Dear Students, Staff, Faculty, Alumni, Parents and Friends of Amherst College,

What follows is a letter that reflects my commitment to keeping you informed about the College. Let me warn you now that it is long. Most, if not all, of you will find it too long. I hope you will find it useful nonetheless.

The slower pace of summer has given way to the sparkling liveliness of eighteen hundred curious young people who are eager to connect with one another and set forth on the adventure of an Amherst education. The Class of 2017 arrived in force on Sunday, August 25. These 466 students—half women, half men—hail from forty states, the District of Columbia, and thirty different countries. Among them, they speak thirty languages. Eighteen percent are first-generation college students; twenty-five percent of our entering students receive Pell Grants; and fifty-eight percent receive Amherst College need-based grants. Our students come from 378 different secondary schools. Forty-five percent of them identify as U.S. students of color. Nine percent of our entering class comes from outside the United States and another five percent have dual citizenship in the U.S. and another country. In addition to their outstanding academic records and accomplishments, our new students bring musical talent, a wide range of experience in dance, and achievement in debate, 4-H, novel-writing, athletics and much more. I have had two formal occasions on which to spend time with the Class of 2017, the new student welcome and the DeMott Lecture, which was given this year by author and Amherst parent, Elizabeth Kolbert. Her book, Field Notes from a Catastrophe: Man, Nature, and Climate Change was required summer reading for all new students, and helped set the theme for orientation as well as for the 2013-2014 Copeland Colloquium. The members of the Class of 2017 are engaged, thoughtful and inquisitive, certain to have a lasting impact on the College as they mark out their distinctive paths through it.

In addition to our new students, we are also delighted to welcome thirteen new tenure-track and tenured faculty who were hired in 2012-2013—one of the largest cohorts of tenure-stream faculty to have been added in a single year. We are also joined by an impressive cast of visiting faculty and artists who will expand the offerings to our students in impressive and interesting ways. As is true of other institutions in the U.S., we face a significant number of retirements, as the large number of faculty who started their careers in the sixties and early seventies leave their posts. We are building the faculty of the future, replacing beloved and accomplished scholars and teachers with the bright, promising gems of the next generation. Thankfully, a number of our recent retirees continue to teach at the College and take part in campus activities, allowing new faculty
and students to experience what has made education and research at Amherst so rigorous, consequential, and enlivening over the past decades. Our celebrations of retiring faculty give us occasion to marvel at the extraordinary careers of so many teachers and researchers. Our new faculty members allow us to build strength and continually transform the curriculum in key areas: the biological sciences, including biostatistics and mathematical biology; American public policy and U.S. foreign policy; Latino Studies; the broad area of Asia; Gender Studies; English literature; and Native American history, to name a few. As we continue planning for a science center that will sustain our longstanding strengths and foster connections across fields, faculty from a range of disciplines have proposed the creation of an interdisciplinary humanities center. Our discussions of this possibility will begin again as the semester unfolds. For this next year, we will undertake nine tenure-track and open rank faculty searches.

Amherst College is fortunate to be able to attract and welcome the excellent students I have described and to be able to replace retiring faculty, and even plan to add to our numbers. We owe this ability to the generosity of our alumni, parents and friends who believe in the importance of academic quality and in the life-changing impact of a great education. In September we will celebrate the success of the Lives of Consequence campaign, during which eighty-six percent of alumni engaged with the College and over $500 million was contributed between 2008 and 2013. It is a remarkable achievement that the College exceeded its original goals for a campaign that occurred during the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. We are indebted to our committed volunteers who worked tirelessly over the years with our Advancement team, led by Megan Morey and our campaign chairs—Brian Conway ’80, Hope Pascucci ’90, and Jide Zeitlin ’85—and, of course, to my predecessor, Tony Marx. The celebration in September will feature a range of events, including a debate between two Amherst alumni on the Supreme Court’s decision on race-based admissions.

In addition to the new students and faculty who have joined us, I would also like to highlight several new senior administrators who joined us over the past few months and who have already begun to make a difference on a number of critical fronts—Provost, Peter Uvin; Chief Financial Officer, Kevin Weinman; Dean of Students, Jim Larimore; and General Counsel and Chief Policy Officer, Lisa Rutherford. They share with the outstanding staff members already in place the goal of ensuring that our students, faculty, and staff not only succeed, but also flourish. Let me provide a little information about some of the work in which we are involved.

Among his many duties, Peter Uvin, Amherst’s first provost, has responsibility for oversight of two high-priority initiatives—strategic planning and our efforts to ensure that every member of the community benefits from the diversity of our students, faculty, and staff. With an eye to our bicentennial, we
will spend the next year and a half on a planning process that will clarify our goals and strategies for the next decade or more. Two of the strategic planning committees started their work in the spring—the committee charged with analyzing our financial outlook and another that will assess and make recommendations for the development of the physical campus. By the end of September, we will have established a committee to study our technology needs and four committees charged with thinking about our core mission activities. These core committees will focus on: 1) What it will mean in ten years to attract great faculty and provide the best possible education for a diverse and talented student body; 2) How a residential liberal arts education can most effectively prepare our students for the world they will enter, and how we can be more intentional about the education students receive outside the classroom; 3) How Amherst can meet the challenge of internationalization so that our students not only understand our imbrication with other cultures, economies, and political systems, but have experienced that interrelation; 4) How we can be certain that Amherst remains accessible and that its diversity is a meaningful educational benefit for all students, faculty, and staff. The committees will meet throughout the 2013-2014 academic year and will solicit input from students, staff, faculty, alumni, trustees, and parents. A steering committee will develop a draft plan, which will then be vetted by on- and off-campus constituents in the fall of 2014, with a final version submitted to the Board of Trustees in January 2015. We will actively seek the ideas and perspectives of every constituency of the College, and, if you have read this far, that means you.

What else is on our agenda for 2013-2014? Amherst is justifiably proud of the socio-economic, racial, ethnic, national and international diversity among its students. Recent calls for higher education to be more accessible and affordable have put Amherst’s financial aid policies, accessibility and success in assembling a diverse student body in a very positive national spotlight. A recent Washington Monthly survey on Best-Bang-for-the-Buck Colleges rated Amherst as the very top for these characteristics. The average student at Amherst is paying less than half the tuition price because of our generous aid policies; while students paying full tuition also benefit from a significant subsidy that represents the difference between tuition price and the actual cost of an Amherst education. There are, nonetheless, still too many families stretched thin by the amount that is left for them to pay. We will do everything in our power to ensure that the sacrifice is repaid with the benefits of an Amherst education.

Demographic research on the racial and socio-economic segregation of our neighborhoods in the U.S. suggests that Amherst College may be the most diverse community in which some of our students have lived or will ever live. It is the College’s responsibility to ensure that all our students thrive and that each one of them benefits from the opportunity to build relationships across differences of all kinds. Communities that lack diversity fail to take advantage of
the full extent of the talent, creativity and human connections available to us. Differences among us, particularly when they are the result of longstanding discrimination or exclusion, can make it hard to build relationships across established boundaries. The benefits of doing so, and risking feelings of discomfort vastly outweigh the expenditure of effort. The process is essential to each of us and critical to our democracy. Our Provost and Dean of Students have worked closely over the course of the summer to put new programs in place and to develop opportunities for students to take the initiative in making connections.

In a separate but related vein, our students effectively advocated last year for a more vibrant social life on campus. Together, we identified the relative absence of appropriate physical spaces as an impediment to the kinds of gatherings that would help bring the student body together. Responding to that input, our facilities team came up with a creative idea to convert the old Power House, now an equipment storage facility, into a space for student events. We have seen early conceptual designs that promise the kind of space we need. In response to student questions about alcohol and party policies, I have asked Dean Larimore and his staff to work with our students to bring greater clarity to these issues. We continue, in the meantime, to add opportunities for campus-wide events and to create the infrastructure that will allow students to organize their own.

We will also continue to address and reflect on important issues as a community. In November, we will celebrate the tenth anniversary of the extension of marriage rights to same-sex couples in Massachusetts. In the past year, students, staff, faculty, and alumni have initiated discussions about our mascot. I anticipate more serious exchanges in the course of this year about the reasons for significant interest in a new mascot. I know there will be no shortage of views and little reluctance to share them.

When it comes to living spaces for students, we continue to make improvements and evaluate our options. Seligman Hall, previously Theta Delta house, has reopened after an extensive and beautiful renovation. Next up on the housing agenda are discussions about the best locations and design for new residence halls to replace the social dorms. It is opportune that we find ourselves facing such consequential facilities questions at the very time we are beginning our discussions of Amherst’s longer-term future. As you know, we are currently in the process of selecting a new site for the science center. Having decided to stop the new building project on the site of the current Merrill Science Center, we have spent the past months exploring the best possible location for the science center. Our discussions on campus and with the Board of Trustees will pick up in earnest as the semester begins. The new plan will allow us to emerge with not only a terrific science center, but also new dormitories—potentially for the same price or less than the amount the original science center alone might have cost and with much less disruption. We are eager to move at a pace that will assure
our faculty, staff, and current and future students of a cutting-edge science center and new dormitories by 2018. The new Pratt Field and field house are on schedule to be complete in time for the first home football game. The field and field house have been sited and equipped so that they serve our softball, field hockey, lacrosse, and track and field teams as well as football. We look forward to great contests over the course of this year.

Let me now provide you with an update on the College’s commitment to improving the way we as a community address the issue of sexual misconduct, a subject worthy of significant space in this letter. Our goal is not merely to do the best possible job of handling reports of rape, sexual assault, and misconduct, but the best conceivable job of educating the entire community, in an effort to foster positive social relationships and prevent assault. As many of you know, articulate and courageous students disclosed a range of problems in our previous efforts to prevent, respond to, and remedy incidents of rape, sexual assault and sexual misconduct. The staff, faculty, and students on the Sexual Respect Task Force have continued throughout the summer to make much-needed improvements in policy, procedure, practice, and education. At the beginning of the summer we re-launched the Sexual Respect website. It now includes the new policies and procedures agreed to by the College community, as well as educational videos. The Task Force has also focused on the effective training of our students to be active bystanders who can help keep their peers safe. By active bystander we mean witnesses to unacceptable behavior or to the distress of another who take it upon themselves to intervene and provide help. Professional training is being provided for our Residence Life personnel, as well as students, faculty and staff.

We have placed even greater emphasis on using this year’s Orientation as an opportunity to enhance preparation and provide programs that will help educate incoming students about how they can help create a healthy, positive culture. Facilitated conversations on “Community Values” and bystander training are taking place across campus. The Task Force has a goal to provide faculty with resources and materials they can use in their courses or other interactions with students. We have added key staff to help in this work, including a Sexual Respect Educator, responsible for coordinating educational programs on sexual assault and relationship violence and serving as deputy Title IX Coordinator for students. A search for a permanent Title IX Coordinator is underway. To their credit, former and current Amherst students have played a significant role in what has become a national conversation about rape and sexual assault on college and university campuses. Their work continues to inform our efforts.

One of the most significant changes in higher education is the emergence and rapid development of online learning programs, many of them offered through for-profit firms. This past year, we studied developments in online
learning and proceeded to do what we do well at Amherst—consider and debate the possible benefits and the potential downsides of the developments we are seeing. Our faculty considered the possibility that Amherst might accept the invitation from edX to join the consortium that was established by Harvard, MIT, and the edX founders. It is one of the most promising online consortia, focused not only on “Massive Open Online Courses” (MOOCS), but also on enhancements to learning and teaching in residential college settings. Despite significant interest on the part of some of our faculty members, the faculty as a whole concluded that they were not ready to join edX at this point. At the same time, Amherst faculty also expressed support for continuing to pursue technology-enhanced options, including so-called flipped classrooms and hybrid forms of traditional and online learning. To this end, Dean of the Faculty Gregory Call and his colleagues in the Office of the Dean of the Faculty have spent the summer developing a program of activities for the 2013-2014 academic year, including visits by experts in the field of online learning and experimental initiatives on the part of Amherst faculty members. We have joined a group of provosts and deans from other liberal arts colleges to explore what we might do together to provide our students, into the future, with the kind of education we consider essential.

Other interesting conversations and projects are underway on campus. The urgency of climate change has given rise on a number of campuses to calls for divestment from interests in coal. Our Investment Committee has met with students to discuss the issues and the conversations will continue this fall. In terms of a different natural resource, the College’s new Book and Plow Farm recently delivered 200 pounds of kale, 300 pounds of tomatoes, and a much enjoyed 500 pounds of watermelon to Valentine dining hall. Within the constraints of the dining facility, we continue to find ways to enhance the quality of food.

On the above topics and more, I welcome your reflections and thank you for the many thoughts and suggestions you’ve offered since my arrival. It is an honor to lead this College and I thank you for that opportunity.

With best wishes,

Biddy Martin