaningful requirement that would still be realistically navigable for any student seeking high honors.

Did the committee consider getting rid of Latin honors all together?

The committee began this discussion a year ago with a conversation about the value of Latin honors and distinction, and how those awards were interpreted both internally at the college and externally. The CEP concluded that the faculty placed a high value on thesis work and wished to continue to recognize this work with Latin honors. That is, the CEP's understanding was that the faculty valued significant recognition for thesis work (in the form of Latin honors), and that the fundamental complaint was the GPA cutoff for the two highest levels. Given that understanding, and especially the value the faculty places on encouraging, supporting, and rewarding thesis work, the CEP turned its focus to amending or replacing the GPA cutoff aspect of honors. The committee recognized that Latin honors are bestowed by the college and concluded that the two highest levels—*magna* and *summa*—should therefore require some College-wide criterion in place of the GPA cutoff. Grade data suggested that median alone would not provide a satisfactory criterion, leading the CEP to consider other factors. Since the College values exploration of the curriculum as part of its commitment to the liberal arts, the CEP found it reasonable to consider a student's achievement across the academic spectrum, in addition to in-depth thesis work within a department; hence the breadth requirement for high honors.

Professor Call commented that he found the CEP's response to the question of why the committee is proposing a breadth requirement for honors students, rather than all students, to be compelling. Professor Polk commented that having more information about the rationale for these aspects of the CEP's proposal will contribute to a more robust conversation at the faculty meeting than otherwise might have taken place. He will be interested to see if colleagues are invested in this particular vision and will be comfortable with the faculty's decision about the proposal, he said.

Conversation turned briefly to a question that the CEP had forwarded after reviewing the FEC's charge to develop a proposal for a weekly ninety-minute to two-hour block during the day that can be set aside for faculty meetings and community scheduling—for example, campus-wide meetings and department meetings. The CEP shared that some of its members feel that a community hour would be

incompatible with a proposal to consider Friday afternoons, and asked for clarification. In particular, the CEP said that it wants to know what the FEC is thinking about the nature of the community hour, questioning whether this period is being envisioned as a more peripheral feature that would allow for making good use of the time in weeks when there is no faculty meeting—or a central aspect of the charge? Or, the CEP asked, is the idea of a community hour somewhere in between? The members agreed that its intention is for the CEP to focus primarily on developing a proposal for a faculty meeting during the day. Other benefits would be secondary. The FEC is imagining that, when faculty meetings don't happen, the time set aside for them could be used for department meetings or chairs' meetings, for example. If faculty meetings do take place on some Friday afternoons, departments that schedule departmental colloquia at that time would have to reschedule them, so as not to conflict with faculty meetings.

The committee next reviewed [a proposal from the CEP for an academic calendar for the next academic year](#) (see also CEP chair Rob Benedetto's summary of the proposal.) The members expressed enthusiasm for the proposal, noting that salient features of the calendar include starting classes the day after Labor Day; maintaining Amherst's traditional four-day fall break; having exam period in the fall end early enough to allow students to leave campus without incurring additional travel expenses (in order to accomplish this, the fall reading period would be only two days and exams would take place on weekend days); having spring-semester classes begin only a few days before UMass begins; having the week of spring break align with the university's spring break; having a four-day April break (including a weekend) that aligns with the April vacation of local K-12 schools; and having one makeup day in the spring, followed by a four-day reading period (two weekdays, plus Saturday and Sunday). In response to the committee's question about whether it would be problematic to have exams on the weekend, Provost Epstein responded that there is precedent for doing so. The committee agreed to bring the calendar proposal to the faculty at the December 6 faculty meeting.

Turning to [another proposal from the CEP](#), to make [some minor changes to the language about thesis courses in the Amherst College Catalog](#), in order to codify the longstanding practice that students can receive credit for a maximum of three courses for thesis work during their senior year. The members expressed support for this proposal and agreed it should be taken up by the faculty at the December 6 faculty meeting.

The committee returned briefly to the topic of the format of faculty meetings. The members agreed that the college should return to in-person faculty meetings without a remote option. In making this decision, the FEC cited the small number of COVID-19 cases at this time and the desire to encourage robust attendance and participation at faculty meetings. Given the numerous substantive items on the agenda for the December 6 meeting, it is expected that faculty members will attend to consider these important matters, the members agreed. It was noted that, if the course of the pandemic changes, this decision would be revisited. The committee then turned briefly to some committee nominations and then voted on each of the motions on the faculty meeting agenda—voting five in favor and zero opposed on content, and five in favor and zero opposed to forward the motions to the faculty. The members also voted five in favor and zero opposed to forward the faculty meeting agenda for December 6 to the faculty.

Conversation turned to the provost's proposal to revise the compensation program for the chairs of academic departments and programs. Provost Epstein noted that, over the five-year period in which the compensation program has been in place, it has become apparent that departmental size and complexity has a significant impact on the demands being placed on some chairs. Given these disparities, the provost said that she thinks that a differentiated compensation approach should be adopted. As a point of interest, she noted that virtually all of Amherst's liberal arts college peers use a differentiated compensation model. Under her proposal, compensation for chairs of larger and more complex departments, as well as for programs, would be increased. She commented that some

programs have a larger number of majors than others, which can also create inequities in regard to chairing; all programs have minimal responsibilities when it comes to faculty personnel processes, she noted. (Prior to the meeting, the FEC was provided with [a letter from seven program chairs about their concerns about the level of compensation for program chairs.](#)) While the FEC cannot decide on the level of compensation for chairs, Provost Epstein said that she is interested in receiving feedback about the model that she had outlined. She also noted her plans to share the proposal with the chairs of departments and programs at their December 2 meeting. In answer to the question of the additional cost of the model being proposed, and who would make the final decision about implementation, Provost Epstein said that she and the president would weigh the feedback and the costs, and then decide on whether to move forward. Since, typically, visitors will not be provided to replace courses that won't be taught because of course release taken by chairs in a given year, other than with single-course "borrows," at times, the new model will come, on some level, at the expense of other departmental faculty.

Continuing the discussion, the members focused on the thresholds being proposed for defining departments as large and small under the proposal and the related level of compensation. In answer to the question of whether departments might be categorized differently from one year to the next, based, for example, on burdens in a given year (e.g., searches or faculty personnel cases), Provost Epstein said that she does not envision doing so. Overall, small departments, for example, would have fewer searches and personnel cases than larger ones, she noted. The committee expressed support for the proposal. Professor Coráñez Bolton thanked the provost for addressing compensation for program chairs as part of the proposal.

The meeting concluded with a brief review of data that Matt McGann, dean of admission and financial aid, had provided ([see two documents](#)), at the committee's request, as an update on the implementation of the recommendations made in [the 2016 report on the Place of Athletics at Amherst \(the "Diver II report"\)](#) and [the 2018 report of the Ad Hoc Faculty Committee on Athletics](#), in particular progress that has been made in increasing recruitment efforts to bring more diverse student-athletes to the college. (See [a related note from the Committee on Education and Athletics.](#)) The committee agreed that the data indicate that excellent progress has been made toward the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) goals set in the 2016 and 2018 reports. In addition, the members felt that the data were responsive to a number of the questions and concerns that were raised at the October 18 faculty meeting. It was agreed to distribute this information promptly to the faculty via these minutes. The committee also expressed appreciation to the Committee on Education and Athletics for its offer to share its accumulated knowledge of these issues with the FEC and the faculty more broadly, and how these issues relate to the Diver II goals. The members decided to consider how best to continue this conversation. In addition, the members acknowledged the hard work of colleagues in athletics and admission that have led to these positive DEI results. Although there is always more work to be done, the achievement of Amherst's coaches, in just a few short years, is worthy of the college's praise and encouragement, the members agreed.

The meeting adjourned at 5:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Epstein
Provost and Dean of the Faculty