

The seventh 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 28, 2022, at 4:00 p.m. Present, in addition to Professor Call, were Professors Coráñez Bolton, Martini, and Polk; President Elliott; Provost and Dean of the Faculty Epstein; and Associate Provost Tobin, recorder. Professor Mattiacci was absent.

Under “Topics of the Day,” commenting on the recent vandalization of a painting of a queer and trans pride flag being displayed at Book and Plow Farm, President Elliott expressed sadness and concern. He commented that, unfortunately, this act is part of what has become a pattern of bias-based incidents taking place at the periphery of the campus. The climate around the globe of increasing extremism and intolerance was seen as a contributing factor. There is no place for these acts of hatred directed at the diversity of the campus community, the president said. At the same time, he recognizes that the college can only offer so much protection against such incidents, and he is thinking about ways of navigating this challenging situation. The committee also expressed its deep concern about what had transpired at the farm, and about the broader issue of identity-based harm. ([See information](#) that was sent to the community about this incident on November 28.) The members then considered some committee assignments, selecting several nominees to fill a few vacancies.

Discussion turned to communications that the committee received from two faculty members regarding faculty meetings. The members noted [Professor Fong’s request](#) that future faculty meetings allow those who wish to participate remotely to listen to the meeting via Zoom, be counted as part of the quorum, be provided with the option to convey comments and questions via the chat function and to have these items read out loud by someone monitoring the chat, and be allowed to vote via a Zoom poll. While he is sympathetic to this request, Professor Call said that he has concerns about offering a hybrid format for faculty meetings. Critical to his thinking about this issue, he commented, are the experiences of peer institutions that have moved to a hybrid model for faculty meetings, and the resultant diminishment of the quality of the participation at in-person meetings. Professor Martini agreed, while noting that it might be useful to allow colleagues who can’t attend faculty meetings to view the meetings remotely. She commented that holding the meetings in Johnson Chapel allows for significant social distancing (including by sitting in the balcony), mitigating the risk of spreading the virus. Provost Epstein expressed the view that offering options beyond in-person attendance will likely undermine the quality of in-person faculty meetings, which is the format that is most desirable. She understands that some colleagues may not be able to attend meetings, but feels that a small number of faculty fall into this category, in comparison with those who may not wish to attend as a matter of convenience. President Elliott also expressed support for holding faculty meetings in an in-person format only, commenting that the quality of discussion and debate is enhanced when participants are in the same space.

The members also noted [Professor Honig’s note](#) about the meeting time for faculty meetings, in which he shared his view about the proposal to schedule meetings late in the afternoons. In his view, the evening time is far preferable for parents. Professor Call informed the members that Professor Honig’s note has been shared with the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP), which is currently developing a proposal for a daytime meeting time for faculty meetings. In addition, the FEC noted that a small group of faculty had sent [a note](#), copying the committee, asking that the new masking policy that went into effect on November 16 be paused to allow more time to study the science of masking and to conduct surveys of staff and faculty.

Conversation turned briefly to the criteria and procedures used for [the Jeffrey B. Ferguson Memorial Teaching Prize](#), which last year’s Committee of Six had suggested be refined. Current tenured faculty members, senior lecturers, and senior resident artists who have been at the college for at least ten years are eligible for the prize, which has been awarded since 2019. Individuals may only receive the award once. The members discussed the nomination process, which has varied over the years, including the

current nomination form. In addition, conversation focused on which constituencies should submit nominations and whether all previous years' nominations should be considered when making decisions in the current year (as is true now). In response to the question of why tenure-track faculty members are not eligible for the prize, Provost Epstein said that, by taking this approach, the award would not become a consideration in tenure decisions and would be a way of honoring a substantial record of teaching. Professor Call suggested that a guiding principle in the consideration of this matter should be to make modest refinements only, rather than radical changes, for at least the next three to five years; the processes and procedures for the award have changed frequently since it was launched, he noted. The members agreed that a time limit on how long nominations are kept should be instituted, proposing that the period be three years. Professor Martini raised the question of whether faculty should be asked to nominate fellow faculty, as students can best describe their experience with their teachers, and she noted that the current form is written for student and alumni participation. It was agreed that faculty should continue to be given the option of submitting nominations. The members also considered whether alumni from the past decade should be invited to submit nominations, rather than all alumni, which has been the practice most recently. In regard to the nomination mechanism, the committee agreed that the current submission form, which is quite lengthy, could be creating a barrier to achieving a robust response rate. The committee agreed that the multiple questions on the form should be consolidated into a single question, with a requirement that each submission be at least 250 words in length and not exceed 500 words. The members decided to review the streamlined nomination form at a future meeting.

Consultant Susan Pierce joined the meeting via Zoom at 4:30 p.m., and the committee welcomed her. The college has engaged S. Pierce to think through issues surrounding faculty service at Amherst, including possible ways of streamlining the committee structure. The discussion began with the consultant offering introductory remarks in which she summarized what she has learned from her work thus far, shared her thoughts, and proposed ways in which the committee could move forward. She noted that, on one hand, there are Amherst faculty members who take particular pride in the faculty's robust role in shared governance and institutional decision-making. From their point of view, the proof is in the proverbial pudding, the consultant commented; Amherst is an extraordinary institution, with exceptional students, faculty and staff. These professors place great value on the degree of autonomy that the faculty has at the college. S. Pierce noted that, although they respect the abilities of the administration, some of these individuals have been explicit in stating that the current level of faculty involvement is an antidote to any future administration that might not have the same level of respect for and desire to work with the faculty as is now the case.

On the other hand, S. Pierce said that she has learned that many assistant professors and some associate professors feel that, after being protected from significant service responsibilities for the most part during their tenure-track years, they will assume what many called "the burden of service" after receiving tenure. She noted that they worry that their scholarly productivity will suffer as a result. Many of these professors expressed great confidence in the staff at the college, conveying that they would prefer delegating to the staff tasks that they believe the staff would do well. At the same time, they have a great deal of regard for their senior faculty colleagues and want to respect their position on the importance of the faculty's governance role. The demographic shift in the Amherst faculty over the past decade has already led to some changes in institutional culture, however, S. Pierce noted. These changes are likely to continue over time, in her view. It is her understanding that the faculty generally would like service to be equitably distributed and also to be recognized and rewarded to a greater degree than is true now. At the same time, S. Pierce said that no one with whom she spoke had suggested that service become a criterion for tenure and promotion that is equal to the criteria of excellence in teaching and research.

The consultant stressed the importance of defining and examining all aspects of faculty service and of not defining service only as participation in the work of college committees. Departmental service must also be considered, as well as an array of other time-consuming responsibilities—for example, providing important documentation in terms of compliance issues, chairing departments, participating in searches, preparing faculty personnel cases, and writing letters of recommendation for students. There is also the service that currently is being described as “invisible labor,” which includes mentoring students and colleagues, as well as contributing to the college’s diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts (DEI) efforts, and which typically falls disproportionately to faculty of color and women at most colleges and universities, S. Pierce said. She stressed that everyone with whom she spoke about DEI efforts highly values this work. A few faculty members wondered whether and how service to the profession counted in terms of tenure and promotion at Amherst, the consultant noted.

Continuing, S. Pierce commented that her conversations last year with approximately sixty faculty and staff members, coupled with the results of the COACHE (Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education) survey and the survey that last year’s Committee of Six had conducted, attest both to a desire to ensure that the faculty has a voice in matters of institutional importance, as well as to concerns about service that were expressed by many faculty members. Given these conflicting alternatives (maintaining the status quo in terms of service versus finding ways to streamline service), the FEC’s challenge, in the consultant’s view, is to develop a third alternative that preserves the important role of the faculty in shared governance, while ensuring that the faculty is engaged only in consequential service. Sharing her thinking on this subject, S. Pierce said that the differing perspectives on this matter should be honored. She remains convinced that the best approach going forward is to identify those areas where the faculty has primary responsibility, where the faculty needs to be consulted formally, where the faculty should play a more informal advisory role, and where the faculty needs to be informed. The faculty, often in collaboration with appropriate administrators, can then build the committee structure and other service requirements around those categories. At the same time, the consultant noted the importance of being mindful of the desire of the faculty and the administration that faculty focus primarily on matters of strategic importance to Amherst, and delegate to the staff administrative tasks that do not require faculty input or oversight.

S. Pierce then described some other questions to address, including the following: Is Amherst, in terms of its expectations for scholarship, akin to an R-1 university or to the top national liberal arts colleges (i.e., a “research college”)? She referred the committee to Wellesley College’s [explanation of itself as a “research college.”](#) How should service be recognized and rewarded? For example, should the post-tenure leaves that are provided after six semesters be explicitly defined not only as an opportunity for uninterrupted time for research, but also as a reward for six semesters of teaching and service? Is the course release provided to department chairs an appropriate reward for that additional service? Does Amherst’s favorable student-faculty ratio (7:1) and favorable teaching load enter into the equation?

Concluding her remarks, S. Pierce proposed that, as a next step, the FEC determine the principles that will govern its work going forward, and communicate them at the appropriate time to the faculty. As a starting point, these principles should include at least the following, in her view:

1. That faculty and staff time are such precious resources that service, first and foremost, should be consequential and therefore an appropriate use of faculty and staff time.
2. That the faculty focus on matters of strategic importance to the college, leaving matters of implementation to the staff.

3. That the faculty, relying on and recognizing staff expertise, delegate responsibility to appropriate members of the staff.
4. That the faculty should have ways to convene faculty voices on matters of importance that emerge cyclically. For example, some members of the FEC noted that there have been some occasions in their memory, for example, in terms of admissions and of housing, when it was critical that the faculty be engaged—even though, under normal circumstances, the staff has the expertise to implement policy in these areas. This might, for example, include naming some faculty members to serve, as needed, in an advisory capacity to members of the staff in lieu of being part of a standing committee that routinely meets. The FEC might also consider a mechanism whereby it might wish to convene ad hoc committees to work with the staff on such cyclical matters.

The consultant then suggested that the FEC determine the most effective ways to engage the faculty in these discussions. In her view, it would be valuable, for example, for the faculty to consider—and in all likelihood to amplify—the list of matters that she had suggested be addressed. She proposed that the FEC should then lay out a process by which the committee will elicit feedback from the campus, before bringing any recommendations forward to the faculty.

The members discussed the ways in which some service of the kind that the consultant had described has already shifted to staff members, offering as example, the work of the Committee on Student Fellowships. While faculty members continue to be deeply engaged in the work of the committee, in particular through the interview work that is an essential part of service on the committee, the time-consuming work of writing letters of recommendation for students being nominated for major fellowships has now largely been lifted from the faculty. Christine Overstreet, director of fellowships, is responsible for drafting these letters, which are then endorsed by the faculty, and does a superb job, it was agreed. Professor Coráñez Bolton commented that the model that has been adopted by the fellowships committee, for which he expressed enthusiastic support, may suggest that having staff relieve faculty of some significant service burdens, when appropriate, may not be as dramatic a shift in governance at the college as one might think. Similarly, Professor Call commented that a shift to having staff members support the work of some faculty committees has been extremely valuable over the years. He noted, as examples, the assistance that Nancy Ratner, director of academic projects, provides to the CEP and Associate Provost Tobin's work with the Faculty Executive Committee and the Tenure and Promotion Committee. It was agreed that, as the committee considers questions around service, it would be helpful for the FEC to learn more about how committees function, perhaps by speaking with committee chairs. The provost noted that most major faculty committees now benefit from staff support.

Continuing the discussion, Professor Martini noted the additional burdens that now come with serving as chair, including, for example, the time that must now be spent on routine tasks using Workday. In regard to Workday, Professor Call also expressed concern, commenting that he is spending a significant amount of time on tasks that do not represent a good use of time and that, ideally, it should be possible to delegate much of this routine work to the academic department coordinator. Continuing, Professor Martini commented that, while enhanced compensation for chairs will help, she feels that additional measures might also be taken to provide chairs with more time to carry out their many responsibilities. She offered as an example the idea of excusing chairs from service on major committees. Provost Epstein commented that it is the practice of some departments that, when a colleague who is slated to be chair is elected to the FEC, for example, another faculty member will become chair while that individual serves on the committee. Professor Call commented that his departmental service takes up more of his time than his service on the FEC.

Professor Polk posed the question of whether advising first-year students is the most valuable use of faculty time. While some believe that this is one of the most important responsibilities of the faculty, he noted that some institutions make use of an advising model that employs staff members for pre-major

advising. He commented on the challenges of advising students whose academic interests do not align with his own, and the time commitment that is required to do so effectively. Provost Epstein said that she does not know of any liberal arts colleges that have shifted college advising to staff. In her view, advising is a central responsibility of college faculty. Professor Martini commented that, when she has advisees who have charted their academic futures early on in their Amherst careers, she encourages them to declare their majors by the end of their first year. In this way, they will have an advisor in their field of choice who can begin guiding them in their sophomore year. Professor Coráñez Bolton said that he finds mentoring students as they navigate the open curriculum to be very worthwhile, though he recognizes the trade-off in regard to faculty time. Professor Polk commented that the role of advising as a form of service should be part of a larger discussion about what it means to be a “research college.”

Returning to the topic of committee service, Professor Call noted the members’ previous discussions about the importance of building community, particularly following the pandemic—the impact of which is certainly still being felt. The benefits of serving on a committee, in his view, include forming new connections, bringing faculty and staff together, learning more about the roles that members of the community play, and gaining a better understanding of one another’s work and of the college. In addition, in his experience, having a standing committee that understands particular issues thoroughly can provide a great deal of help in the event of a crisis. Several members noted that the strengthening of programming for new faculty has produced cohorts of tenure-track faculty that are quite cohesive, which is positive. Another effect has been that some divisions have been created, which have no doubt been exacerbated by the separations caused by the pandemic. Fewer faculty now know one another across cohorts and across the college, and there is less cross-generational interaction, some members pointed out. Committee service can help forge such relationships, it was noted. Professor Polk described his own experience with committee service, which he began in his third year at the college. While this was the first occasion that his time was not completely his own and that he was accountable to a committee chair, he found that the service was a very useful vehicle for bringing him into the college community more fully. Professor Martini, who said that she would like to see other opportunities to bring faculty together, noted that a colleague had recently suggested to her that trivia nights be held at the Inn on Boltwood as a fun way of building community.

Professor Call noted that, unlike at a university, the faculty world at Amherst is the whole college, with broader responsibilities to the institution. President Elliott said that the meaning of the term *service* itself is not clear, and he wonders about its origins. The term makes it sound as though the responsibilities that have been under discussion are extramural. The members agreed and preferred *citizenship* or *governance*. On a related front, conversation then turned briefly to whether faculty should be involved in adjudicating student discipline cases through committee service, with several members expressing support for continuing with this model. Professor Martini expressed the view that committees that have deep involvement with student matters should have a faculty presence. She has found it encouraging to see the time and attention that faculty members have devoted to such service, and she feels that their participation has made a great difference. While some may see involvement in student disciplinary cases as a conflict of interest, Professor Polk, said, in his experience, he assumed more of a caretaking role in this circumstance. He was invested in students beyond what can be a punitive moment, giving attention to what could be a restorative outcome and demonstrating that he cared. Professor Martini commented that, while she served as a class dean, she relied heavily on the tremendous expertise of the staff in the Office of Student Affairs, which she found to be incredibly helpful. Provost Epstein wondered if students involved in disciplinary cases might worry about taking classes with faculty who are made aware of what is happening, essentially closing off parts of the curriculum to them as a result.

Concluding the discussion, S. Pierce asked the members if, as a next step, they wish to focus on articulating principles to guide the work of considering faculty service. She noted plans for her to come to campus at the end of January to meet with groups of faculty and committees, and wondered if it

would be helpful for the FEC to think about framing recommendations ahead of these sessions, which could then be shared and discussed by the various groups with which she will meet. Following the meetings, the committee can consider the feedback of colleagues about what they deem consequential service—that is, what the faculty should be involved with and what is considered to be less important. Professor Coráñez Bolton expressed support for establishing a baseline of values regarding service and for providing these principles to participants. Professor Polk agreed and noted that thinking about advising as a value, for example, has led him to consider it through a different lens. Faculty time, it was agreed, should be thought of as a precious resource, and the groups should consider how best to use it. It was decided that it would be helpful for S. Pierce to meet with staff who serve as liaisons to faculty committees, and she agreed to do so. The members expressed appreciation to S. Pierce, who left the meeting at 5:24 p.m.

The meeting adjourned at 5:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Epstein
Provost and Dean of the Faculty