2005 Mellon Project Panel Study Report

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1. Student Academic Life

Student-Faculty Relations

We can learn quite a bit about how students experience Hamilton by looking at the extreme attitudes—both good and bad—that students hold towards the faculty. However, we need to be cautious when talking about "students' attitudes towards professors." There are no easy formulas such as "most students like Hamilton professors," since most students only have experiences with a small portion of the Hamilton faculty. The students themselves differentiate between the types of relationships they have with professors, tending to do so in four rough groups: 1) professors they have a close relationship with, 2) professors they have a "professional" relationship with, 3) professors they dislike, or whom they have had a bad experience with, and 4) professors they do not know.

A mentor beyond academics

Just over half (32 out of 61) of the students interviewed reported having close personal relations with one or more professors, and many noted that they have spoken with some professors about personal or social matters on a number of occasions. Meanwhile, thirty percent (18 out of 61) of students interviewed reported that they did not have close relations with a faculty member—many of these students, however, noted that they maintained "professional" relationships with faculty. A small number of the students surveyed (7 out of 61, or 11%), when asked directly about whether they were close with a professor, did not directly answer the question in either a positive or negative way. Four students not only responded that they did not have close relations with professors, but gave specific examples of bad relations with professors.

1. Reported having at least one close professor	51% (32)
2. Reported not having a close professor	31% (20)
3. Did not directly answer question	11% (7)
4. Reported bad relations with professor(s)	7% (4)
Total	100% (63)

Collapsing category 4 into category 2, and omitting category 3, we find that the typical Hamilton student, then, reports being close to one or more professors, though a significant percentage of the student body does not.

1. Reported having at least one close professor	57% (32)
2. Reported not having a close professor	42% (24)
Total	99% (56)

Students who reported having a professor close to them repeatedly emphasized how they frequently dropped by their professors' offices "just for a chat"—a professor's availability for informal discussion is a key component in a close student-professor relationship, according to these students. However, more importantly to most of these students is their ability to meet with professors outside the classroom and talk with them about issues other than academics. Students with professors close to them report how they feel they can talk about issues outside of class work and academics with the professor, and in many ways this is a primary characteristic of a strong student-professor bond. Further, students reported that this bond increased when they met with professors outside of the classroom, or saw them outside of an academic setting. "John" noted how,

> S: The best things about having a relationship with a professor, as opposed to just being one of his students, is that often they can, you know, you see them outside of class; and I think some of the best things about, you know, really knowing professors is seeing them outside of class, and then you know, feeling that they actually do thin[k] of you as a person. So you know, I could just see a professor in Café Opus or something, you know, we could sit down and talk for five minutes or an hour, or whatever it happens to be.
>
> I: Like who?
>
> S: Well, my adviser has been really...he's just a really nice guy. I mean, he… asks about, you know, things outside of, you know, my course work and stuff. So I mean, you know, when I came back from abroad, he wanted to hear about, you know, you know, what I'd done there, where I traveled, all things like that…I would say the thing I value most about my

> relationships with professors is, is, is really just being able to approach them at any time, not just when they're sitting in their office or when, you know, when they're packing up their stuff at the end of a lecture. So I think that's the best part. ["John"]

Another student, "Poetry," commented how her interactions with her professor outside of the college on class trips helped her to get to know the professor better as a "friend."

> S: Most of our class was hands-on, like going to…[meet] representatives and senators and having dinners and lunch with them, and just talking to them back and forth and stuff. And so that made me able to like, was able to like, you know, grasp like, you know, she's not just a professor, she's actually a friend, you know, that's really helped me. ["Poetry"]

Further, students noted how their closest professors go out of their way to help them, whether it be reminding them of deadlines and course requirements or helping them to raise their grade in a certain class. "Jonathan Thompson" commented that:

> S: Personally, if I could pick my top professors, it would be the ones who took the extra effort to help me out or to like help students out generally. I took a psychology class with [name omitted], and I had been struggling in class. I asked to see him during office hours, and I laid out my plan, like here this is how I'm going to get my grade back up to a B. He was like okay, and if anyone's in class who can do it, it's you. ["Jonathan Thompson"]

And "Amy" reported that one time her professor, at the end of an email about a class discussion,

> S: Wrote "you know I was reviewing your transcript and just wanted to make sure you know that you need this one more class…before you can graduate," which was definitely, I mean I knew I needed it, you know, but it was nice that there was someone who was checking up on me and looking out for me. ["Amy"]

Students report that having a professor as a friend has academic, and social benefits as well—it gives students opportunities to work on their professor's research projects, to design independent studies to replace or supplement normal coursework, and to network with professionals in their field of study, in addition to providing the practical

benefits of having an academic and intellectual mentor.[1] We also know from survey data that students who report being satisfied with student interaction with faculty have higher GPAs. This correlation may not just be one-way, but may be reciporical—good students may find that they have better relationships with their professors (and find more venues to foster such relationships such as join student-faculty research projects) than poor students, and students with close relationships with their professors may feel more inclined to work hard, revise their work with their professors, and make full use of their professor's availability, which might well help their grade. In any case, close student-faculty relationships seem to have a very positive effect on student experience, work, and satisfaction with Hamilton.

A "professional" relationship

A large portion of students reported having, what some of them called, a "professional" relationship with their professors—one characterized by friendliness and respect (but not to the degree that the student would call the professor a *friend*), and by an exclusively academic, in-class relationship. This seemed to be, in a way, the default type of student-faculty relationship—the one most students seemed to expect from a professor, and the one that some of the students preferred:

> S: Other professors, you know, aren't really the same, you know, they just sort of want to get through their class. I mean, but I think you can almost like expect that. I mean you can't expect that a professor is going to like have, like developing close, you know, friendships with all their students, you know. So I mean, there is, I think, you know, relationships between like professors and students I think is like, its sort of appropriate for, I mean compare it today like a professional relationship for the most part… I think most professors, like it seems to be more of a professional relationship, which I think is fine, that's to be expected. ["Sean"]

Even students who reported being close to their professors also suggested that this closeness, in some ways, remains "professional."

[1] One particularly important issue further research should focus on is *when* students seem to bond with their professors, and how their time at Hamilton is shaped by when they make these bonds.

> S: You know, professors know you and you can talk to them; you can get to know them a bit; and you don't get lost, you know, you're not a number… I'm not anticipating getting invited to anybody's house for dinner, but you know, it's not that I don't know people here.

"Tom" commented on his time at Hamilton that,

> S: One of my regrets is not having very strong relationships with the teachers; something to learn from. ["Tom"]

> S: I mean, I don't, like I don't really have a professors that I can go in and talk deeply. But I mean I go in and talk to professors about work and stuff if I have questions. ["Luke"]

The "professional" student-faculty relationship is characterized by its focus purely on the academic work of the classroom, and a degree of distance on all other "personal" issues. This is the relationship that most students, it seems, expected to have with their professors upon entering Hamilton—most who had close relationships with their professors seemed surprised and delighted that such a relationship was possible, despite the fact that the majority of Hamilton students have at least one of those relationships. We should note that the majority of student-professor relations are probably of this "professional" sort, since most students who were close to a professor were only close to one or two, out of a possible dozen or more professors with whom they have taken classes. In this sense, and as students have reported in *their* experience, "professional" student-faculty relationships are the default, and close relations are the exceptions.

Students repeatedly report how beneficial it is for them to have a professor they have worked with or simply talked to in a more personal way. In this way, these relationships are to be encouraged. The administration and the faculty seem to realize this, and have, each in their own way, taken steps to foster and develop these relationships, steps which have taken form in Hamilton's advising program, to which we will turn next.

The Advising Program

The faculty have attempted to, in part, institutionalize some of this close faculty-student relationship in the advising program, in which students are (hopefully) paired with faculty members in their field of study in order to develop an academic plan for their years at Hamilton. The vision put forward by the faculty in the "new Hamilton curriculum" holds broad but very important goals:

> Academic advising is one of the many ways in which students engage with faculty on an individual basis. Advisors and advisees work together to craft a unique, individual academic plan based upon each student's strengths, weaknesses, and goals. Hamilton College views the advising relationship as an on-going conversation that transcends mere course selection and attempts to assist students as they explore the breadth of the liberal arts curriculum, experience college life, focus on a major concentration, and prepare for life after Hamilton.[2]

While the rhetoric surrounding the advising program suggests that advisors take on the role of the mentors and friends characteristic of close student-faculty relationships, students report that their relationships with their advisors are typically "professional," and tend to only center around practical matters such as course registration, where professors are *required* to approve the student's course plan. Let us look at some examples in the students' words.

"Victoria," similar to a good number of students, reported having a close relationship with her adviser:

> I: So have you formed any close relationships with any professors?
>
> S: Well yeah. I mean especially with my adviser. That's like the closest because I've had her since like my first semester freshman year. Like I had her, she wasn't my adviser at that moment, because she was my professor. So it was like since that moment until now, and then she became my adviser, it's been just like a really close bond, like I've really enjoyed it. ["Victoria"]

Note, however, that this professor *became* her adviser, and was not her originally *assigned* advisor. The same student later commented, about the same professor, that:

[2] Hamilton College Website: http://www.hamilton.edu/academics/info.cfm.

> S: We talk about everything. It's like when it has to be academic…it's like registration period coming or, you know, or when it was something to do with like a deadline coming up but other than that, it would just be like catching up on – so how have you been, how are things. And It'll be like yeah, how are the classes going and all of that. But besides that, like so what things are going on in your life. So it's like it's been really helpful, and it's just been really like, it's been a good time, like I've enjoyed it so much. ["Victoria"]

One student, "James," summed up his relationship with his adviser in words many other students echoed:

> S: I think I've probably mentioned this before in these interviews, but the one faculty member that I haven't really connected with is my own adviser. I still see him in the gym or somewhere, and he just says hi. I don't even know, I think he knows my name, and when I come to those [course advising] meetings he knows it… I mean, that's one person, and it hasn't really bothered me much. I don't, I didn't really feel the need to be too close to him just because, I meet with him just because of classes. ["James"]

Some students did report being close to their advisors, described being their friend, meeting with them outside of an academic setting, and talking with them about issues outside of academics. However, these students did not report that these relationships arose out of the advising process, but the exact opposite—*students switched their advisors, when they could, so that their closest professor simply became their advisor*. While we cannot say *conclusively* from the information given from the students that no or very few close student-advisor relationships were *caused* by the advising program,[3] the data we have, reported by the students, suggests that this is the case. The success stories of the advising program—those cases where the relationship between student and the advisor are both like that between two friends and between master and apprentice (in other words, it is both a social and an academic/intellectual relationship)—*seem to not have come out of the advising program at all*, but are the kinds of

[3] It would be very difficult to compulsively demonstrate this, since all the data would have to be reported from either students or faculty, neither of whom would necessarily or reliably be able to state *from where* their close relationships came.

relationships that develop anyway between some students and their professors which are then institutionalized (i.e. the student simply switches advisors to their closest professor).

The expressed goals of the advising program have not been met, and attempts to institutionalize close faculty-student relations have not come to fruition. There are numerous reasons why this may be so, some structural/organizational, and some social.

First, assigning professors to students and hoping for a positive outcome is similar to assigning people to be friends—it rarely works. Second, the program assumes that all students and all advisors are open to forming the types of relationships the program seeks to encourage, while many students reported that they actually preferred a "professional" type of student-professor relationship. Third, professors are not held accountable for their advising, and are not evaluated in the same way as they are when they teach classes, thus they have no structural incentive to advise well, or even at all. Fourth, many students' intended majors upon entering Hamilton (which is what the assignment of advisors is based upon) changes during their freshman or sophomore year, and hence their advisor changes. Since, for most students, advising is most important during their first two years, many students find themselves having spent two critical years with an advisor outside of their eventual field of concentration. Fifth, some advisors, students report, just don't seem to care about their advising of students, meaning that many students change their advisors to those professors who do seem to care, thus overloading those professors with advising work. Sixth, and finally, there is no structure within the advising process—it is amorphous. What this means is that the program gives predefined goals, but only sets up one in-program requirement (that advisors approve courses), and thus only gives one small way to achieve its large goals. If there *is* a structural way to create close student-faculty relationships, it should probably have more of a structure in the first place!

The advising program is over-ambitious, in that the faculty have attempted to give a formal structure to the close student-faculty relationships that, everyone agrees, benefits those students who have them greatly. If all students could have one member of the faculty with whom they were close with, all students would probably do better than had they no such relationship—this much we can say with relative certainty, and this much the faculty, and many of the students, consciously recognize. However, in attempting to create a system that in effect tries to force these relationships, the new curriculum has

instead created a largely burdensome program, full of structural flaws, which cannot meet its goals.

Student-Administration Relations

In addition to asking students about their relationships with members of the faculty, this year we also asked them about their attitudes towards and relationships with members of the administration. Our data indicates that the majority of students' attitudes towards the administration are characterized primarily by confusion as to what the administration consists of. Numerous students, when asked whether they have good relations with the administration, and whether the administration listens to students, answered first by reinforcing their notion of what the administration consists of, saying things such as "like the big board of trustees and stuff?" [Katie] or "college administrators, do you mean like deans?" [Tom], and then, working off their definition, talked about their relationships with the administration. Students' confusion as to what constitutes the administration is not unique (even social scientists run into problems of defining such organizations), and should be expected—students and administrators live very different lives, work in different environments, focus on different issues, and work towards different sets of goals. Given that these worlds rarely meet, students' impressions of the administration are shaped by the two types of cases in which they do: first, by their brief and rare encounters with those who they think of as administrators, and second, by decisions and policies announced by the administration that affect the students in some way.

Encounters with "the Administration"

While students and faculty meet regularly for classes, which provide a focus for bonding and interaction, there are no formal and ritual activities administrators and students share, hence student relations with individual administrators tend to be far weaker than those they share with their professors. Those times when students do interact with members of the administration are generally isolated and short incidents:

> S: I'm an international student. And like they [the dean of students office] help us out. We get rides to the airport…always with complete respect…they're extremely helpful. Other administrat[ors], I sat down with [President] Joan

> [Stewart] to have a pow-wow…she's very comfortable with students. ["vagrant cow"]

The one event students repeatedly noted when asked whether they think the administration listens to them is the president's open hours. Numerous students were aware of the open hours, and remarked how they think they are a good thing for the president to have. Despite this positive reaction, almost no students responded that they had gone to the president's open hours. Students, then, seem to see the open hour as a nice symbolic gesture on the part of the president, but rarely take advantage of it, and so maintain their sense of distance from administrators.

> I: Do you feel that the administration listens to students on the whole?
>
> S: I think so. I mean I don't know a lot, but I think, I mean president Stewart has her open hours. ["Kathleen"].
>
> S: I feel like [administrators are] probably available, you know, just talk to you if you have problems or questions or you want to arrange stuff. I mean the president has her open hour or whatever it is, which you know, it seems like a good policy. I mean I've never felt like I wanted to go and chat about things with President Stewart. But you know, I'm sure that some students don't feel that way, and it's good that she has that. ["Sean"]

While the majority of students have only random and infrequent interactions with administrators (or none at all), there is a slim portion of the student body that does regularly meet with administrators, and subsequently have a very concrete idea of what the administration is, who and what it consists of, and what student-administration relations are like. These select few tended to be student leaders (members of the student assembly, class presidents, heads of clubs, members of the student media), and hence had formal reasons and means to access the administration (and, likewise, to be accessed *by* the administration). These students' views on the administration, interestingly (and perhaps expectedly), tended to be *much* more positive than those students who had had few interactions with administrators. While they noted bureaucratic difficulties inherent within the administration and its relations with students, these students also singled out individual administrators and administrative departments for being quite sympathetic to

and accommodating for student needs and wants. Some of these student leaders commented in the following ways:

> S: [With the administration,] I haven't really had as much contact with them until this year, with HALT because we have people come in and speak. And it's sort of been interesting because I had no idea that these [administrators] existed, or what they were doing. ["Linda"]

And,

> I: All right. What about the college administrators, do you have good relations with them?
>
> S: College administrators, you mean like deans and stuff like that?
>
> I: Yah, like the Dean of Students, Office of the President, Res Life.
>
> S: Okay. A little bit of a relationship… When I was on Student Assembly, I would meet with a couple of them every now and then to discuss things… dean Thompson was great. She's very understanding…
>
> I: Do you feel like the administrators listen to you and other students?
>
> S: Definitely.

Social proximity, then, is central to student-administration relations—most students feel distant from and disregarded by the administration, a feeling caused by, to some degree, a self-imposed reluctance to engage administrators, and also by Hamilton's lack of a formal and ritual means for students to interact with administrators in the same way they do the faculty. While it might be impossible, or at least impractical, to construct a *meaningful* way for all or most Hamilton students to meet and interact with administrators, at very least we should recognize that students' negative attitudes towards the administration are tied to a sense of distance from it inherent in the social and bureaucratic structure of the college.

Administrative decisions and the student body

The other way in which student lives come into contact with the administration is through administrative decisions and policies that effect the student body. As a group who, we might argue, is especially sensitive to change, students seem to frown upon many of the administrations' decisions. There is a general sense among students that the administration is actively and consciously trying to limit students' social options, and minimize their "social life." Fraternity members especially feel that the administration has taken an aggressive stance towards societies, and that through residential life decisions and the revised alcohol policy, administrators have sought to eliminate the role of societies from Hamilton's social life. In some sense, this may be accurate. Looking simply at the policies approved by the various divisions of the administration and the board of trustees, social options[4] on campus have, in practice been limited, especially through tightening restrictions on private societies. What students, both in and out of private societies, do not recognize is that administrative decisions are rarely a product of one administrator's desires, or even the desires of an administrative department, but that they typically arise from various sources and for various reasons. The students' recognition that administrative decisions have restricted social options for students is mistaken for a desire by the president, the board of trustees, or by other administrators, to either "get rid of private societies," to "make Hamilton a dry campus," or to in some other way change and limit the social life of students.

Students overwhelmingly feel that they should have a central role in decision-making at Hamilton, and that such participation could be achieved through greater contact between students and the administration. Few such channels exist formally, and until they are created, student satisfaction with the administration will remain low.

[4] When using the term "social options" we refer, as students do, to the broad category of activity students can partake in, from joining clubs, to throwing parties, to consuming alcohol. The term itself is highly problematic, because it means so many diverse types of behavior at once, and so we will try to specify what type of activities are meant when possible. Typically, though, students use the term to mean simple having fun with other students, in whatever form that may take.

2. The Curriculum

Sophomore Seminars

As a main part of Hamilton's new curriculum, sophomore seminars are one of few core requirements for students outside of those of their major. Generally team-taught and interdisciplinary, these seminars have had mixed results, in the students' eyes, during their first few years of existence. Responding to the interview question of whether the student's sophomore seminar "added anything distinctive to their time at Hamilton," around two-thirds said it did not. This is not to say that only a third of students enjoy their sophomore seminars—around half of the students said they did, the other half that they did not. In other words, a near-equal amount of students like the seminars as disliked them; however, most students reported that their seminars were not at all distinctive. Further, in many cases, those students who like their sophomore seminars suggested that they liked them not necessarily because they were sophomore seminars, but because of typical reasons why students like some classes: they like the subject matter, they like the professor who teach it, etc. Meanwhile, many of the negative responses towards the seminars point to the organizational and social problems inherent in the structure of the sophomore seminar program.

As we shall see, sophomore seminars face a number of basic problems that essentially arise out of 1) the goal of increasing interdisciplinary interaction that has been institutionalized in these courses, and 2) out of the basic requirement that students take a sophomore seminar. These problems, as many students report, consist of: 1) poor course selections, which result in students taking courses they dislike; 2) classes numbering over their student capacity; 3) co-taught class professors having different standards of academic expectations; 4) disciplinary and intellectual divisions both between professors and between students.

While the seminars face these problems, they also seem to have succeeded on two fronts. Overwhelmingly, positive comments about Sophomore Seminars centered around the benefits of making public presentations. With few exceptions, both those students who generally enjoyed their seminars and those who responded that the seminars added

something to their Hamilton experience mentioned, in a positive light, the presentation requirements. Even some students who greatly disliked their seminars noted how they improved their public speaking and communication skills by taking the course. Many students also commented on how having to write a large final paper (which some of the classes required) helped prepare them for their thesis work later on.

Course selection

One of the first and probably the most problematic issues students faced upon the institution of the sophomore seminars program was course selection. For many students, some fields were underrepresented, while others were overrepresented, and because all sophomores were required to complete a seminar, many popular classes and/or classes in underrepresented fields quickly filled during registration. Numerous students reported having to take, because of scheduling problems, classes in fields completely unfamiliar to and in some cases even disliked by them. While one of the goals of the program was to encourage students to engage in fields outside their major(s) and minor(s), that many student were essentially forced into classes outside their field because of requirements and scheduling provoked a high degree of anger and frustration from them, reflected repeatedly in their responses to our interviews. “Frank” speaks bluntly about his seminar, saying:

> I: Do you think that your sophomore seminar has added anything distinctive to your or helped you in any particular way?
>
> S: I think it was a total waste of time.
>
> I: Yeah?
>
> S: Yeah. I mean the, the scope of what you can do is so limited that you can get stuck doing something you really don’t want to do.
>
> I: Well, can you tell me about your sophomore seminar and how that was?
>
> S: I got stuck in the [omit name of class], or whatever it was called, seminar and it was just a total waste of my time. I didn’t get anything out

of it as far as my major, and I wasn't interested in it at all. So I think the sophomore seminar is pretty detrimental.

I: Okay. When you say you got stuck in it, what do you mean by that?

S: Well, it was the only one that really fit into my schedule. ["Frank"]

"James" echoed many students' sentiments in his interview:

I: Do you think that [your sophomore seminar] has added anything distinctive to your career at Hamilton?

S: No, not really.

I: Really?

S: No, I didn't, my, my sophomore seminar was, I don't know. I mean most of the time it was much the same as any other class, except that it was larger and that there were people in it that didn't really want to be in it. I think that was one of the only significant differences. ["James"]

Course selection problems are not limited to sophomore seminars—popular courses, departments, professors, and class times can and do fill up regularly. However, the *degree* to which sophomore seminar course selection proved problematic for students is much higher than normal, a fact reflected not only in responses to our interviews, but to course evaluations as well, in which sophomore seminars overall are rated significantly lower than the average Hamilton class by students.[5] Further, students who responded to our interview the *most* negatively about their seminars were typically those who were "forced" into them because of a lack of alternative options. Such course selection problems are compounded by the fact that, as team-taught courses, the seminars demand twice as much faculty attention,[6] and thus limit the ability of the faculty to expand the number of courses offered so as to alleviate the selection crunch of sophomore year registration. This problem, as stated, is not necessarily integral to the program—such problems arise with course registration frequently, though to a lesser degree—but to resolve it, would require some form of restructuring of how the courses are set up in

[5] This may not *only* be due to course selection problems, but judging by how frequently students reported such problems with their sophomore seminars, is most likely a major factor in such negative evaluations.
[6] In addition to the fact that only senior faculty members are allowed to teach the seminars.

relation to one another and in relation to the desires, needs, and sheer volume of students and faculty.

Volume within courses

Another problem, which is directly related to the one above, is that of the size of classes within the seminars themselves. Some students report that, because of either very high demand for some courses (combined with those course's professors admitting students over the maximum), or very low demand for others, they had an imbalanced class experience.

> I: What did you take?...
>
> S: The [class name omitted]. I think it was very, there wasn't enough structure in it for the size of the class, since there were like 30 people in it. It just meandered, and didn't go anywhere.
>
> I: How do you think that could have been helped?
>
> S: Either a smaller class size, breaking in half with the two professors or something; or a more structured environment.

Students frequently complain about the size of classes outside of sophomore seminars, and while the problem seems endemic to all types of classes and departments, students seem particularly distressed by *seminar* classes that are too large—these classes, after all, are intended to be small and intimate, and to foster close discussion and intellectual relationships.

Comparing students' reports to the numbers available on sophomore seminar class sizes, we can see how many student found themselves in classes that were sized inappropriately for a seminar format. At the same time, by comparing this data to that of typical Hamilton classes, we can see that, while some of the seminars were crowded, on average they were significantly smaller than the typical class at Hamilton.

For the class of 2005, the majority of whom enrolled in a sophomore seminar their sophomore year, the average class held around 12 students. However this number is misleading when accounting for students' perspectives, since, as seen in Diagram 5, 38% of students are enrolled in classes larger than 20 people, while only a slightly higher 42%

are enrolled in classes sized from 10-20 students, and 20% in classes less than 10 students. Hence, many students wind up taking "seminar" classes that, in practice, are far too large to accomplish the goals of the ideal seminar course.

Diagrams 1 and 2 show the change in sophomore seminar class sizes from their institution in 2002 to the present. Most notably, while the average class size has increased, there are far fewer large classes.

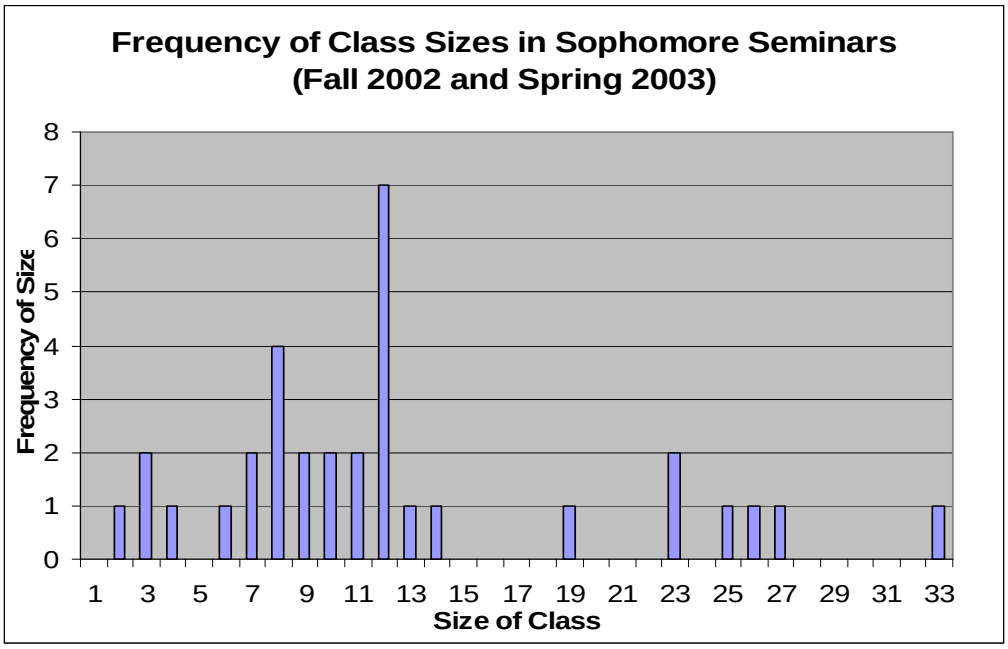

Diagram 1. Mean = 12.45 Students per class; Median = 12 Students.

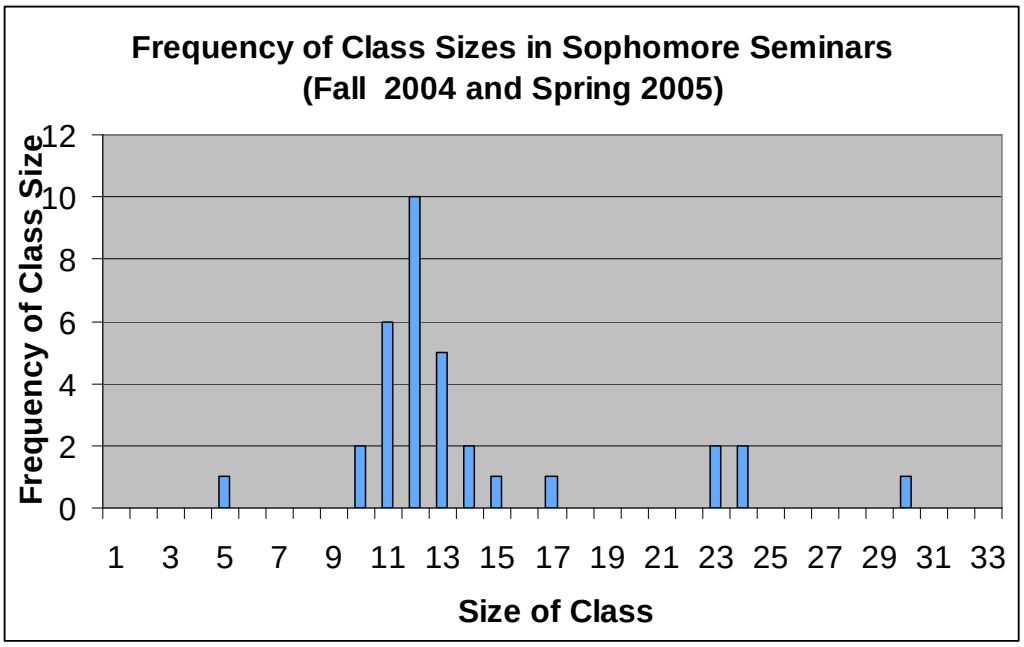

Diagram 2. Mean = 14.375 students per class; Median = 12 Students

Diagrams 3 and 4 display student experience of class size in sophomore seminars, or in other words, the likelihood of which a student would find him/herself in a class of that size.

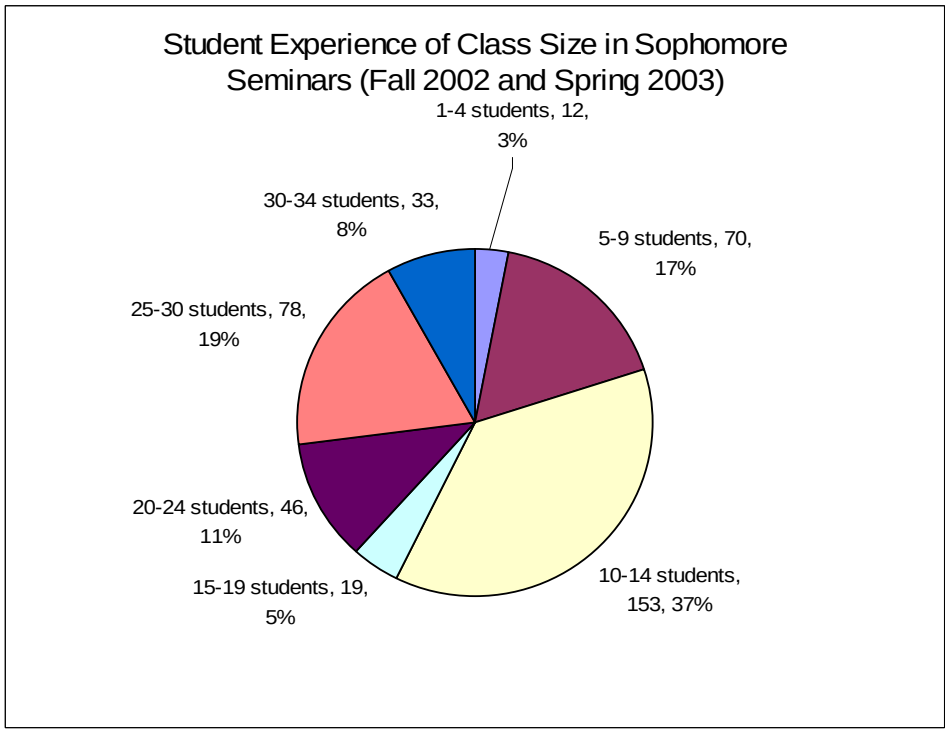

Diagram 3.

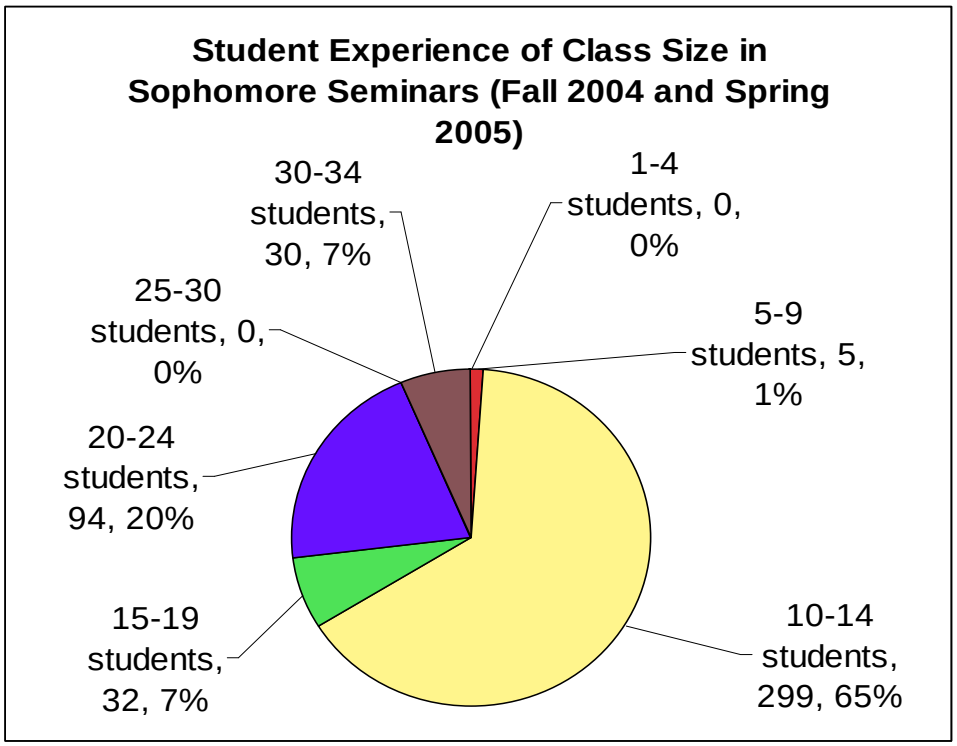

Diagram 4.

Diagrams 5 and 6 are condensed to better show the change in student experience of seminar class sizes. Most notably, Sophomore Seminar class sizes have stabilized around the 10-14 student area, which is suitable for this type of class. Significantly, very large and very small classes are far rarer than in 2002.

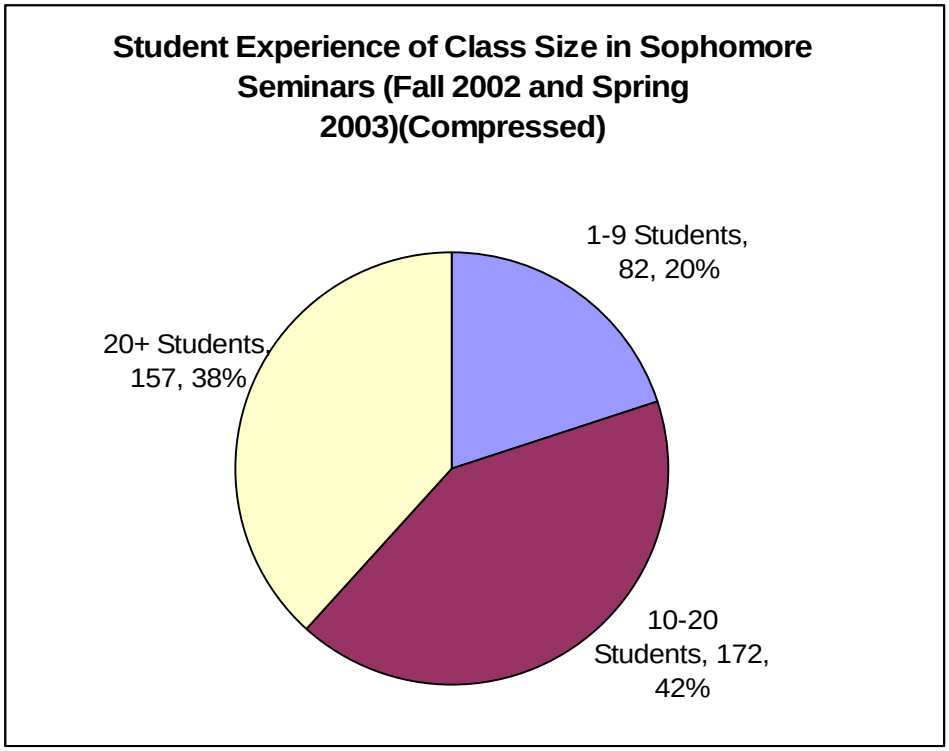

Diagram 5.

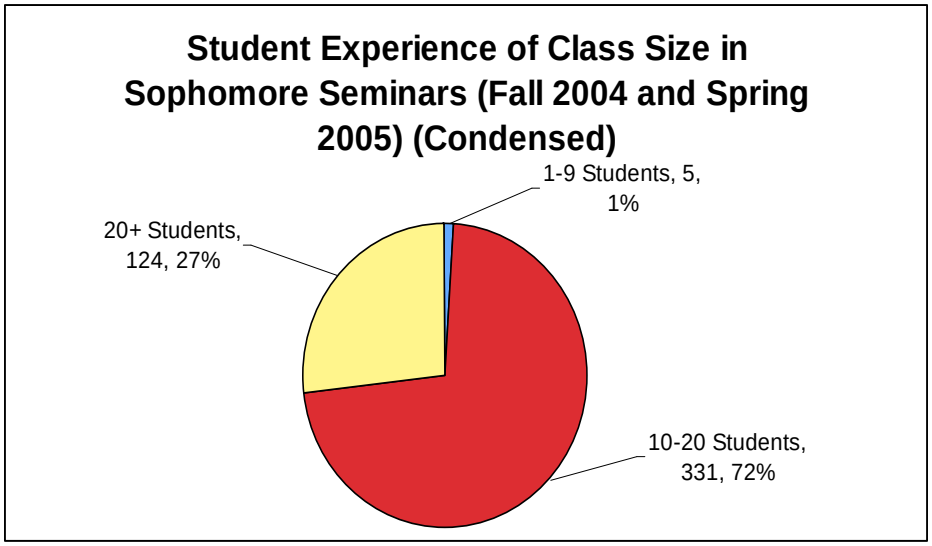

Diagram 6.

This data, combined with student reports, suggests that due to the requirement that students take a sophomore seminar their sophomore year, combined with a high demand for some classes and a low demand for others, many students from the class of 2005 (who

took these seminars probably in the fall of 2002 or spring of 2003) experienced classes far too large to fulfill the intended goals of the program. We can also see from this data that the students' situation has improved since the program began, but still faces problems of class size that may be inimical to the scheduling structure of these required classes.

The potential for double standards within team-taught courses

Even those students who registered in seminars they wanted faced problems within the program, which manifested themselves within the classroom. Most significant to many of the students was what they felt was a double-standard of grading, teaching, and evaluation, arising out of the team-taught nature of the seminars. Some students reported receiving good grades or evaluations from one of the class's professors, while grading poorly with the other, despite having done the same amount of work at the same skill level. "Jane Smith" reports how,

> S: There was not always much sufficient agreement between the two of [the professors], so we were getting papers back with like two very different grades, you know…I initially felt confused because we were getting mixed responses; that, and other stuff; they were getting on. We were more confused as well as like what we should really be focusing on. It was just, it was a big hodge-podge of stuff. ["Jane Smith"]

This problem was particularly frustrating to many students, who expressed feeling lost in some of the interdisciplinary material, while at the same time being unaware of what was expected of them due to what they saw as two (or more) different sets of academic and disciplinary expectations expressed by the course's professor team. "Murphy" recounts how,

> S: [The professors] had very conflicting personalities, and you know, they were approaching the same topic – one from like a History point of view, and one from a literary point of view…so they had conflicts and things. And yeah, they didn't know how to grade. So I think, in general, lowered everyone's grade and kind of like caused a lot of problems for people. [Murphy]

"Murphy" echoes a number of other students who not only faced evaluative differences between their professors, but disciplinary ones as well, differences which the sophomore seminar's goals as an interdisciplinary program sought to help overcome, but which have manifested themselves directly and problematically into the classroom.

Disciplinary divisions

Intended as classes that would bridge disciplinary divisions, many sophomore seminar classes, as students described, actually seemed like two different classes only tangentially linked. A significant number of students complained of how not only did their professors have different standards and expectations, but completely different intellectual outlooks, which oftentimes clashed.

> S: [The professors] were at odds as to how to approach the humanities section of approaching the [topic]. In the literary and historical sense, they didn't quite understand that. And so the final project that I did, while it was in their context, was not understood by them because they didn't know anything about lit[erature] or history, you know, in the academic sense, in the same way that they do about Biology. ["Ruttiger"]

Sometimes the divisions were not simply academic, but personal as well:

> S: It would have been good if my teachers liked each other, and had anything in common. But they hated each other, so the class frankly wasn't that amazing. Like they just kind of lectured, alternating day-by-day. And once in a while, they fell asleep in the other one's lecture. ["Jen"]

"Jose" did not mince his words about his bad experiences in the class because of his professors' lack of communication:

> S: It was pretty much an unmitigated disaster of a class… apparently [the professors] never spoke to each other, like about the class. Like I saw them meet once about it. I mean like, you know, they met, but there was no real communication between them, and it was just sort of, I mean it was bad in that sense. They didn't teach much. ["Jose"]

The danger, for the college, in encouraging interdisciplinarity by institutionalizing it in a required class program, is that sometimes this institutionalization can backfire and actually increase disciplinary divisions when the mixing of disciplines is unsuccessful. Hence, while many students noted their good experiences in bridging disciplinary gaps, many others suggested that taking these classes simply reinforced their embeddedness in one or the other fields taught in the course. While exposure to other fields can benefit the student, it can also alienate him/her.

These problems are embedded in the way in which the college created the sophomore seminars program. The faculty and administration saw interdisciplinary behavior among students, and decided to encourage that by making it into a required program—the flawed and essentially unempirical assumptions underlying this are that: 1) all students (or, more specifically and importantly, *sophomores*) can and will benefit from interdisciplinary experience, 2) interdisciplinary experiences can be encouraged and created, 3) they can be encouraged and created simply by requiring team-taught seminar classes of all sophomores. The empirical evidence on these issues is mixed, but at very least suggests that a good deal of problems arise when these assumptions are built upon. While interdisciplinarity is a noble and central goal of a liberal arts education, there is little evidence to suggest that requiring, programatizing, and institutionalizing it is an appropriate way to encourage it.

Public presentations and long papers

While students had large numbers of complaints about their sophomore seminars, they also noted ways in which these classes have helped them improve academically. Most significantly, a good deal of students reported improving their public speaking skills from the required speaking section of each sophomore seminar. Both students who liked and disliked their sophomore seminars noted that their experience(s) of having to speak publicly in the classes gave them a better sense of themselves as speakers, and refined their skills as orators. Of all the positive comments regarding sophomore seminars, the most frequent centered on the public speaking element of the class, and how it helps students gain a better sense of how to speak to an audience.

S: I think probably the main thing I took away from the sophomore seminar was the big presentation, just meeting with someone from the [communications department] and she like came and videotaped us, and then just having to present it to the class. And I think that was the first PowerPoint presentation that I'd done on my own. SO I think just learning how to do that, and feel more comfortable with oral communications.

I: Has that continued to help you in other presentations?

S: Yeah.

I: And given you confidence in public speaking and stuff like that?

S: Yeah. I think I remember a lot of the things that I learned, and I remember a lot of the things that, particularly I learned about myself and seeing myself videotaped.

I: Like, like I'm curious, like what?

S: Just I'm not very good with keeping eye contact, and that I tend, I always get very nervous when I'm talking in public settings.

I: Me too.

S: Just remembering to like slow down when I speak. I don't know. Just seeing yourself and being able to think. And then just, like I said before, learning how to do a PowerPoint presentation myself. I feel like I've had to do like many more of those since then. ["Mary"]

Students reported learning not only such more technical speaking skills as these, but also how to identify their own abilities to work upon and improve.

S: It [sophomore seminar] helps you recognize your weaknesses when it comes to oral communication skills; when it comes to presenting yourself professionally with the presentation requirement. It was tough, but you learn a lot about your weaknesses, and you learn a lot about your strengths. It's, it's a good requirement. I don't see, you know, I think it's very productive…Feeling comfortable in a big group of people is really important because if you can do that, you can really do anything…Because if you understand the material, you can, you can talk about it with large groups of people…That confidence is invaluable. ["Tom"]

Further, students such as Jenn reported how she gained a sense of what was expected of her as a presenter, and how to improve her connection with her audience.

> S: We also did a lot of presentations, which was really good for me because in the beginning I felt very uncomfortable talking in front of a while bunch of people. And then by the end of the seminar, I felt more comfortable doing these, and I kind of knew what my audience expected of me and how I can engage them in my presentations. ["Jenn"]

Such improvements are not unique to sophomore seminars, but seem to occur whenever some form of public speaking is required in a class. Overall, students who had had little or no experience with public speaking reported dramatically improving their skills by taking a class that required it. On the other side, those students who have already had some training or experience in public speaking (these students were very much in the minority) reported little improvement from being required to speak publicly in these seminars. We will discuss some of the causes, details, and consequences of these patterns of reports in the following section on public speaking at Hamilton.

Sophomore seminars also seem to have helped some students' writing skills—many students reported that having to write a long (20+ pages) paper for their class helped them greatly later on in their academic career when they had to write their theses. Students at the sophomore level are rarely required to write papers that long, and oftentimes many students are first exposed to projects of that size in their senior years.

"Liz" commented that "it's the longest paper I've had to write, and that was fun," and her comments were echoed by many other students, noting how their seminars gave them their first experience dealing with issues of structure, argument, and style in longer papers.

The seminars, in some cases, proved helpful for students with little experience with the technical intricacies of writing. "Kim" detailed how her seminar improved her writing in a number of ways:

> S: I really liked mine. I took [class name omitted], and I think it's really helped my writing. I'm a Math major, so I don't really write a lot; and when I do write, it's pretty simple. But I think taking that at least has made me focus more on, like I feel like it helped me realize what you are good at and what you need to work on – more so than just a writing

> intensive class. And I think that's been really helpful. I mean I, still now when I write a paper, I, you know, look and think about what the kind of things that were pointed out in my sophomore seminar as something I can, you know, we would write all the time. So I mean I really liked it. I thought it was really helpful, but that could be just the one I picked, you know. ["Kim"]

From the data we have, it is difficult to make comparative conclusions about the benefits of sophomore seminars—its hard to tell whether the seminars gave these students a *unique* experience that they probably would not have received otherwise. In other words, it is not clear whether students benefited from their sophomore seminars *because* they were sophomore seminars, or simply because they were classes. This methodological problem actually reveals a problem within the operations of the sophomore seminar program itself—that the standards of program, what it sets out to accomplish and present to students, are not uniform. Some seminars emphasize writing, some emphasize public speaking, some are highly interdisciplinary and team-taught (and some are not), and some appear to hold goals outside or beyond those set out by the program. This problem is compounded, again, by the fact that these classes are required by the school in order to further a number of goals that, in many cases, are overlooked.

Sophomore seminars can certainly play a positive role in student's education at Hamilton, but in order to do so they must be focused around a single concrete goal (we have suggested oral communications), not one that creates functional roadblocks (such as the goal of interdisciplinary has done).

Public Speaking at Hamilton

Students overwhelmingly report that their public speaking improves over the course of their Hamilton career,[7] and that much of this is due simply to their exposure to it in one or two classes at Hamilton, and their lack of prior exposure to public speaking. From what students report, oral communication skills have a steep learning curve. Students with little or no experience giving presentations reported improving dramatically after only a few experiences of presenting material to an audience.

Students who benefit

By almost every student account, the one or two classes that they had that required presentations[8] improved their skills greatly, and most notably improved their comfort and confidence in front of a group. "Jack" for example emphasized how he gained confidence at speaking publicly from having to do it in classes.

> I: Okay. Do you think that in any way your speaking ability has improved at Hamilton – either in public speaking, talking in classes, handling yourself in interviews such as this, or any other respect? And if so, can you describe in detail how you think that improvement occurred?
>
> S: I would say definitely.
>
> I: Okay.
>
> S: Well I guess I don't know if it's just me getting older and maturing, or I mean I guess like that's one aspect; but it seems like every class I've taken, we had to do some like group project we had to present to the class, which helped me get over nerves. But I mean it seems every class always emphasizes participation of class. As well as my organization, you know, it's just given me an opportunity to talk to large groups of people and present my ideas. So I think I've definitely become more confident in speaking. ["Jack"]

Repeatedly, students commented on how their "public speaking has improved just from pure exposure to it" ["Jade"], and that their improvement was not necessarily intentional, nor were they even always aware of it.

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[7] 83% say their speaking improved in either giving presentations or talks, interviewing, or leading class discussions.

[8] The majority of students reported only having one or two classes during their Hamilton careers that required presentations.

I: Do you think your speaking ability has improved since you've been here?

S: I would say so, yeah.

I: How so?

S: I mean I haven't taken any, you know, like Oral Comm classes or anything; but I think just through, probably through a lot of my classes being really small and being largely discussion-based that I've become more comfortable, you know, speaking to other people or in front of other people…I don't feel like I intentionally did something to specifically improve my, you know, speaking skills. I guess it's just something that comes with practice and with experience. ["Jenny"]

A number of students suggested that Hamilton should have some kind of oral communications requirements, because, they felt, many other students were not being exposed to the same benefits from giving presentations and talks that they were.

S: I think they should have a mandatory 100-level public speaking class that all freshman students have to take, or all sophomore students have to take. And maybe, instead of having gym credit, you know; maybe two gym credits in one, a 2.5 credit for rhetoric and communication, maybe having a student take that before, you know, they graduate because I think it's such an important skill, and I think it's great that Hamilton emphasizes it, but I really don't think they do it well. ["Jean Claude"]

S: But I really wish there was more opportunity to speak. I think it's funny. I work in the Admissions Office and they always say like how at Hamilton you learn how to write and speak really well. And I wish we had speaking intensive classes like we have writing intensives. And I think that's still like peoples' big fear, like just getting up and speaking in front of people. It's sometimes fun too when you've worked on something really hard in class, like I sometimes wish I could get up and talk about it or give a report on it. ["Susan"]

And some students wished they themselves had had more exposure to public speaking while at Hamilton.

S: I don't think that we get enough practice with like public speaking, like we don't really have to do group presentations very much in classes. And so I think that could be improved. But I think like, I think it's great that we stress writing skills. I think it's equally important that you be able

> to like speak in public and express your ideas verbally, which I'm not the best at. I'm much better at writing. But as far as, I think DC helped me the most, going there and working on the Hill and that kind of thing. I became much more confident just, you know, talking to people, meeting new people, and being more outgoing in that area. I think that helped the most, but not really through classes. Many encourage class participation, but especially if you're in the larger lecture classes, I mean you can definitely get by with not having to ever talk. So I don't think classes really do much for speaking. ["Katherine"]

Frequently students identified themselves as "poor public speakers," but unlike many students who self-identify as poor at quantitative skills, those who thought they were poor speakers believed they could get better with practice and training. This point is significant, and we will return to it later.

> S: I know that I'm really bad at it, and I needed to do a lot of practice. But I didn't take a lot of courses where I had to do a lot of presentation skills, which I do suggest that they, they actually, that Hamilton should probably change that. I think presentation skills are really essential to like, to you know, like work and just, and handling like the rest of your life. ["Mystique"]

> S: I mean I'm not the best public speaker. I know kids who are juniors and sophomores who are taking public speaking courses who could run circles around me in a debate, but I would say that I've improved ["Jonathan"]

Most of the improvements students reported did not come from their taking Oral Communications classes (because most hadn't), but instead come from their experiences leading discussions or giving presentations in class (which most students reported they had had). For most students, these experiences were few in number, but significantly bettered their confidence, comfort, and communication abilities in front of groups. The improvements students noted above came quickly to them, and while they may not have had opportunities to refine their communication skills at a higher level, most students seem to have taken the large first step to becoming better oral communicators, due primarily to those classes where presentations are required.

Part of the reason why students reported such a steep improvement in their speaking skills has to do with the nature of public speaking itself. Students are much more emotionally involved in giving a speech than writing a paper, simply because they

are being visibly and immediately evaluated by their peers and their professor(s) while giving it, whereas when handing in a paper, students can detach themselves from it until they receive feedback, and even then they receive feedback just from their professors. The possibility of public embarrassment, especially in front of peers, adds considerable, but largely invisible weight to presentations, and puts much more than the student's grade on the line. Some students who are concerned about their presentation put a great deal of work into preparing for it and improve, and some students who are not concerned about it suffer the immediate judgment of their peers and professors, and typically learn a valuable lesson from their experience as well, and subsequently work towards improvement. Hence both students who reported putting in a lot of time into their presentations, *and* students who admitted underpreparing for them reported improving in their public speaking skills. The power of immediate feedback, especially from peers, is evident in the successes of the oral communications program at Hamilton, and suggests that other academic-skill programs at Hamilton might benefit from similar structuring.

Students who didn't benefit

While the majority of students reported that their oral communication skills improved, around 20% said they did not, citing one of two reasons. Either 1) they were already strong public speakers upon entering Hamilton (and improvement required more intensive study than for those with no experience speaking to groups), or 2) they were never required to present in their classes. "Jen" expressed both reasons, saying:

> S: I think it's just, I mean the classes that I've taken, for the most part, don't really require that much speaking. And I did a lot of drama in high school, so I had enough speaking abilities that like unless I was a Communications major or an English major or somewhere where I had to be talking to other students a lot, that I just am not asked to do that. So I've pretty much stayed at the same level. ["Jen"]

Students also noted how public speaking is greatly underemphasized in comparison to writing:

> I: Have you had to take any public speaking courses or had to give any presentations or do interviews that would require you to utilize your speaking skills?
>
> S: Not really. The sophomore seminar we previously mentioned did have a presentation. That was some ridiculous proportion of your grade. But other than that, I've not had anything, I mean no real serious presentations. Like I don't think my skills have improved as greatly as say my writing skills have improved. I mean I don't think, but I mean I've never been required to take those classes, and I never have; so I don't, whereas, you know, I've taken a lot of writing intensive classes. So the skill hasn't necessarily improved at the same rate. ["Jose"]
>
> S: But I don't think that my speaking ability has significantly improved at all, or become less, after going here because I think that the emphasis has always has been more on writing. Technically my writing has improved, but I can't say that my speech has. ["Jane Smith"]

While it is encouraging to note that 80% of students believe their public speaking skills have improved since coming to Hamilton, that 20% report otherwise is distressing because it appears to be a relatively simple matter to give all students the initial formative speaking experience that makes such a difference to their abilities.

Further improving oral communications at Hamilton

If the college wanted to, it could raise the average quality of students' oral communications skills dramatically by, in some way, ensuring that every student took at least one or two classes that required presentations. This might take the form of some kind of speaking-intensive program similar to the writing-intensive program in which students are required to take a set number of the intensive classes in order to fulfill their degree requirements, or it might simply consist of encouraging professors to include presentations in more of their classes. As many students reported that their sophomore seminars provided the with their first exposure to giving presentations, perhaps that program (with some modifications) is best suited as the vehicle for providing that initial skill-building. As the seminar program is already in place, and is struggling to solidify its goals and structure itself in a beneficial way, centering the program around a strong public speaking requirement might not only benefit public speaking at Hamilton, but also

revitalize the sophomore seminars program in the students' eyes. Regardless of how the college might go about this, it is clear that, in regards to students' oral communication skills, a little experience goes a long way.

Gauging just how much the college should encourage or require oral communications requires a comparative evaluation of oral communications with the other general academic skills the college seeks to instill: namely, quantitative and writing skills. The current weight given to these are clear enough in the curriculum requirements—writing is emphasized more than oral communications, and the average student leaves Hamilton having done far more work improving his/her writing than his/her oral communication skills. Meanwhile, while writing intensives are required for all students, quantitative-oriented classes, like oral communication classes, are not, and many students leave Hamilton having little experience with either.

3. Student Life

Extracurricular Activities, Student Organizations, and Societies

What seems central to the creation, success, and student-benefit of campus organizations are the *people*. Yes, the activity itself matters, but it is the other students who participate in it who enrich the experience and make it what it is for the students. The one unifying thread that ran through almost ever student response in regards to extracurriculars was that they loved meeting, befriending, and spending time with the other people who are part of the organization. In other words, the most important component of extracurricular at Hamilton is the people, and not the activity, though the activity forms the basis for the grouping of the people, and is the axis around which social bonds are formed and flourish.

The social nature of campus organizations

While the people within the group and the group's activity form the functional basis of all of Hamilton's activities, there are other important elements that formalize the group and its activity. Most students who reported starting up their own club commented on the importance of funding for furthering their goals on campus, and so gaining formal recognition from the college in order to obtain funding is also important for many, if not all groups, though to varying degrees. Tied to funding, extracurriculars gain formal mechanisms of recognition and communication by being recognized by the college—their group's name goes on the extracurricular roster, the group gains access to an email account through which activities can be arranged and advertised to the campus, and the group gains legal protection as a campus organization.

Functionally speaking, then, extracurriculars at Hamilton are constituted by (in order of importance) 1) a group of students, 2) an activity, 3) funding, and 4) a mechanism of formal recognition (a club name, constitution, email account, etc.)

Students were asked what the most important activity they took part in while at Hamilton, and the vast majority of answers centered around one or more extracurriculars (societies, clubs, organizations, sports teams) in which they participated. Overwhelmingly, regardless of the specific response to the first question (that most important activity was, e.g. Track. Fraternity membership, chess club, etc.), the *reason* students liked that activity was because of the *people*. The next most frequent response was that the activity helped build skills for them that they believed would help them both in and beyond Hamilton.

> S: That would be like my [Chinese] major training, which is kind of nice. And it's a nice community like thing, and you just, you know, are really close to the other students you work with and taking in whatnot for that – just the language people and all that type of stuff has been really nice, and going to China with them. Our freshman year, we did that as part of the program; and then going abroad with them. So you just spend a lot of time with these people. And then I'm dancing through, I'm in the student dance lines or this year I started dancing on dance teams. So those girls are kind of fun. Yeah, I'd say those are important. ["Maudie Savran"]

"Lisa" explicitly stated that it was the people who mattered, and not the activity:

> S: Yeah. I mean I'm captain of the fencing team, so that's important not because of fencing, but because it's a group thing. We all get together through the week, and it's fun. It's just nice to be part of it for four years, I guess. ["Lisa Simpson"]

For many students, specific events such as studying abroad, taking trips with other students, participating in an important game, or performing in a concert or musical were key social moments for them—bonding moments that solidified their friendships with others in their group.

> S: Choir and a cappella. Since freshman year, choir sort of, you come and like there's like 70 people and you don't know anybody. And then about halfway through, you generally do a play or a musical, and everybody sort of bonds in like January when you get back from spring break. And since freshman year, they've just been my family. And you go on tour and I mean there's 70 people, which is a lot, a lot of people. But by the end of the year, you sort of have found the particular 15 or 20

> that you see around campus all the time, that you have the same classes with; and they've sort of just been like a community… Have, just have this community unto themselves and support each other, that you have, I don't know…I mean we have, we spend so much time with these people, four hours a week for choir rehearsal and six hours a week for a cappella, that it's pretty much every night other than Friday and Saturday. But if you don't have sort of a foothold of, these people may annoy me if I spend too much time with them. But it's okay because I love them when I wake up the next kind of morning. ["Judy"]

Of all the extracurriculars students participate in, team sports seem to bond students the most closely, largely due to the significant amount of time students must commit to their team, and thus to each other. "Mary's" experiences on the Lacrosse team were not unique to her or to her team—students on teams repeatedly commented on how close they are to their fellow teammates, and how their time on their team has been a (if not *the*) defining experience for them at Hamilton.

> S: I think the one thing that I've been most happy to be a part of is the lacrosse team. I played lacrosse all, well this will be my fourth year, and I'm a captain this year. And it's just been such a great experience because the team is really close, and I've gotten to know girls that I wouldn't have been able to know, you know, from being in classes with them or just from interacting with them socially. So I've just gotten the opportunity to know people that I wouldn't have known, and I've gotten to be really close to my coaches now, and gotten to know some of the other sports players, and that kind of thing. So that's probably been, and I just love lacrosse and the experience of being on the team. So that's been probably my favorite experience at Hamilton. ["Mary"]

Students in greek societies used similar language to students on sports teams to describe their group experience. Typically, while society membership was quite important to members, it came secondary to sports team membership and/or academics. Still, a notable number of students such as "Luke" reported their society membership as most significant.

> S: Just like getting to know the guys in my class like really well. There's like ten of us. And like it's, it's like having ten best friends. And I mean that's just great because I mean, like I made friends like before that and, you know, I've stayed friends with those kids; but you know, just having ten people that are really, really close to me is great. And football is fun just because I love playing football. And I'm not really involved with the coach, but you know, it was still great. And I mean I love the

> guys there too. It was just great to like run around with those guys for four years. ["Luke"]

While there are numerous different types of extracurriculars and organizations for students on campus, they are all defined by the strength they gain from the social networks that grow from them. These groups not only give students something to do outside of class, but oftentimes give them a way to orient and identify themselves within the college community. This is clearest with students who have made their own organizations from the ground up, and whose identities are directly tied to their groups.

Making your own

While some students suggest that the school is missing some vital sports, doesn't have certain types of clubs, or is somehow lacking extracurriculars, an equal amount of students seem to think that extracurricular opportunities at Hamilton are plentiful. What students *did* seem to agree upon is that if something is missing from Hamilton, students have the ability to fill in the gap—Hamilton, through the office of Student Activities, makes it relatively easy to create a student organization, receive some degree of funding, and receive the benefits of becoming a recognized club, society, sport, or activity.

Ten percent of the students in our panel reported that they had created or helped create an organization on campus, and all of their experiences in doing so were similar. They recognized a lack of a certain kind of activity on campus, got friends and interested students together to help start the organization, met with the appropriate members of the administration, filled out the right forms, and became a recognized organization. Sometimes the students who started the club were already involved in the activity beforehand, and then simply decided to take the next step towards recognition,

> S: Sophomore year when I was playing chess with just one of my friends, like he just told me to start a Chess Club, and I kind of did. And so then finally this year, we finally made it an actual club…
>
> I: So you had the opportunity to do that. Tell me about getting that going, what was that like?
>
> S: Actually it wasn't even that hard. Like originally, like the first couple of years I was just sending out random e-mails through the school's

mass e-mailing list. So I did that; and then this year, we sat down and wrote a Constitution. It wasn't that hard at all. ["Jack"]

And sometimes the students found that the only way they could participate in their activity was by making an organization. Asked about his most significant activity, "Jose" replied:

S: Au Cobain, a music club. I would say that, since it's sort of been like a personal project almost to like build it up from the ground, make it a successful organization that will last well into the future.

I: Yeah. So what made you decide to do that?...

S: Sophomore year, I first had a car here and like I started going to a lot of concerts in the local area. And I was disappointed in that there weren't, that CAB sort of brought like big concerts but that really wasn't what I was into musically; and so I wanted to bring smaller, more, or less well-known acts to Hamilton College.

I: Did you expect to have that kind of opportunity when you came here?

S: No. It wasn't even, I mean it was a totally unexpected sort of, I had this idea with a bunch of friends on the way to Albany to see a concert. So it came out of that, grew out of that. But it was, I mean it was very, a very unexpected thing. I never thought I'd come and start my own club.

I: Are you, do you see the opportunity for other people, or do you think it's more to you?

S: Yeah. I think while it's, while there's a lot of bureaucracy involved, that I find irritating, I think that anyone who had a club-worthy idea or activity could easily start and maintain a club.

I: Okay.

S: And I mean it wasn't really a club until like junior year. I mean it was like me and my friend doing stuff all of, well I guess all of sophomore year. And then sort of more into junior year, it was, I mean it was still, and, and now it's finally where it's not just me in it. There's a group of people. I guess that started January of this year, was when we first really did an event that everyone took part in and helped out with. ["Jose"]

"Jade" remembers her freshman year how she helped form a sorority with a group of friends and interested students.

> S: The most important extracurricular activity I've participated in in the past four years, three and a half years, has definitely been the formation of the Kappa Sigma Alpha sorority.
>
> I: Okay.
>
> S: We started it as freshmen, my friends and I were, you know, Greek part, Greek life is a much bigger part of life than most people recognize. And so we, you know, I have a lot of friends who have pledged Greek elsewhere, and so I was interested in it myself and I looked at what was available, and my friends did as well, and we did not see people like us fitting in with societies on campus. And so we started the Kappa Sigma Alpha sorority as an alternative to girls who wanted to go Greek, who were interested in what Greek life offered, but could not see themselves fitting in. Independent, young girls who are involved in other things, the sorority is important to us, but is not our life. ["Jade"]

Asked what his most significant Hamilton experience has been, "Dex" replied:

> S: I'd have to say the Capoiera Club. I mean it's a group of guys that I've gotten to know really, really well. Some people actually, jokingly, liken us to a frat because we're always doing everything together. But it's a group, group of people who like to hang out with each other and have a good time…
>
> I: Do you feel like there were opportunities to do things that you wanted to do while you were here – again, in any realm?
>
> S: Well, the one thing about Hamilton, I'd say like is that if there's something you want to do and it doesn't exist, you can set it up yourself. Like the Capoiera Club, for example, when I came here freshman year, there was no club. There was this guy, Roberto, and he had studied it and wanted to, you know, practice it with people. And so for the first year, it was really unofficial. The second year, we built the club up and got it approved and everything. ["Dex"]

"Dex's" statement that "the one thing about Hamilton, I'd say like is that if there's something you want to do and it doesn't exist, you can set it up yourself," and "Jose's" statement earlier that. "while there's a lot of bureaucracy involved, that I find irritating, I think that anyone who had a club-worthy idea or activity could easily start and

maintain a club," was repeated by a number of students when questioned about the availability of opportunities at Hamilton, which is significant, and points to not only a suitably flexible bureaucracy within student activities, but also to a simple but structured process for gaining club recognition. Perhaps more importantly though, this suggests that a good deal of students are aware of and happy with the breadth of opportunities available at Hamilton.

4. Conclusions

We have said, in previous years, that the assessment of Liberal Arts colleges is difficult work for the simple reason that these colleges do not lay out concrete goals in the same way, say, a job training business does. Yes, there are a collection of skills, experiences, and maybe even values colleges hope to bestow upon students, but at the same time, members of the faculty, administration, student body, and alumni all seem to recognize that Hamilton, like most other liberal arts colleges, derives much of its strength from *not* explicitly stating, formalizing, and institutionalizing a list of concrete goals. The flexibility and openness of liberal arts is what defines it as liberal arts in the first place.

This being said, the possibility still remains for us to asses what Hamilton does well, what it does poorly, what it wants to do better at, and from this judge what and how it can improve.

Developing academic skills

We have used what we might call an "industry standard" set of academic skills--writing, public speaking, and quantitative skills—as one of the bases for our evaluation of academics at Hamilton. This division is far from arbitrary, and we have stuck to it for three reasons. 1) Students overwhelmingly think of academic skills in these terms, and this has practical effects for their own work, as well as for how their work is evaluated. 2) The ways in which these skills are taught and learned (as well as the rate at which they are developed) differ radically, according to students. 3) The college has institutionalized this skill-codification into the Hamilton community—we have a writing center, an oral communications center, and a quantitative literacy center—and this too has practical effects on students' skill-building, their work, and how they are evaluated. Further, what we have found from our alumni interviews is that academic content—the actual material students learn—is far less important (both in and out of college) than the academic skills they developed in processing the content. All of this points to the importance of evaluating the teaching and learning of these skills at Hamilton, which is what we have attempted to do here.

The data we have suggests that there is no one trend regarding Hamilton students' academic skill building, but instead a number of smaller and interrelated trends, which we will list here according to their skill division, and then comparatively analyze.

1) Writing:

The average student's writing at Hamilton irrefutably improves over the course of their four years. Students recognize this, and attribute their improvements primarily to repeated exposure to writing assignments (which is furthered by the writing intensive course requirement), and the abundant availability of help with writing (from professors, peers, and the writing center). In terms of *relative improvement* then, the majority of students in all fields suggest that their writing has improved, and the data suggests the same.

In terms of an *absolute scale of writing ability*, students graduating in the sciences and mathematics report a significantly lower writing ability than students in the humanities, arts, history, and social sciences. While 62% of humanities and arts, and 63% of history, and social studies students report that they "write effectively," only around 46% of students in the sciences and mathematics feel they have this ability.[9]

Student's writing abilities are significantly determined simply by their exposure to writing, and also by their gaining the relevant means to critique and revise their work. The writing intensive program, which requires students to take classes marked writing intensive,[10] is by student accounts the primary way students' writing improves. While numerous arts, humanities, history, and social sciences classes are writing intensive, far fewer mathematics and sciences classes are (relative to the number of classes available in

[9] Cite + Unfortunately, given the data we have, we cannot yet distinguish between academic fields within these broad categories of intellectual divisions—we cannot determine, for example, whether a computer science major's reported writing skills are higher than that of a mathematics major, since both are included within the same category (science and mathematics). This is a symptom of the sampling method of the senior surveys, which uses a fixed set of potential responses to the question of the student's major, fixed responses that do not perfectly align with Hamilton's majors. Hence this comparison of intellectual divisions (arts and humanities, history and social studies, science and mathematics) is the most reliable and meaningful comparison possible.

[10] The general requirements of which typically include writing a number of papers or a single paper of significant length, revising papers for re-submission, and going to the writing center for further assistance in revision. Oftentimes the standards of "writing intensive" are not fixed, but vary from professor to professor

each division), explaining the discrepancy between science and math students' reported weakness in writing.

2) Oral Communications:

Similar to writing skills, the average student's oral communication skills improve significantly over their four years at Hamilton, and again students attribute this improvement simply to exposure to giving presentations. As Hamilton has no oral communications requirement, the majority of students simply receive these experiences from those classes (often few) in which the professor requires some form of presentation.

In terms of an absolute scale, far fewer students (in every academic division) reported that they felt they could "communicate well orally;" however there was far less of a reported skills discrepancy between the three academic divisions in terms of oral communications than there was for writing—in other words, student abilities in oral communications are significantly less dependant upon their field of study than writing skills. Overall, though, students feel significantly less confident about their oral communication skills than they do their writing skills, regardless of their field. When asked if "Hamilton greatly impacted their ability" in oral communications, 37% of students responded "yes," whereas for writing, 60% responded "yes."

We can probably attribute the differences in students' writing and oral communication skills to the fact that writing forms one of the bases of the core curriculum (i.e. students can't avoid it even if they tried), whereas with oral communications, whether students gain experience giving presentations is simply luck of the draw.

3) Quantitative Skills:[11]

There is a clear, significant, and distressing quantitative skills discrepancy between fields of study at Hamilton. Students reported quantitative skills vary most widely according to their field of study--while just over 40% of science and mathematics students reported that "Hamilton greatly impacted my ability to use quantitative tools,"

[11] We should note here that, in this year's panel study, we did not collect data regarding relative improvement of student's quantitative skills in the same way we did for their writing and oral communication skills.

only 20% of History and Social Studies students, and less than 10% of Humanities and Arts students, responded in the same way.

One reason for these discrepancies were largely discovered in last year's progress report, which suggested that, since the installation of the new core curriculum, and increasing number of students with majors outside of quantitative fields are avoiding science, lab science, and mathematics courses. In other words, quantitative courses are more and more being filled *only* by students majoring in quantitative fields.

Other reasons for the discrepancies were also outlined in last year's report, reasons reinforced by this year's panel study. Students overwhelmingly feel that, while everyone can improve at writing, not everyone can improve at quantitative skills. The perceived learnability of academic skills probably has an effect on enrolment in certain academic fields, and may also have a direct effect on the reported abilities of students. In other words, students who do not feel they are "math students," do not enroll in mathematics classes, hence their skills in the field do not improve (in effect demonstrating their original reason for not taking math classes, whether that reason be sound or imaginary). Further, it may be the case that students who self-report as not being the *type* of student who does well with quantitative work, also self-report as not having gained quantitative skills from Hamilton, simply by virtue of the fact that they are not "quantitative students."

Weighing academic skills

Intentionally or otherwise, the Hamilton curriculum contains inherent value judgments concerning different academic skills. While all students are required to undergo courses that seek to improve their writing, oral communications and quantitative skills are treated as optional, and while the majority of students report they improve in oral communications, this improvement is of course relative to their initial inexperience giving presentations at the college level. Further, the distressing discrepancies between quantitative skills among students in different divisions suggests that, as the curriculum stands, the only academic skill Hamilton actively seeks to develop in all of its students is writing.

We should recognize that the curriculum of a school *must* include value judgments about academic skills and content, and that, for the purposes and uses of

assessment, our job should be simply to outline what Hamilton could do to improve the experiences and development of its students.

We have suggested earlier that the writing program at Hamilton is quite strong, and should be a model for other academic skills programs, should they be created and developed. Hamilton's writing program is strong because it requires students to gain numerous experiences writing and revising, and because it also provides students with the resources to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of their writing (a vital step towards improvement). With a little organization, funding, and probably an adjustment to the core curriculum, Hamilton could create a comparable oral communications program, which could also provide students with the experiences and resources vital to improving their skills. While many students still seem to hold fast to the view that only some people can be good at oral communications, they at the same time seem to recognize their own improvement with the skill, and hence, to some degree, recognize that everyone could benefit from some degree of training in the field.

To a large degree, students feel that quantitative skills are unlearnable, or inaccessible to all but those already within the field. Students' inhibitions towards quantitative students are the single largest barrier preventing them from learning these skills, and overcoming this barrier then is an issue of overcoming the stigma attached to quantitative skills and work. While there is still disagreement among students, and certainly among faculty as well, as to how much quantitative training students need, we should only worry about this issue *once* the stigma of unlearnability is eroded from quantitative skills—this is a difficult task, and one that requires further focused research that can study both students who do and do not take and thrive with quantitative course work.

We have focused on 3 skills so far, but these are not necessarily the only skills Hamilton, and liberal arts in general, should emphasize. Reading, foreign language, and critical reasoning skills, to name three more, can and do all play a major role in students' lives in and beyond college, yet these are not required, nor are there institutional means (beyond the advising program) to encourage these.

Integrating students' academic and extracurricular life

Students' academic life is unequivocally tied to their relationships with their professors, and most importantly to those professors closest to them. Further, student intellectual life is not limited to the classroom, but expands into their extracurricular and independent activities as well. Students repeatedly noted how they wish their academic and extracurricular lives were more integrated, and displayed an active interest in integrating them through research projects and independent studies. This interest should be furthered, as the experiences students gain from combining outside interests with academics create the strongest and most formative intellectual moments of their college career. Members of the faculty have been, and should continue to be, the most important links between the two sides of student life—life in the classroom, and life outside the classroom—and the administration should look into further ways to formally encourage the intermixing of student academic and extracurricular experiences.

Overview

The major recommendations of this report are as follows:

1) Restructure or abandon Hamilton's advising program—as it stands currently, it is completely ineffective in its goals, and its forms of "advising" pale in comparison to the many other informal forms of advising students seek out and benefit from.

2) Refocus the Sophomore Seminars program, recognize the structural flaws inherent in its form of interdisciplinarity, and make the seminars a venue for oral communication experience for students, in order to make the seminars more valuable and students' oral communication experiences at Hamilton more vibrant and valuable.

3) Model other academic skills programs on the writing program (i.e. required intensive courses paralleled by a strong and active support system). Oral communications, quantitative literacy, reading skills, and others can all flourish if implemented

institutionally to give students the base level of experience that is so important to their development of these academic, and life, tools.

4) Work on ways to integrate students' extracurricular life with academic life, and encourage such integration when prompted by students. The current division between academic and extracurricular life is unnecessary and in many cases detrimental to both. this should be attempted in a non-institutionalized way, but in a way such that the structure of academics and extracurriculars encourages and promotes it naturally. There is a wall between the two worlds, or two forms of student activity, a very real wall that students face every day but do not realize, and it will take some restructuring work on the part of the administration and faculty to break down this wall.