Dear Members of the Class of 2025 and New Transfer Students,

Welcome to the Amherst community! I look forward to meeting you soon and getting to know you over the coming years. As you are undoubtedly aware, we currently anticipate a return to fully in-person teaching and learning this fall. We are delighted at the prospect and eager to introduce you to life at Amherst. Some pandemic-related health and safety measures may continue to be necessary this fall, but the exact nature of these measures remains to be seen. As always, we will follow public health guidelines and make determinations of what we believe is best for the Amherst community to operate as safely and effectively as possible.

I’m writing to invite you to participate in a tradition of common reading for new students. A highlight of Orientation activities at Amherst is the annual DeMott Lecture, in preparation for which we choose a shared reading for the incoming class. This year’s DeMott Lecturer will be Shayla Lawson, Assistant Professor of English at the College. Our reading will be her recent book *This Is Major: Notes on Diana Ross, Dark Girls, and Being Dope*. You have probably already indicated whether you prefer an electronic or paper copy; if not, please reach out to orientation@amherst.edu to let us know. (Due to challenges with international mail, all international students are invited to access the electronic version.)

The DeMott Lecture honors one of Amherst’s legendary teachers, Benjamin DeMott, a scholar of English literature. Professor DeMott wrote an essay that I consider one of the best I have ever read on what it means to teach and learn in a setting of the kind Amherst offers. The essay, “English and the Promise of Happiness,” identifies English classes as places “wherein the chief matters of concern are the particulars of humanness: individual human feelings, human response, and human time.” DeMott celebrates the growth that occurs in such settings, where “the function of conversation—searching for terms, pretending to exactitude, criticizing and celebrating each other’s offerings—is to re-situate a deeply private enterprise on a public stage.”
This Is Major is a collection of essays highly attuned to what DeMott calls “the particulars of humanness.” Its essays deftly reflect on human feelings, human response, and the complexities of human engagement—with others and with the world around us, through the lens of what Lawson elsewhere calls “Black femininity.” I hope you will enjoy the book and find it thought-provoking. For those interested, I will host two small-group conversations about the book and the lecture during the first two weeks of the semester, open on a first-come, first-served basis and requiring only that you read This is Major and think about the lecture. Information about how to sign up will be available on the DeMott Summer Reading page of our website in mid-August.

Please be on the lookout over the next few weeks for a variety of communications from our new-student orientation team to help you plan and make the transition to life at Amherst. I look forward to meeting you soon. Until then, happy reading!

Warmly,

Biddy Martin