“White Paper” for the CAP

May 12, 2008

Colleagues on the CAP:

In his instructions to the various subcommittees of the strategic plan, Dean Urgo suggested that the subcommittees might want to prepare, in addition to their public formal reports, supplementary “White Papers” intended for more limited circulation. These White Papers might address issues either too sensitive for public posting, or problems that might be more efficiently handled by specific college agencies.

In our review of the college’s academic program, we came across several issues that call for immediate attention. Several of these are tied to one overarching problem that we describe in our public report:

“The adoption of the Open Curriculum may have unintentionally encouraged an increase in the autonomy of Departments at a cost to educational breadth. Departmental autonomy also has the effect of shifting the focus of the Academic program from the students (where we think it should be) to the faculty. We encourage a stronger balance between these interests.” …

“We hope that the CAP, as the elected committee with purview over curricular issues, will increasingly serve as the guardian of college-wide interests, providing a balance for initiatives generated through departmental agendas. We recommend that the CAP develop ways of encouraging departments to invest in the notion of a broad liberal arts education that balances breadth with depth for all Hamilton students.”

We have two specific recommendations and several questions for the CAP:

1. We hope that this strategic plan, unlike the current strategic plan, will actually be used for curricular planning.
2. We encourage the CAP to adopt as its central mission the role of serving as the spokespersons for college-wide (as opposed to departmental) interests. The longstanding practice of the CAP, responding to scattered ad-hoc issues is, we think, inefficient. Having a central mission will help keep the committee focused.
3. Why should the vast majority of curricular planning be done at the departmental level? What is the role of the CAP?
4. Should departments design their curricula primarily as preparation for graduate studies in their own specific fields? (If that is their goal, they are failing. See part one of our report.)
5. What can be done to encourage departments across the curriculum to introduce challenging and engaging courses accessible to junior and senior non-majors without prerequisites?
6. How can faculty and/or departments who develop such courses be appropriately rewarded?
7. Should a department’s contributions to the broad Hamilton Liberal Arts education be a factor in faculty allocations? (See Dan Chambliss, “Recommendations to the President and the Officers of Hamilton College, Updated February 2008.”)
8. There are 47 departments and programs (including “Interdisciplinary”). Is this too many? (Over the five-year period 2003-2007, six of these departments/programs averaged fewer than three concentrators per year.) Has the introduction of small, specialized programs contributed to the well being of the College as a whole, or has it contributed to the growing fragmentation of the curriculum?
9. Should the CAP consider limiting the number of courses (including prerequisites required through other Departments) that can be required for the concentration?
10. Has the growing autonomy of departments and curricular fragmentation contributed to a decline in the sense of a shared College mission?
11. Why, according to the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education, do first year Hamilton students not feel sufficiently challenged?
12. Is grade inflation a problem?
13. Should the CAP have a role in strengthening the advising system?
14. Why do we still have a swimming requirement?

As you will have seen in our public report, the Subcommittee on Academic Program has recommended that the DOF establish two task forces to study advising and academic standards. The task forces will report to the DOF and to the CAP.