2006 Mellon Project Panel Study Report

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I. Introduction

1. The Four Poles of the Student Experience

The past five years of interviewing and surveying students and analyzing their responses has given us a number of fascinating insights into the student experience at Hamilton, but perhaps equally important, it has given us a great deal of information as to how we study students, and how we *should* study them. This study started from the position that the student must be used as the unit of analysis, not classes, departments, or disciplines, in order to understand, and assess, what exactly liberal arts does. Primarily from the interview data, we have found that there are four areas of the student experience that are particularly important to students both in and beyond college: Academics, "social" life, extracurriculars, and skill-building. These are *not* exclusive areas of experience—they in fact overlap quite frequently—but they have proven quite useful as categories of study. The distinctions between these four areas are not ours, they were provided by students, who make general distinctions between them throughout the panel study. These distinctions tended to be both temporal, behavioral, and spatial—students schedule time for academics, social life, and extracurriculars, and take part in these activities in specific places and settings. Throughout these three dimensions of student activity, students develop the various skills (writing, public speaking, reading, organizing, socializing, leadership, teamwork, and others) that form the core of what students take from a liberal arts education.

We will use this model of the four poles of the student experience throughout this analysis of the panel study, but not restrictively—there are numerous cases where students bridge the gaps between, say, extracurricular and academic life (and interestingly, these moments are, for the students, some of the most rewarding and memorable experiences of their college careers). This model is useful for us not only to see how students order and categorize their experiences, but also for how they transcend the day-to-day divisions between these areas of their experience. Further, this model will help illuminate the skill-building processes that are the real essence of the liberal arts education.

Our focus will not be solely on these four areas of student experience—there are plenty of insights into what goes on at a small, residential liberal arts college that are generally unrelated to this model, which we will discuss. However, as we have found, the daily activities of students can be "unpacked," quite interestingly, by examining them through the divisions students categorize them into.

2) Methods of Analysis

1. Challenges

The main challenge we faced in analyzing the panel study data was one that social scientists face regularly—namely, that people often respond with different answers depending on who or what is asking the question. Responding to interview questions, students frequently spoke in anecdotes, recalling specific experiences to suggest general patterns of experience and behavior. While these anecdotes are very useful for some purposes (they frequently help illuminate the mechanisms in the causal relationships we are studying), they are difficult to use with in others (it is more difficult to get a sense of a *general* student response to an open-ended interview question than a multiple choice survey). In other words, our conclusions from the qualitative study are, not surprisingly, qualitative. In many cases we buffered our findings with analysis from other parts of the project—the writing project, the survey team, etc.—and this kind of methodological triangularization gave us our most concrete results. In cases where such reinforcement was not possible, we used all the panel data available to check and support our findings. Overall, despite this challenge, the amount and quality of the panel data was great enough to reach meaningful conclusions on its own, and even stronger ones when data from other parts of the project was relevant.[1]

[1] Analysis note: In interview quotations, "I" refers to the Interviewer, "S" to the Subject – in this case, the student panelist.

III. Student Academic Life

1. Student idealizations of Liberal Arts Academics

Upon entering Hamilton, students have a particular notion of what a liberal arts education is, and much of their opinions of the college are shaped by their experience meeting or not meeting these expectations. Students differentiate between the ideal of "liberal arts," and the ideal "liberal arts student," and we will address the details of both.

A. The Liberal Arts College.

According to students, liberal arts colleges must be open, flexible, and have the student as the central focus. Many students also commented that an essential element of liberal arts is its small size—a requirement for a strong and close community. One student simply commented that "Well, it's a liberal arts college and um, there's a lot of freedom about choosing courses and like not forcing you to take, uh, specific courses" ["Cem" 01-02]. Similarly, another student states that "Well, to me it's like you have the freedom to like learn everything, like to be able to expand and actually take part in everything like History to Art to the Sciences. And instead of going to a school which has like a defined type of like requirement" ["Victoria" 01-02].

For other students, liberal arts gains its meaning by being a contrast to "big city schools": "most liberal arts colleges tend to be smaller. I saw myself drowning and just kind of falling… at a big school" ["Jack" 01-02]. Overwhelmingly though, students focused on how liberal arts offers *options*, both in the short and long terms. "I would say, just a liberal arts school is a school that provides many options for [you]. It provides… a way to try a lot of different things. I think, you know, just being my age I think it's a lot less stressful to have that option… not being so, not being forced to make a decision right away" ["Tom" 01-02]. "Mary" commented similarly:

> S: I wanted to come to a liberal arts school because I really didn't know what I wanted to do and I thought it would give me the opportunity to look and study in a lot of different courses and areas, and I guess I think of liberal arts as being a broad range of different courses and the opportunity to study in interdisciplinary ways. ["Mary" 01-02]

and “Victoria” stated that,

> S: Well, to me [in liberal arts] you have the freedom to like learn everything, like to be able to expand and actually take part in everything like History to Art to the Sciences. And instead of going to a school which has like a defined type of like requirement… [Hamilton] has like a mixture of everything depending on what classes you’re taking. [“Victoria” 02-03]

Some students were well aware of the extent to which students have academic freedom at Hamilton—“James’s” perspective on the issue suggested that Hamilton’s academic options empowered students intellectually :

> S: I guess, for me, [liberal arts] means that for one you’ve got more control over the like the education that you’re having, and also that there’s some sort of connection between all the studies you’re making, like vis-à-vis, some sort of ability to communicate, I guess. Like writing is more emphasized for instance.
> I: Okay. You said you had more control, I guess. In what way do you have more control?
> S: Well, like rather than a traditional education where like there are certain things that you have to study, like the core curriculum. You get to direct what you’re doing. And in some cases, like determine majors, or create majors, for some schools. [“James” 02-03]

Central to many students’ expectations of liberal arts is this notion that liberal arts offers many options, and does not force the student to commit too soon to one path. There is both a positive and negative dynamic to this idea—the positive is that the student will have experiences in a variety of fields, and can potentially pursue many goals—the negative is that the student will not be restricted to a single field as a professional school or a university with larger divisions between departments might so do. Upon applying to a liberal arts college students hope to find both academic and professional openness, and the freedom to not have to commit. The frequency of this kind of response to our 01-02 interview question of “what do you think liberal arts means” was surprising—nearly every student who directly answered the question, mentioned liberal arts’ openness, academic freedom, and interdisciplinarity. The ability to “not have to decide just yet” was also frequently mentioned. Perhaps though, this is to be expected from this class year. The class of 2005, which was the focus of our panel—was the first year to not have the traditional core curriculum requirements, and this new academic freedom was well

publicized to prospective students. Indeed many students directly cited Hamilton's lack of a core curriculum[2] as one of their main reasons to attend, often focusing on what kinds of classes they didn't have to take, such as foreign language, math, or hard science as especially important in their decision.

As stated, students often contrasted the kind of education they would receive at a larger university or professional school, with that of a liberal arts institution, but suggested that either path could lead to a good job and personal success beyond college. "Learning a bit of everything," as students believe they do at liberal arts colleges, can be as important, if not more so, than learning a lot of one thing and specializing in just one field.

B. The Liberal Arts Student.

The liberal arts student, upon finishing his or her education, should be able to solve complex problems, analyze a situation or problem carefully and accurately, be skilled in writing and oral communications, have both a breadth of knowledge from a variety of fields and disciplines, and also have a depth of knowledge of some specific topics. In other words, according to students' ideal, the student of liberal arts learns gains a well-roundedness, critical eye, and academic intensity during their studies.

Students spoke in specifics as well as generalities, suggesting a number of qualities of a good liberal arts student. "Anne" comments that "ordinarily, I'd never take a Science class I don't think, but I guess it's kind of part of the liberal arts education, like to kind of take something different" ["Anne" 01-02]. "Jon" responded to a question of "what do you think liberal arts means" by focusing on the skills it would instill in him:

> S: It means that when I graduate here, I'll be able to solve problems and have a wide depth of knowledge, and be able to communicate effectively orally and in writing.
> I: What do you mean? Like wide depth of knowledge?
> S: That my knowledge isn't confined to one specific, or two specific subject areas, but it's kind of, you know, like exploring, like understanding different things. ["Jon" 01-02]

[2] Hamilton still has a core curriculum, including writing intensive courses and sophomore seminars. However in students' eyes the elimination of the old core curriculum was, effectively, the "end of requirements at Hamilton."

Other students reported that Hamilton would give them a strong "foundation" for a career or further education.

Overall, students responded to the general issue of what liberal arts students are with general, and rather uniform answers. Much of this is probably due to the freeform nature of liberal arts itself—as students suggest, the education can be shaped and molded in many directions, and so upon entering the college, the student knows that many things are possible, but can respond with few specifics.

2. Student-Faculty Relations

We can learn quite a bit about how students experience Hamilton by looking at the kinds of relationships students have with professors, especially the close student-faculty friendships that seem to greatly shape the students' academic experience. 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. 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.[3]

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?

[3] This data is taken from the 2004-2005 interviews, where students were asked directly about their relationships with the faculty.

> 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" 04-05]

Another student, "Marcy," 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. ["Marcy" 04-05]

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" 04-05]

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" 04-05]

These close relationships seem to arise at any time in a student's career—as early as freshman year, or as late as senior year, though the most significant relationships begin early and have years to develop. Further research should investigate whether developing these relationships during freshman year is especially helpful for the student to adjust and orient themselves to the academic and social climate of the college (the panel study data suggests this is the case, but is not conclusive).

Students report that having a professor as a friend has clear academic and social benefits—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. 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 reciprocal—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 affect on student experience, work, and satisfaction with Hamilton.

Significantly, it is not just the best and brightest students who benefit from these close relationships—many students who self-identified as "B" and "C" students, or as not terribly motivated intellectually, knew at least one professor who they felt comfortable "dropping by to chat" with, or seeking out advice from. While "A" students may have more formal ways of meeting new professors and developing relationships with them (through research projects, being known in a department, etc…), other students seem to have very good access to professors as well, and almost regardless of the academic skill of the student, they can develop good relationships with these mentors. That being said, *all* of the students we interviewed who self-identified (and who seemed, by the things they talked about and way they talked) as Hamilton's best students, had at least one, and normally two or three close professors, while the self-identified "bad" students typically

did not have one. The important point here is that "bad" students *can* have these close relationships, and benefit from their effects, and that they seem to *need* them more than any other group of students. Unfortunately, as we have seen, encouraging these relationships is difficult—as they are frequently spontaneous, attempts to arrange them, such as the advising program, have had mixed success.

There is good evidence, based on student reports, that a close professor, as we have characterized them, is more important to a student's[4] intellectual and personal development, than any other part of their college experience. This has important implications for hiring practices if, indeed, more sociable, open, student-dedicated, and student-minded professors have the largest and best impact on students, and characteristics such as academic notoriety, prestige, and scholarly focus are less important for student outcomes. The encouraging side of this, for the administration, is that it only takes a *few* of these excellent professors to make a huge difference in many student's lives and careers—one member of the faculty, motivated to enlighten and educate students, can have a profound affect on hundreds of students per year if their classes, advisees, and activities are organized properly.

B. 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

[4] Providing of course, the student *has* a close professor.

> 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" 04-05]

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

> 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" 04-05]

and "Luke" stated that,

> 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" 04-05]

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.

3. 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.[5]

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" (at best), 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.

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

> 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" 04-05]

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:

> 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" 04-05]

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" 04-05]

"John's" advisor didn't give him the guidance he felt he needed, so he sought it out elsewhere (from a math teacher), and gave some advice on how the administration might fix the advising problems he (and other students) face:

> I: Has you adviser been helpful?
> S: Not really, no. Like last week, you know, during advising period, I told her I was to be steered towards business management (end of side 1 of tape). Last week I asked my adviser what classes could steer me to business management, and she really was unsure. She was really uncertain. She's like I don't know, maybe you could take this. Everything I said, she was like yeah I think so, I think so.
> I: Okay, what major is she in, or what major?
> S: Well, see she's in communications and does a little bit of marketing. But she found me one good class that would help me, to steer me towards marketing. That was Rhetoric and Communication.

I: Okay, good.
S: And obviously I'll need to know how to, you know, communicate to the world and do public speaking. I said okay, and asked what Math courses do I need. And she just said uh, I don't know, what do you think you'll need? And I said statistics, maybe. And she said, uh maybe, yeah I like that.
I: Okay, so the uncertainty she wasn't really necessarily helping you out. She was just giving, putting a lot on you?
S: Yeah. And so, I mean I talked to my Math professor about it and he was the one who, he gave better advice than my adviser did, and I was just saying why don't you become my adviser?
I: Do you know about the advising system? How that works? And did you know that you can switch?
S: Yes and no.
I: Do you have any interest in doing that?
S: Yes, I'm thinking of doing that next semester…Because I've only seen my adviser during advising week, or freshman orientation week and advising week because I really don't find it that helpful…
I: Okay, so you've obviously found some problems in the advising system. Tell me what those are, and tell me how you think the school should go about fixing them…
S: I guess you can fix that by having a student choose a professor, or choose a professor who he or she thinks is capable enough about advising. I just didn't feel satisfied with her answers, and I was just like having a casual conversation with my professor, I felt a lot more casual and he was telling me courses that get, involve statistics. He said maybe I should try Economics, but I can also focus in all areas of business. My adviser never said, mentioned anything about Economics.
I: Right. So you need more guidance.
S: Yes. ["John" 01-02]

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,[6] 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 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).

Interestingly, a small group of students, when asked about their relationships with their advisors, mentioned that they actually received more advising (though informal) from other students:

I : Are there any people, I know we're all adults, but are there any like adults on campus being, be it professors or staff or coaches here that you are close to, that have maybe been a mentor for you?
S: No.
I: You laugh.
S: Sorry.
I: Do you feel like you should have had one? I'm just wondering why you're laughing.
S: ????? I feel like, yeah, I do, you know.
I: You feel like you should have?
S: It's just funny asking that question, no, it's allowed. Actually I could have handled it very well, yes. If there is any mentor, it's sort of a student mentor.
I: Yeah?
S: Yeah.
I: Who?
S: A friend of mine from home. He was here before I was. He's ????? Like he has very high academic standards, and captain of the swim team, for example. You know, he's sort of a very plausible big brother figure - not quite that, but he's a very plausible such figure.
I: Is he a good friend of yours?
S: Yeah. ["Hank" 03-04]

Other students suggested the same: that while their formal advisor gave them little actual advice, other students (often older) gave them academic and social advice that made the greatest impact on their experiences at Hamilton. In a follow-up interview with "Hank," he commented on how this student mentor, or "elder" as he called him, helped him with

[6] 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.

his athletic training as much as his academic studies, giving him counsel on what classes to take, and how to manage his time better.

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!

While the program faces these problems, there is one way in which it has benefited students—it regularly and formally places students in professors' offices. Many students, as far into their college career as their junior year, admit not spending much time talking with professors one on one, not visiting professors in their office hours, and not taking advantage of time before or after class to talk to professors. The advising program, in the first week of students' time at college, puts students in one on one contact with a professor, and this, at very least, helps familiarize the student with the faculty.

Further, as advising takes place often at the beginning and end of semesters, it puts students in offices a number of times, and likely best benefits students who might not otherwise spend any time outside of class in the presence of the faculty. Future study should focus on the importance of early interactions with faculty, such as the first student-advisor meeting, to gauge further the importance of these encounters.

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.

4. Student-Administration Relations

In addition to asking students about their relationships with members of the faculty, we also asked them about their attitudes towards and relationships with members of the administration. Our data indicates that most student's attitude towards the administration is 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" 04-05] or "college administrators, do you mean like deans?" ["Tom" 04-05], 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 meet: 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.

A. 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. ["Hank" 04-05]

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 continue to maintain a 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"] 04-05.

"Sean" went into more detail with his response:

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" 04-05]

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 who and what the administration is. 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" 04-05]

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. ["Tom" 04-05]

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.

B. 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 affect 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[7] 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'

[7] 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 organized or semi-organized ways, in whatever form that may take.

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.

IV. The Curriculum

1. Student Course Selection Processes

Student course selection is at the core of a number of issues we have discussed, and so we turn to look at the ways students make these decisions, what informs them, who they do and do not seek out for advice, and what outside forces shape their course selection.

The most notable finding from the panel study is that newer students (particularly freshmen, but also sophomores) choose their classes in different ways than upperclassmen (juniors and seniors). While underclassmen tend to use peer advice extensively to decide which classes to take, upperclassmen seek out professors they have a good relationship with (and who are typically in the student's major) for counsel. This finding is in line with previous findings by Professors Owens and Jensen from previous years that students become more sophisticated in how they seek out information upon which they base their course choices.

Perhaps more significant than how students select courses are how outside factors such as course restrictions, class sizes, prerequisites, and major requirements, differently affect the student depending upon their class year—underclassmen's course options are limited by most classes being above their level (200+) and by closed out classes, while

upperclassmen are typically prohibited from lower-level courses (100-200), and find that they must use their course time on classes within their major, in order to complete degree requirements. These preexisting factors often limit most students' real course options to a slim amount—while a course catalogue may be overflowing with forty pages of fascinating and diverse classes, the reality of student course selection is that most students really can only choose from one or two pages of the a catalogue. In this next section, we will discuss some of the preexisting limitations on students when they choose courses, and then turn to how, within this frame of possibilities, students choose.

A. Limiting factors on student course selection.

Last in course registry, freshmen normally can only take 100-level courses, but may be allowed into 200-levels with the permission of a professor, or if they have a strong background in the field. 100 level courses are almost always introductory courses, and are typically reserved for underclassmen interested in the basics of a field. Underclassmen, then, have a horizontal spectrum of course selection—they can choose from a couple of basic classes in each department, but nothing above that base level.

Another equally limiting condition that all students find—increasingly so as you move down class years—is that many classes quickly reach their maximum capacity and close out. Freshmen are hit the worst, as they register last, and are often left with a course selection they had not initially planned for: "I got blocked out of like my first, second and third choice on one of the groups and my first and second choices on three others. And I got like my last three choices" ["Jack" 01-02]. Adam had a similar experience: "It's always a problem. Like we were in the fourth [line] last time, so by the time I got to the door I had like, I got maybe one of the classes I wanted" ["Adam" 01-02]. Many freshmen, and sometimes even sophomores, find themselves registered for classes they hurriedly chose while waiting in line to register, of which know nothing about other than the course name and the professor who is teaching it.

A further limitation on course selection is class time—classes overlap frequently, and necessarily so, though this occasionally prevents some students from taking certain classes (this is not limited to underclassmen, but does affect them).

The combination of these three limitations on underclassmen course selection, effectively reduce a very large pool of classes, to a slender selection, from which the students pick (sometimes quite hastily, if upon registration day, they find they some of their choices have been closed out) their courses. The effective underclassmen class possibilities is a horizontal spectrum of opportunity—underclassmen can pick from numerous introductory courses, and some 200-level courses as well, but their options to expand vertically into 300+ level courses are severely limited.

These limitations have important implications for other college programs, especially the advising program. By most student accounts, as we have outlined in the section on advising, the advising system is largely ineffective, and has little real positive impact on students' academic and intellectual experience. Beyond this though, given the limitations on underclassmen course selection, the notion of advising underclassmen on course selection is in many cases rather absurd. Freshmen especially, but also some sophomores, simply do not have the real course selection opportunities that would necessitate much advising, or reap benefits from it—the spectrum of freshmen student course selection is too slim, come registration day, for much advice to be effective (this is assuming, in the first place, that the student would seek out and follow the advisor's advice in the first place, which as we will see later on, is rarely the case with underclassmen!). Further, as many students commented that they saw their advisors solely to obtain a signature on their course selection sheet, a sheet listing courses that the student was later locked out of, any advising that does take place might well be completely wasted because of registration restrictions. This is not to say that every underclassmen is locked out of all their classes, but simply to suggest that, frequently (as far as underclassmen report), course selection is not a matter of choice, as much as it is one of fitting into classes before they are closed.

Upperclassmen face different types of limitations on their course selection, but face them nonetheless, and are as equally frustrated by them as underclassmen are.

One of the basic limitations on upperclassmen course selection is that upperclassmen are typically prevented from taking introductory courses, and typically only allowed to register for them with written permission of the instructor. For some

upperclassmen, this is a problem—some students find that, come junior or senior year, they are taking two or three courses per semester in one department to fulfill major requirements, and wish to branch out and try something new. For most upperclassmen though, their class slots are spent on courses within their major or minor, or for a related field, and so they do not have to confront this limitation.

Despite being higher up the ladder, even upperclassmen are shut out of classes due to capacity. Many 400-level classes, as small seminars, are restricted to senior majors first (who have no other chances to take the class), then other majors and minors, before the class is open to the general student body. "Cem" found that, even as a Junior, some of the classes he wanted to take in his own major field were closed to him:

> S: It's been like a problem, like this year especially, like as a junior. I can't get into Econ classes and Lit, and it annoys me.
> I: What, what happened?
> S: Because the seniors take all the 400 classes, and most of the 300 classes, and like we're, like, and I had, I could only take one class for Econ even though I am a junior and I am an Econ major. There was only one course that I could take.
> I: Really?
> S: Yeah.
> I: Wow.
> S: I wanted to take like two or three Econ courses this semester, but I could only take one.
> I: Wow.
> S: And I even emailed the professors, and they were like, you know, I have like ten like seniors on the waiting list and I can't take you.
> I: Wow. So did other people have the same problem?
> S: Yeah, I think so. ["Cem" 03-04]

Clearly, class size continues to be a limiting factor in student course selection throughout their college careers, and regardless of the level of the class. Cem's comments were echoed by other juniors and seniors, especially when asked about "opportunities at Hamilton" and whether they felt restricted in some way.

Perhaps the largest limit placed on upperclassmen in selecting their courses are their major requirements, which can vary widely depending on the department. Students rarely complained about this limitation, mainly because they wanted to take classes in the field anyways, and were familiar with the professors and the subject matter, and so the

courses were a known quantity and could be comfortably selected. Most departments require ten courses within the field, including a senior seminar course (perhaps two, if the thesis is a year-long project), and a set number of courses in the higher levels (300+), including some fundamental courses of variable levels. Many of these requirements are completed junior and senior year (depending upon class availability at registration), leaving only a few spaces for non-major work. Students with a minor, or more than one major, face even more such limitations on course selection.

The limitations put on upperclassmen are perhaps most distressing—for many of these students, these classes will be the last they will ever take in an educational environment, and many students, upon reaching senior year, regret not taking, or sometimes not having, the opportunity to explore other fields, as reflected by Jose in this comment: "I mean my only regret is, I mean at this point there are like three or four disciplines I wish I could have taken classes in… but now I have friends who are majors in them, and I'm like oh, you know, I wish I knew a basic understanding of what they were talking about. But I think the list was Sociology, Philosophy, Anthropology, Archaeology" ["Jose" 04-05].

We turn now to look at how, within the limits students face, under and upperclassmen choose courses, and what influences these decisions.

B. How Students Choose Courses.

The panel study never included a question directly about how students chose their classes, but many questions touched on the issue, and oftentimes the students themselves often drew their responses towards how they made these choices. Overwhelmingly, the panel study findings on student course selection supports the HEDS findings, and also provides insight into related issues. The survey findings referenced here are taken from the 2003-2004 progress report, Part V- Learning About Learning: Students' Course Choices (prepared by Ann Owen and Elizabeth Jensen).

Underclassmen seem to rely heavily on peer networks as sources of information about classes and professors. Many students in the panel study, when speaking about choosing their classes during their first year, discussed how an older student had

influenced their decision, perhaps by recommending a professor, class, or department, or warning the student about one. Other students with experience in a department were much greater resources for first-year course choice-making than the first-years' advisors, who's significance in course decision-making was minimal.

There are a number of reasons why first years may rely more heavily on peer networks for academic decision advice. 1) Choices for freshmen are essentially limited to 100-level classes in many departments, departments they will not be familiar with, and even their advisor may not know much about. Peers, on the other hand, have a wealth of experience in numerous fields that can be easily accessed. 2) There are numerous mechanisms for student bonding in the first few weeks and months of college life, but few mechanisms for student-professor bonding, hence, during the periods when students are choosing classes, they have already constructed a peer network, whereas they may have only met their advisor once. This is a simple issue of familiarity and comfort—students create social networks with each other much more quickly than they do with non-students simply through constant social exposure. Further, according to some students, they did not develop a close working relationship with a professor until their late sophomore, or even junior year, and hence did not have a non-student mentor to seek out for advice until later in their academic career.

Later on (maybe sophomore year, but certainly junior and senior year), students tend to seek out advice from the professors in their major, their major advisor, and from other students within their field, and much less frequently ask for advice on courses from their friends. Some of the possible reasons for this follow: 1) By their junior year, most students have made close connections to one or two professors whom they go to for advice. These professors (and sometimes administrators or other community members) are typically in the student's academic field, and often become advisors when the students choose their major. This student-faculty network takes longer to grow than the student peer network, but once it is in place, it is a great resource for students, and they make use of it extensively in their decision-making process. 2) The students are already familiar with the school and their major department, and no longer need to seek out the baseline of information that underclassmen do to orient themselves. Instead, they may talk to the

class instructors themselves to see what topics will be covered, what perspectives on issues will be taught, and so on.

C. Discrepancies between survey data and panel study data.

Survey data suggests that, of all sources of information, students use the course catalogue and the schedule book the most, "indicating that the course selection process is one done in relative isolation, while panel data points to a different source—that the choosing process is a largely social one—but much of this may be symptomatic of the methods involved in asking the students about their experience. Interview questions are more likely to produce anecdotal answers, and students seem to remember specific experiences in which a student gave them advice, more than they remember reading through the course catalogue. Despite the discrepancy, it is clear that students do use peer networks as sources of information for choosing classes, though it is unclear to what degree in relation to other sources (and it is difficult in the first place to compare the influence of a fellow student to the influence of a catalogue on decision-making).

D. Conclusions.

While it is interesting to discover the reasons why students choose the classes they do, it is important to note that it isn't always the student who does the choosing—all students are somehow limited in the courses they can take, and so in effect, many choices have been made for them. Some of these limits are necessary, some are probably not, but at very least it is important to recognize that the spectrum of potential courses a student could choose from, upon opening their course catalogue, is much smaller than it may initially appear.

2. 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 student 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* (which, as special and required classes, they *should* be). Further, in many cases, those students who liked their sophomore seminars suggested that they liked them not necessarily because they were sophomore seminars, but for the same reasons they like any other classes: they like the subject matter, they like the professor who teaches 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, problems that arise out of 1) the goal of increasing interdisciplinary interaction, which has been institutionalized in these courses, and 2) 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 and 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.

A. 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), the fact 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 [name of class omitted], 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" 04-05]

"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" 04-05]

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.[8] 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,[9] 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 relation to one another and in relation to the desires, needs, and sheer volume of students and faculty.

B. 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.

[8] 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.
[9] In addition to the fact that only senior faculty members are allowed to teach the seminars.

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,[10] 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 wound up taking "seminar" classes that, in practice, was 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.

[10] For various reasons, a small group of students were unable to take or chose not to take (for unrelated, personal reasons) the classes their sophomore year.

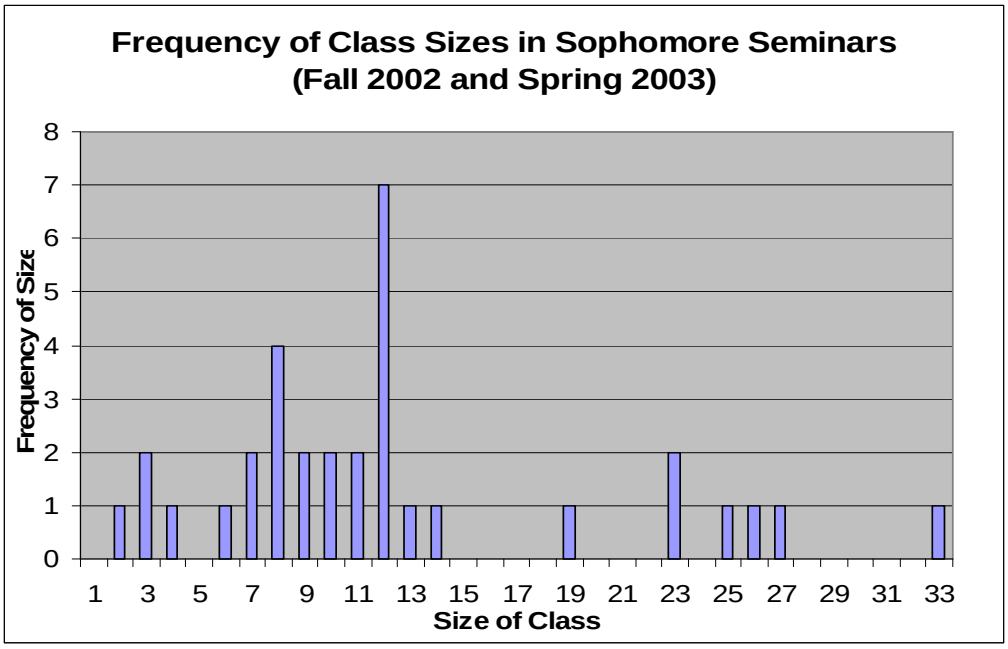

Diagram 1. Mean = 12.45 Students per class; Median = 12 Students.

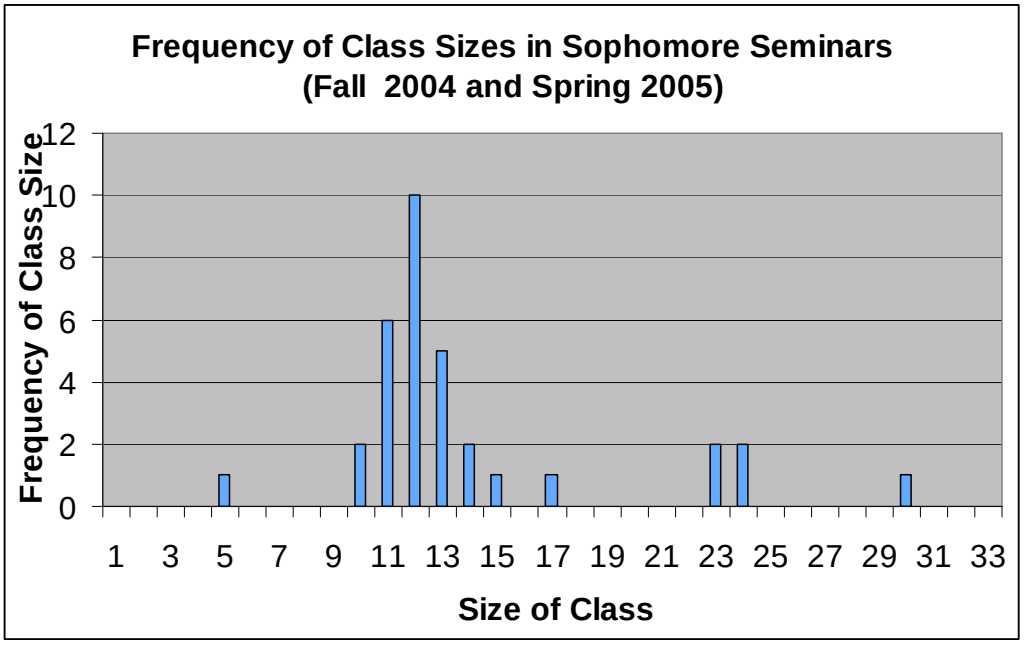

Diagram 2. Mean = 14.375 students per class; Median = 12 Students

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.

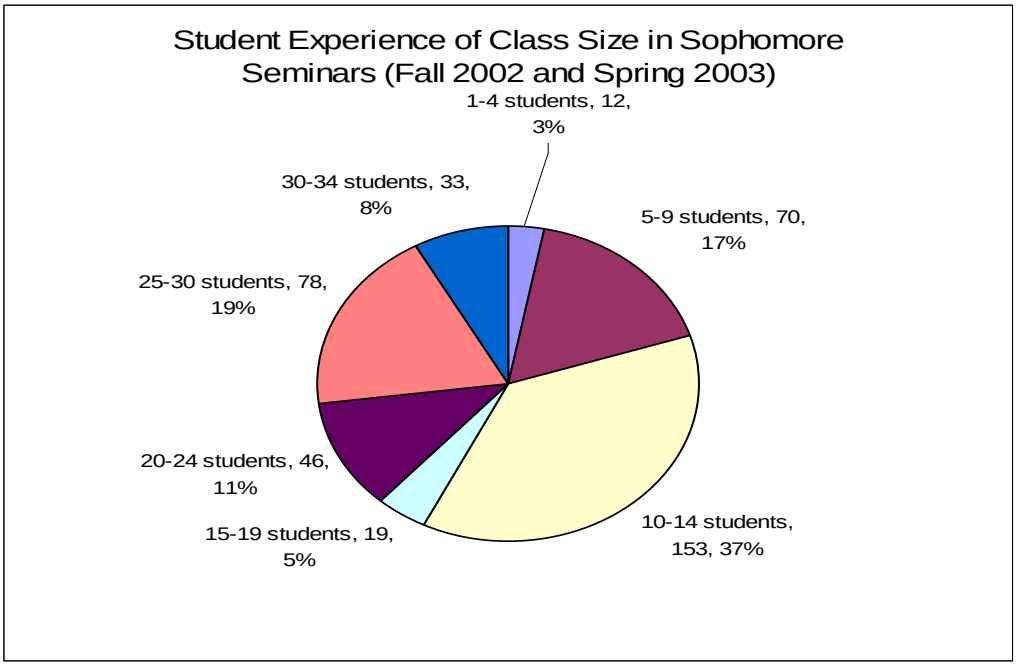

Diagram 3.

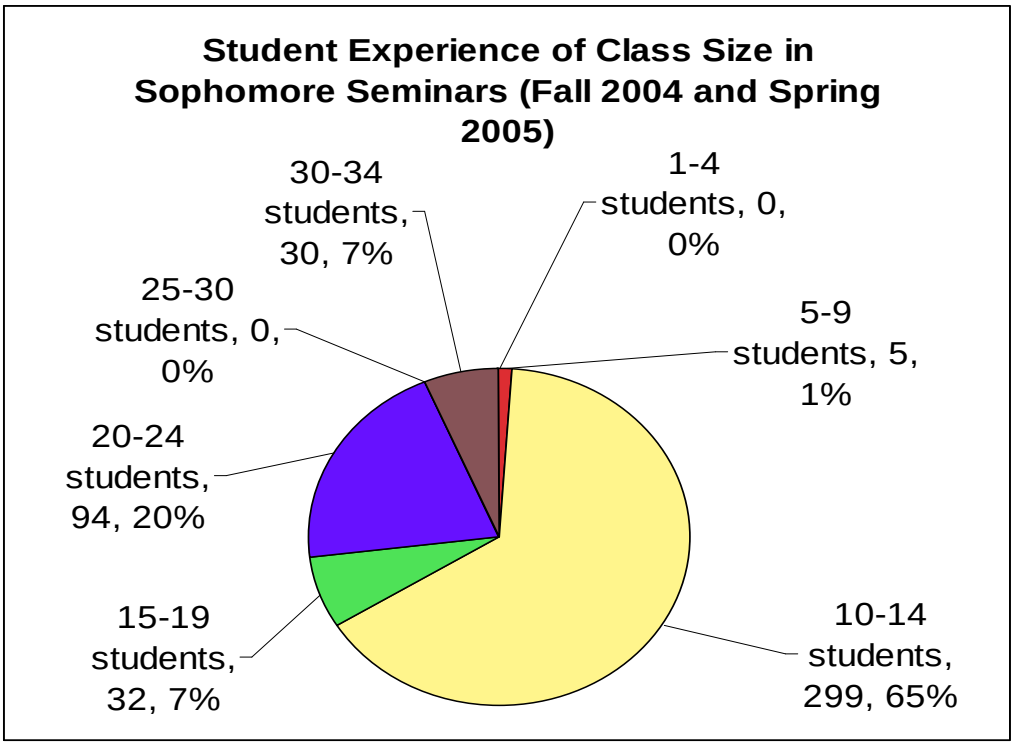

Diagram 4.

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.

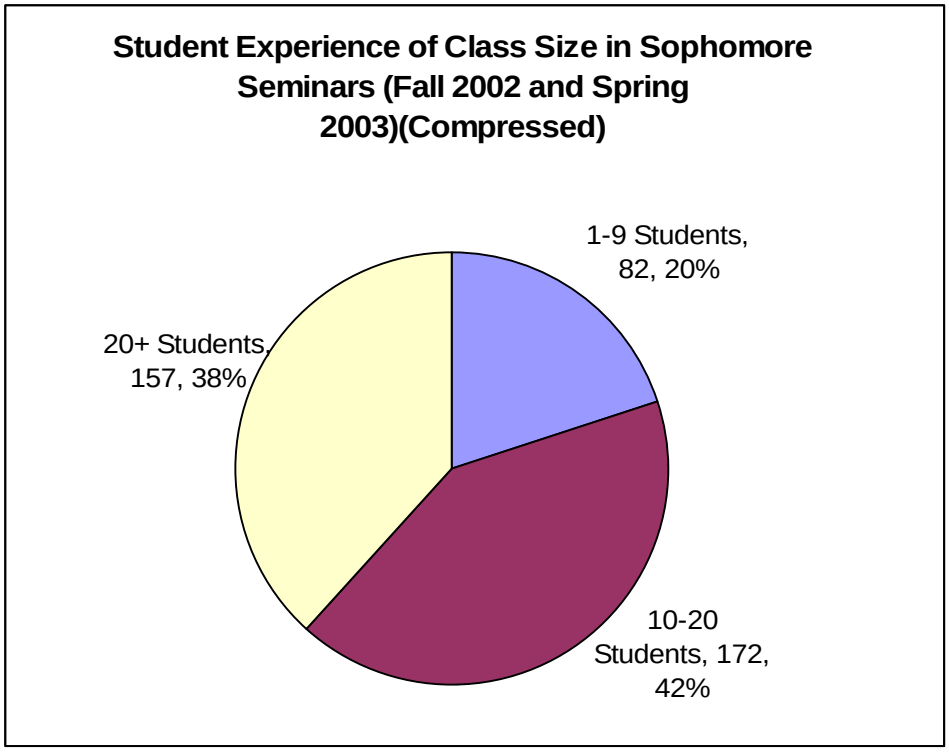

Diagram 5.

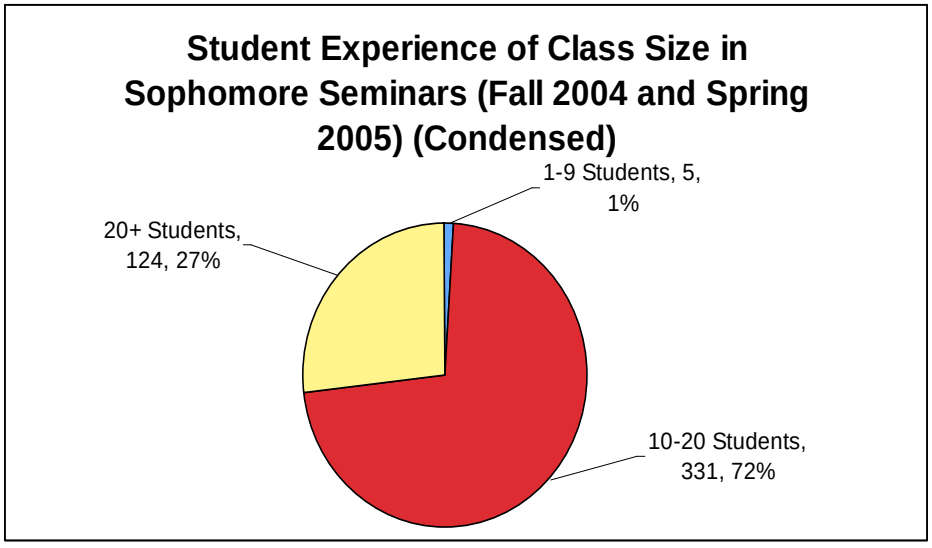

Diagram 6.

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 are inimical to the scheduling structure of these required classes.

C. The potential for double standards within team-taught courses.

Even those students who registered in seminars they wanted faced problems within the program, problems that manifested 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" 04-05]

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" 04-05]

"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.

D. 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" 04-05]

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" 04-05]

"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" 04-05]

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 interests 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. Further, forcing interdisciplinarity into the frame of a *class*, instead of just encouraging students to choose their classes with a breadth of academic interests, isn't necessarily the best way to give students the interdisciplinary academic experience that can be so valuable to a student.

E. 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" 04-05]

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" 04-05]

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" 04-05]

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.

Some sophomore seminars also seem to have helped students' writing skills—some 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" ["Liz" 04-05], 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" 04-05]

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). A careful restructuring of these classes, with attention paid not only to improving the content but also the course selection and availability, would give students a much better experience, and would change what is for many a stressful and unfulfilling course to an enriching and interesting class experience.

3. Proseminars

Through and emphasis on writing, speaking, and discussion, proseminar classes attempt to form an intense intellectual climate which is largely student-guided. Unlike

other class formats, the enrollment of proseminars is limited to 16 students, in order to better encourage a close and intense social and academic environment. Proseminars are not content-specific; students can choose to take them in nearly every academic discipline, and all students from the Class of 2005 were encouraged, but not required, to participate in at least four proseminars prior to graduating.

Throughout the four years of interviewing students, we found that students are generally unaware of what proseminars are, and that there is even a proseminar program in the first place. When asked initially if the students had taken any proseminars, or what their opinions of the program were, almost all students expressed some ignorance of what the program was,[11] and interviewers typically had to prompt students as to what these types of classes were, in order to learn their opinions of them.

While students didn't seem to know much about the program itself, they certainly appreciated its benefits—students enjoy small classes, benefit from continual discussion, and seem to get more out of these classes than larger lecture classes. Many students, however, qualified their praise of these discussion classes by adding that they are only suitable for some kinds of course material. Speaking about a proseminar class, "Mark" commented:

> S: Like that really lends itself well, that material lends itself well to discussion… [name of class omitted], which I took fall semester was also a lot of group discussion. That kind of material lends itself really well, but other things, like neuroscience, I don't really, I don't think that if it were discussion based it would be as, as helpful or as useful, I don't know how to describe it, but it doesn't seem like it would be as good as just a lecture. You know, some stuff just needs to be lectured when taught, and you just learn it. ["Mark" 02-03]

Other students echoed "Mark's" comments, adding that material where there is lots of room for debate, such as philosophy, arts, and some social sciences, are better suited for discussion-based classes, whereas some hard sciences and maths are better conveyed in a lecture format. Aside from this, nearly every student who commented about small

[11] Typical responses to "do you know what proseminars are included: "Do you mean sophomore seminars?" or "writing intensive classes?", and often a simple "no." When the interviewer described the classes, however, most students in the senior-year interview admitted to having taken them before.

classes, suggested that they are beneficial to student learning regardless of the course material. Many students went as far to say that the small class sizes at Hamilton was one of the deciding factors for them, and contrasted Hamilton with other schools with larger classes:

> I: Do you find class size is a factor here?
> S: Yeah, I definitely, one of the reasons why I did come here is because, you know, there are few classes where you'll have 40 people in the class. And you know, I could have gone to a school like University of Maryland or University of Virginia where a lot of my friends went, but you really just become a number. You know, like a lot of my friends who go to say like Virginia Tech, they don't even have to go to class because of all the lecture notes, and even sometimes tapes of the lectures are online, and I didn't want to have that happen. I really wanted to kind of get to know more people, you know, through having smaller classes and get to know them better. And also get to know professors, some of them better. ["Dan" 02-03]

Other students emphasized these points as well, especially how close interactions between students and professors are the best part of small classes. "Jose" suggested that small classes are more "comfortable" and the conversation within them is more fluid, and also added that his experiences in proseminars have been his best:

> S: I prefer student, light classes with less students. Students are more comfortable in them. Certainly I've found experiences in classes where some large, large groups like nobody wants to talk or, you know, wants to be the person, and like I've, I've had the experience of sitting in classes where I know the answer to every question and no one, people just sit there and stare at the professor. It's very frustrating, and you know, difficult. But I've found my proseminars to be most enjoyable, like sitting around and discussing stuff. I enjoy that. ["Jose" 03-04]

The experiences students seem to be having in proseminar classes are close to those they expected, and hoped for, from classes at a liberal arts college—they are small, discussion-based, have close student-faculty contact, and are intellectually stimulating for these reasons, as "Randy" comments:

> S: I think we should have a lot more [proseminars]. I mean I came to a liberal arts school, I think all classes should be like proseminars, which I know is really idealistic, not practical exactly, but I think we should, the class sizes are like the introductory classes. I didn't really come to a liberal arts school to be in a class of 70 people. Anything really above like 25, in my opinion. ["Randy" 02-03]

The reason for students reporting gaining so much from proseminar are the intended ones—small classes greatly increase the chances and benefits of highly social learning, as well as close student-faculty relationships. Again, we see how bridging a gap between areas of student experience (academic work and social life) can pay off greatly for the students, who treat class time more as social time *mixed with* academic time, than purely academic time.

4. Study Abroad

For those students who take part in the study abroad program, the experience is formative to their college career, almost always a positive one, and almost always yields positive academic benefits overall, despite potential logistical difficulties in fitting the study abroad into the student's academic and social path, and readjustment issues when the student returns to campus.

Students had difficulty identifying what about their experience studying abroad was so influential, though many observed that the "culture shock" of living in a new country or area, while scary, is ultimately quite educational. Students who studied abroad also suggested that every student should have a similar experience, and that the cultural education gained from time abroad is central to the liberal arts education.

> S: You get the opportunity to like leave and try something new, and I mean it's just, it's definitely great. Like if every student could do it, like they should, you know. It's just something that, it's like a, it's a different taste of like how college life could be. ["Victoria" 2004-2005]

The same student also stated, along with others, that her study abroad experience was helpful because it gave her time to get away from campus: "I needed to get away from the campus for a while. Yeah, it was getting to me just being like closed up so much" ["Victoria" 04-05].

For most students who went abroad, the worst part of the experience was returning, both because at the end of their six months or a year they had developed strong friendships with other students studying abroad (often from other universities), and because of the clear culture shock of re-entering the college was unsettling:

> S: I was hard coming back to the States period. It was, I, there was more culture shock on the way back than going there. Because going there, I was prepared for it to be somewhat totally different. Sometimes when something was the same, I was surprised. Like when a mother and her son have the same conversation that I have with my mom, it's just like, it made me laugh. But then coming back, you expect everything to just be the same as when you left it. And you get back, and it's like, it's sort of jaded. Like all those things that we don't like to talk about – being American, eating too much beef, the servings that we eat like, and it's mostly food for me, I got nauseous. Like I came back and saw like hamburgers, and it made me nauseous because they're so much healthier there. And I mean just little stuff like that really freaked me out. And then right when I got back to Hamilton, I guess the first weekend I was here, I was like really driven to go find all my friends and hangout, and I did it, and we were all in one room, and then it was just sort of like overload. Like really too much; I couldn't catch up. Like people were acting different than I thought that they should, I guess, like than I remembered them. ["George" 03-04]

Other students echoed what "George" was saying—that living abroad gave them perspective on their lives in America, or in their words, let them see "a broader picture" of what America is like. In many ways, this new perspective seemed to many students to be the most valuable lesson from studying abroad, and beyond the stories and mementos, is the lasting lesson of the abroad experience. Hence, much of the "culture shock" of returning is a symptom of, actually, a very significant and beneficial change in these students' lives.

Students who did not study abroad had a few simple reasons for their choices—1) they were not interested in leaving campus, 2) they did not have the language

requirement to study in places they would like to go, and 3) they wanted to pursue so many activities or studies at Hamilton, that a semester abroad did not fit into their larger plan. While these points are in many cases valid, many students seem largely ignorant of the potential personal, cultural, and social benefits they could gain from a study abroad experience, and instead focus on more tangible motivations on-campus, such as friends, coursework, and extracurricular commitments. If study abroad students are fair judges of their experience, then there is overwhelming evidence to suggest that students gain greatly from studying abroad, though it is unclear which students benefit the most, or if there are students who would be better off staying on-campus for all four years.

V. Academic Skills

1. Writing

The writing program at Hamilton is extremely successful at improving student writing, and students repeatedly recognize and praise its methods and results. At the core of the writing program are the writing intensive classes—classes in which professors evaluate students primarily on their writing assignments, and provide the students with opportunities to revise and rework papers to improve them and their grade. Each student is required to take a set number of writing intensive classes per year throughout their academic career, and the classes are dispersed and scattered throughout the disciplines frequently enough to provide students with many opportunities to take them at every level of coursework, and in every field. Writing intensive classes can take many forms—some professors assign a small paper each week, and perhaps larger papers for midterm and final exams, while others might assign three or four large papers spaced evenly apart throughout the semester. Also, aside from writing intensive courses, students report that they still have a good amount of papers to write in non-intensive classes.

Also central to the writing program is the writing center, which provides students with peer-review feedback on their papers, and hour-long one-on-one sessions focused on individual student papers. Students' opinions of the center are generally positive, and several students commented that they hold conferences with tutors many times a

semester, sometimes more than once on a single paper. Other students report that they infrequently use the center (some only do so when required for a class), for a variety of reasons which include: the students don't believe their writing needs peer review; the students don't feel peer review is worth the time; the students think the advice tutors give can be inaccurate). Overall, some students take full advantage of the writing center facilities, while others only do so when required, but generally students feel that the center aids student writing.

The benefits of Hamilton's rigorous writing program can be seen early on—by sophomore year much of its lessons have sunk in:

> S: My papers here I didn't think were ever bad, like they were always like at least B work. But like over time, just I'll rewrite papers and things for professors, I feel like now I've learned how can just like, I can plan out my entire paper and like, it's just like, it's almost like they teach you how to make it into this like well working machine where like you present your idea, and then like everything's really clean cut, and like it works if you have all your supporting information and all your supporting quotes and all your supporting stuff. So like I feel like my papers have just become really well polished, especially if I ever, like especially if I invest a lot into them which I haven't had to write many papers this year, but usually I do. And so, and since like my professors are always willing to work with me on them, like if I have questions. I just feel like my writing has gotten a lot better. ["Murphy" 02-03]

Standards of writing seem to progress well as students move from year to year—freshmen are expected to already have a good grasp on areas of writing such as laying out a structure, presenting a thesis, and dealing with grammatical issues, and those who do not are quickly required to learn these basics, either through consultation with a professor, repeated revision, or meeting with a tutor. As students progress to their sophomore year, they are typically required to complete longer papers, or are more frequently assigned smaller papers. Some of these papers may be assigned in their sophomore seminars as we saw above. By junior and especially senior year, much of a course evaluation may be based on a single paper, which may be required to be relatively long (twenty to thirty pages, which at least in their junior year, will be longer than any paper most students have written).

The senior thesis is in many ways as much a completion of the students' concentration in a field as it is their continued work in writing—most theses range from thirty to a hundred pages, require (for a good grade) a clear structure and argument, precise grammar and punctuation, and an intellectual reach beyond what most students are used to. Nearly every student who mentioned their thesis, commented on how writing it (or planning it—some students were interviewed before beginning it) was an important, memorable, and highly educational experience, mainly because, as a self-designed project, it typically consisted of topics the students were very interested in. Combining this interest with strong institutional support (many majors have at least one course senior year devoted to students developing and/or writing their theses, and every student is assigned a thesis advisor who further oversees the research and writing process), and a good amount of time for research, brainstorming, and the eventually writing process (many students reported they began coming up with ideas for their thesis the summer before their senior year, and some used topics from papers from previous classes as the foundation to their project), the thesis is the pinnacle of most students' intellectual careers. Perhaps as important as the intellectual side of it, it may well be the most important piece of writing (in regards to how much students learn from writing it) that the student will ever complete.

As we have noted in the 02-03 year-end panel study report, students seem to develop their writing skills at different times—in other words, writing skills such as being able to create a good structure for the paper, lay out a clear argument, write with grammatical precision, etc… develop at different times in the students' academic careers, most likely due to the different types (in terms of length, scope, and evidence amongst others) of papers students are assigned depending on their class year. The following diagrams present student-reported reasons for writing improvement over their four years at Hamilton:[12]

[12] In some cases, students did not report that their writing improved, or did not give a specific reason for improvement, and so were not counted in this analysis. At other times, some students gave more than one reason for improvement, and the importance (and hence inclusion) of these responses was weighed by the author. Also note: the panel study questionnaire used by the interviewers directly asked about whether professor feedback improved student writing, which may be a reason for a large amount of positive responses in that category. Credit goes to Kimberly C. Torres '97 for the design of this analysis from her work on the 02-03 progress report, which the author of this report has altered slightly to accommodate for new issues based on the 04-05 data, and expanded into the 03-04 and 04-05 data set.

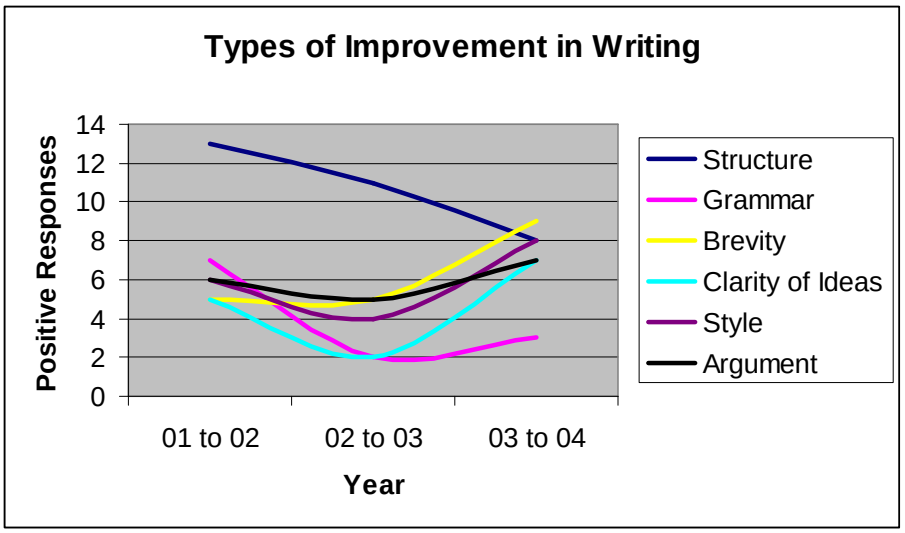

Diagram 7.

Diagram 7 displays what types of writing skills students reported improving, and when. While we had relatively few responses to this issue (42, 29, and 42 responses from the 01-02, 02-03, and 03-04 interview years, respectively[13]), we can notice a few trends. First, students report a high amount of improvement (and from their responses, a lot of work) in the structure of their writing. Structure becomes less of an issue as students progress, and other writing skills such as brevity, clarity, and strengthening their argument seem to become more important.

[13] The 04-05 panel study did not specifically ask about student writing, so we have no data for this category. However, judging from what information we do have, senior year improvement in writing does not differ from junior year writing substantially except for the volume category of the sources of writing improvement, in which many students, commenting about their thesis, reported that the volume of this project improved their writing, especially their structural skills.

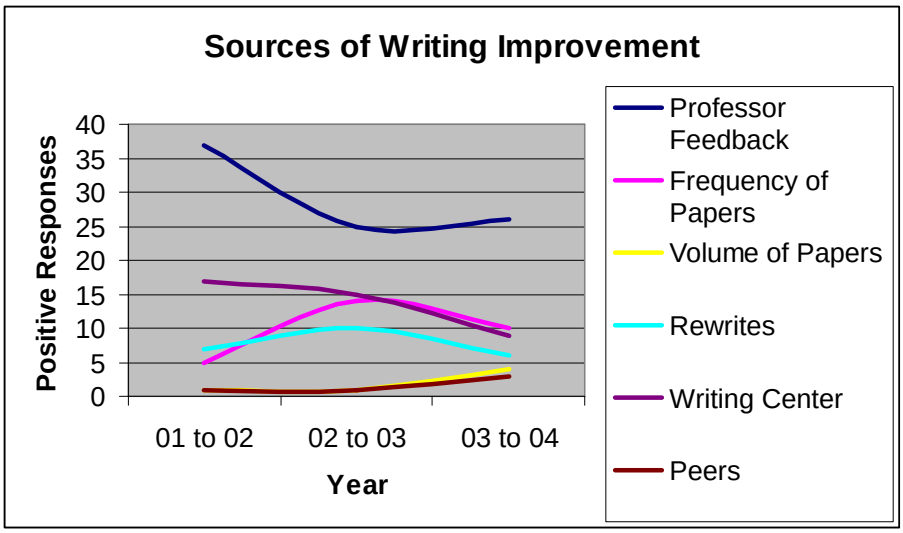

Diagram 8.

Diagram 8 illustrates the sources of improvement in writing over the first three years at Hamilton. Clearly, in every year, professor feedback is extremely significant, especially during the freshmen year when students are learning how to craft papers to meet the standards of the college and their professors. Meanwhile, the writing center decreasingly becomes a source of writing improvement, likely because 1) professors often require students in their 100-level classes to attend the writing center (and hence, often require students who would otherwise not go to the writing center to visit it), 2) many students view the writing center as a "grammar" or "spell checker," and as they develop more confidence in writing, feel they do not need to go there as much.

Some of the categories in the diagram overlap, such as rewrites and professor feedback (usually when a student rewrites a paper, he or she does it with professors' comments in mind), and rewrites and the writing center. Therefore, collapsing the categories into "revision" and "amount of writing" as sources of writing improvement might help demonstrate their importance.

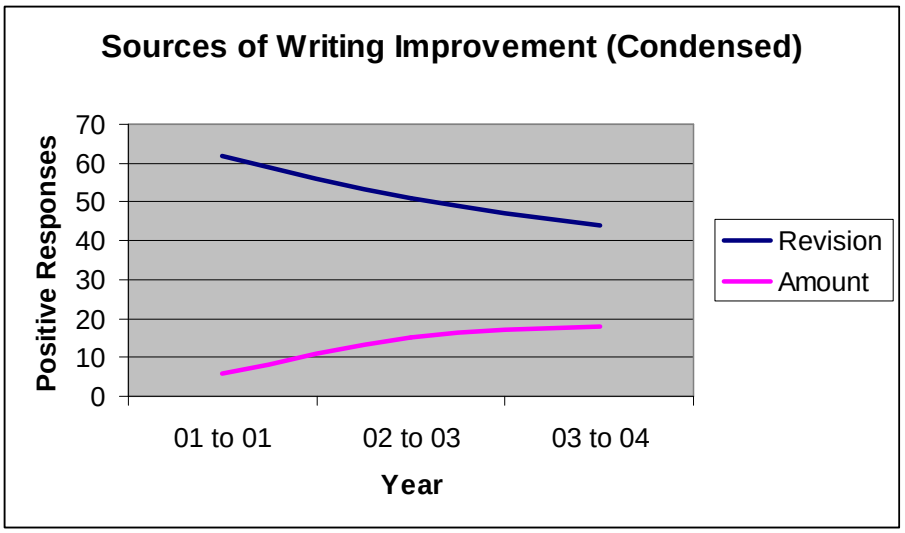

Diagram 9.

Diagram 9 shows the collapsed categories of professor feedback, rewrites, writing center, and peer review into the "revision" category, and frequency of paper and volume of paper into "amount." This demonstrates the general (but decreasing) importance of revision in the student's writing career, and the low (but increasing) importance of the amount of papers in developing student writing.

Many students stated that their writing improved significantly their freshman year, but their comments suggest that the change in writing is not simply improvement, but *adjustment*—students used to the five-paragraph structure of a paper were introduced to new ways to argue their point, new styles of presenting material, and new methods of outlining and structuring their papers. Many students realized that much of their freshmen year writing challenges centered around tailoring their paper to their specific professors and fields. Many departments, and often professors within specific departments, widely differ in their expectations of style, volume, structure, voice, organization of argument, and sometimes even smaller issues such as punctuation, forcing students to quickly learn that what one professor may want from a paper may be drastically different that what another wants.[14]

[14] Some students who took team-taught courses even commented that, within one course, their two professors' expectations of student writing were quite different, leading to difficulties on the part of the student to craft a paper that suited both.

Of all the student comments about writing, one of the most frequently mentioned topics was the students' "confidence" in writing, which seems to be related to the adjustment issue as much as it does the students' increasing writing abilities. Many students in their junior and senior interviews commented that, whereas at one time (in high school or freshmen year) a five page paper was daunting and could take many hours, now it was quite straightforward and, by most accounts, relatively easy and quick. Students cited their confidence in writing, coming from a good sense of what was expected of them, and the means to meet those expectations (both in terms of the students' writing skill, and the resources available to improve a specific piece of writing, such as the writing center, professor feedback, and peer review). Confidence also seemed to be a factor of the student's comfort and familiarity with a certain style of writing:

> S: I feel that after three years here, like my scientific writing is much better than like, I'm much more confident, I don't know if it's just like the classes I've taken; but I'm much more comfortable writing a scientific paper than like an English essay.
> I: Now, when you say scientific writing, do you mean lab reports or the style of writing, maybe a combination of both?
> S: A combination of both because like a lot of the time scientific papers are just glorified lab reports. You have your introduction, your methods, your result, discussion, conclusion. ["Jade" 03-04]

Student confidence with academic material and skills is a recurring issue in the panel study, and we will return to it again in our discussion of oral communications, as well as in the conclusion of the report.

Another issue that students frequently brought up in discussions of writing was how a specific professor or class affected student's writing, often during freshmen year.

> S: Well, I think even through my first year when I had nothing to do the Writing Center, I still think I improved a lot throughout the semester just through criticisms of my professors I think. I had a great professor first semester, [professor's name omitted], who was so, I mean you can't get away with anything, you know, writing those papers. And I just never really had a professor who challenged, you know, my ideas or my writing like that before.
> I: So what do you think made him good?
> S: He was, he was the type of professor that everyone had to read. Like I've had classes here that if you did the reading or not, sometimes it

> just doesn't really matter. But him, you have to read. You have to think about it, and you have to talk. And I just, I thought the way he ran his class, like it was hard, but it was good. [The class] I took with him… I still think that was the best class I've ever taken. ["Jane" 01-02]

"Jenny," commenting about the same professor, had similar praise about how this person helped her writing:

> S: Well, I had, you know, I had [professor's name omitted], and I think he definitely helped like, you know, improve because he's really good about like giving comments and stuff. Like he would mark up our papers all over, and also include like a typewritten page on why he felt was good as far as, like you know, he'd write up the actual papers with the grammar stuff, but then like he'd like type out a page's worth of like, you know, his feedback on the comment side of the paper and stuff. And that like never happened in high school. It was like, you know, my grammar would be corrected and they're like good idea and whatever, so you know.
> I: That's above and beyond. I've never heard that.
> S: Yeah, that was definitely helpful. ["Jenny" 02-03]

There were a handful of professors who seemed to have a major impact on student writing freshman year, and while in almost every case the student commented that they struggled to meet the professor's standards, ultimately they were rewarded by being well-prepared for the many kinds of writing they would face in the following years.

2. Oral Communications

Students overwhelmingly report that their public speaking improves over the course of their Hamilton career,[15] 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.

A. Students who benefit.

[15] 83% say their speaking improved (typically by either giving presentations or talks, interviewing, or leading class discussions), while 17% say their public speaking has not improved or has become worse.

By almost every student account, the one or two classes that they had that required presentations[16] 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" 04-05]

Repeatedly, students commented on how their "public speaking has improved just from pure exposure to it" ["Jade" 04-05], and that their improvement was not necessarily intentional, nor were they even always aware of it.

> 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" 04-05]

Students' confidence in their speaking skills, through experience and familiarity, grows over time, and seems to be a large part of how students progress up the learning curve of oral communications. Similar to the development of writing skills, speaking skills

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

initially benefit best from exposure and review, which provides the student with not only a sense of what to expect, but also how to improve on their performance.

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" 04-05]

> 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" 04-05]

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… 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… 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" 04-05]

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. ["Li Wei" 04-05]

> 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" 04-05]

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 immediately and visibly 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, 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 under-preparing 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.

B. Students who don'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 were 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" 04-05]

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" 04-05]

> 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" 04-05]

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.

C. 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 way that clearly benefits all students, 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.Quantitative Learning

The most interesting and prevalent trend in students' comments about quantitative skills is that many students do not think of it as a skill in the same way they do writing and oral communication skills. According to students, while they apply their writing and speaking skills frequently throughout their time at Hamilton (in and out of class) and say they will do so frequently after graduating, the applications of quantitative skills are much more limited according to students. While most students accepted that some quantitative skills, such as basic math and statistical analysis skills, will be of great practical use in and beyond college, they feel the majority of quantitative learning in liberal arts finds application only in the classroom. While some students conceded that everyone should devote at least some of their coursework to the quantitative fields, few students outside of these fields do so. As found in the 04-05 project report, "students who are not majoring in science are not taking science courses"[17]—students concentrating in the humanities and social sciences are increasingly separating themselves from "hard and lab sciences, whereas the humanities and social sciences are increasingly attracting more non-majors to their classes. The decreasing amount of non-majors in the sciences is greatest in lab science courses, but the trend is also significant in other science and math courses.

Some students even responded to our question about their quantitative skills by wondering what "quantitative skills" were in the first place, and their general ignorance of this category of skills indicates their rejection of quantitative academics as a general skill.

While many students respond to our questions about quantitative learning by saying that quantitative coursework "isn't for them," the students who are focusing their academic attention in math and science, are increasingly taking more and more classes in quantitative academics. This divide is distressing—it indicates that math and the sciences are increasingly becoming more and more isolated since the removal of distribution requirements. However, there is no evidence that the previous requirement of quantitative

[17] 2004-2005 project report, p 148.

coursework by students improved their Hamilton experience, or that they necessarily learned much about quantitative fields (as there were numerous "soft" science and math courses which non-majors would take to avoid the "hard work" of the "real" math and science courses.

VI. Student Social Life

1. Student idealizations of college social life

As with academics, upon entering Hamilton students have a very specific notion of what social life at a liberal arts college is and should be like. The majority of these preconceptions (that students mentioned) focused on parties, alcohol, and day-to-day social issues students would face freshman year (such as having to live in co-ed dorms, and share bathrooms with members of the opposite sex). Students also frequently mentioned how they expected college to be less cliquey than high school, and to be a more mature social environment. Connected to this, students expected Hamilton to be an accepting place where people of different cultures, backgrounds, and beliefs would feel welcome and accepted. Students differentiated this kind of community of acceptance from the lack of community at big city schools, and suggested that the small size of Hamilton is the main reason they expected it to have a close-knit community.

By and large, Hamilton's social life met these expectations for the majority of students, though many students also pointed out significant exceptions. While most students agreed that Hamilton society is more mature than their high school, the cliques that many students sought to escape still existed, though they seemed less important. Many students not in societies noted that fraternities and sororities are, effectively, institutionalized and formal cliques, and so in some sense, Hamilton is more socially elitist than high school. Of all the things students were surprised to find out about Hamilton's social life, the most common was how oriented around fraternities it was. Much of this has to do with the nature of private societies—unlike any other organization, their main purpose is social activity (though they take part in numerous

activities on campus), and through their events (primarily parties), they are the most visible social force on campus.

Further, private societies have a far greater membership that is regularly reported, and so new students, expecting to enter a school with around 30% Greek membership, find that the school is actually around half Greek. The reasons for the discrepancy between the reported membership and actual membership are simple:[18] while societies are required to report their full member list to the administration, the list they send is typically not complete. The reasons for this are numerous. First, societies are required to meet a GPA requirement, or face administrative action, and so by not reporting the lowest GPA students as members, avoid penalty. Second, and more recently, some societies face housing limitations, and too many members of a given society are prohibited from living in the same building (to prevent the dorm from becoming a defacto fraternity or sorority house). Hence, many private societies find ways of working around administrative restrictions, with a major consequence being that incoming students have an extremely skewed view of how many students are Greek and how many are independent.[19]

Aside from private societies, students still noted social exclusivity, though also suggested that social groups are quite porous and flexible, and that the student community is significantly more mature than the popularity-focused student society of high school. Some students even seemed to suggest that the cliques at Hamilton were positive, because they tended to be oriented around activities (sports, arts, music), as opposed to the exclusionary cliques of high school.

> S: I think that's been like my first impression that there's like a lot of different groups here.
> I: A lot of different groups in terms of?
> S: Terms of like athletes and the artistic types, and from there, like kind of like that type of thing.
> I: Different types of, how you think they are segregated to different types of, I don't know, commonalities?

[18] The author and another consultant to the project, Shauna Sweet, learned of this through a private meeting about society membership that we held in 2004 with a handful of society members. This finding—that many society members are not officially recorded as members—is of great significance to the project, as, if unnoticed, would have greatly skewed survey data when compared with official society membership data.
[19] Our survey suggested that in fact around half of Hamilton students are greek-affiliated.

> S: Yeah, yeah. I mean like, like when I got to visit like Vassar, it seemed like the majority of people there were like more the artistic type, and it's not like that here. There's not like one distinct type of student, I don't think, that goes here. I think it's a mix.

Throughout the interviews, interestingly, students seemed to want their Hamilton experience to be different, and much better, than their high school experience. This kind of distancing, especially in the first year, seems like a key social component of adjusting to the college environment—students frequently talk about their high school, but in ways that strongly suggest they are beyond (and better than) it. Encouragingly, students overwhelmingly state that their Hamilton experience is better than that of high school,[20] and specifically regarding their social life, they point to the lack of emphasis on popularity and group membership, as well as the overall higher maturity of Hamilton students.

Aside from specifically social differences, a great deal of students responded to the question, "how do you find Hamilton to be different from high school?" by answering that, whereas in high school much of their time was consumed by class and homework, Hamilton offers a huge amount of free time. Students all responded extremely positively to this new freedom, and interestingly, most seemed to suggest that this free time is not, in fact, "free," as they quickly fill it up with extracurricular activities, increased academic studies, and social activities.

> I: Okay. So in general, how do you find Hamilton to be different from high school?
>
> S: Oh gosh.
>
> I: General idea.
>
> S: Well, let's see. I get to have like millions and millions more hours of free time. It's, I don't know, some parts of like the structure of high school are good, but in general I think it's a little too structured. I like that even my earliest class, which was 8:30 which is pretty early for here, it's still an hour later than my earliest class in high school. So that's nice. It's nice to be able to walk to the place where you go to school, like walk to

[20] This statement comes from first year students, who were asked how Hamilton is different than their high school, and how they would describe Hamilton to high school friends.

> your different classes, and to have time like free time, chunks of time during the day where you can eat lunch for more than 20 minutes, and where you can like, I don't know, hang out or like go to the gym in between classes or just like do stuff like that. Doing everything for yourself instead of like for someone else because I mean like it'll change really soon, and it probably like, and you're thinking kind of like what, but I mean right now because like I'm a freshman and I'm already in college, and like I'm not really thinking about the future, it's kind of like nice because there's no real big goal ahead of me. Whereas, all throughout high school it was like well, like if I go out now instead of doing this bit of homework now and leave it until later, maybe I won't do it and then maybe I'll get a bad grade on the test and then maybe I won't get into college. And now it's just kind of like yeah, I worked really hard, you know, I'll work kind of here, but I'll give myself a break. ["Sasha" 01-02].

Even students who did not state that they filled this free time with activities stated that their newfound freedom quickly gave them the chance to develop more time management skills. Hence, almost regardless of the specific coursework of the student, almost all students are extremely busy with something on campus—student time fills, with a variety of formal and informal activities, very quickly upon entering Hamilton, and continues that way throughout the students' college career. While students comment excitedly about all their "free time," they in fact, have little actual time in a given day when they have no activities or work.

2. Network-building

As stated in past reports, students spend a good deal of their first year seeking out and developing friendships, and creating a solid social base of friends of many different kinds. There are numerous mechanisms for friendship-making, and the most significant ones are those which occur earliest in the student's life at college. Programs such as Adirondack Adventure place students in intense situations (the outdoors) and in small groups to encourage and foster socializing, and many first-years cited this experience as extremely helpful in meeting new people and developing long-lasting friendships. Other programs, like orientation, attempt to familiarize students with the campus, its facilities,

student social life, academic expectations, and college rules, an experience many students find overwhelming and confusing, as they simultaneously are trying to meet new people, remember names, and compose themselves carefully.

The other main way students start to meet each other is simple proximity—the first, and often the closest friends students make are from their freshman-year dorms. With many students, the stress of the first-year, and especially first year living arrangements, is a bonding point for roommates and dormmates. Some students regularly spoke of "the North [dorm] crew," or "root [dorm] crew," describing groups of friends who bonded their first year through shared living arrangements.

3. The "Work hard, play hard" lifestyle

Many students live intense lives, and seem to thrive off this intensity. Students frequently use the common phrase "work hard, play hard" to describe their time at Hamilton, trying to suggest that they make up for their "play" (which frequently, almost definitively for some students, involves alcohol) by ensuring they work on and do well in their class work. "Work hard, play hard" seems, for many students, to be a justification for pushing their "play" to the edge—staying up later, drinking more, going to more parties, having more romantic partners, and then waking up the following day and working on homework, starting and finishing a book, or cramming for an exam.

It is difficult to tell, simply because of verification issues that arise from self-reporting, whether these students learn particularly better or worse, and do better or worse at college overall, than students who live more moderate lives. One thing we can tell is that many students are perpetually afraid of "burning out"—of reaching a point in which they can no longer continue with the intensity of lifestyle they have pursued. "burning out" can occur at either end of the spectrum—students can burn out from overworking in academics, as much as they can from drinking too much or too

frequently, or abusing drugs. Other students complain of being overcommitted outside of class—of having too many responsibilities in extracurriculars or campus jobs.

Part of the problem of "burning out" is temporal—there simply aren't enough hours in the day for the student to do everything s/he wants to. The other part is purely socio-psychological—students have developed a kind of culture of over commitment, where students talk to each other about how much they have to do as a kind of status symbol. This kind of brinksmanship, where the student regularly brings themselves to the edge through overwork or excessive play, is highly regarded by other students (in many circles). This culture of over commitment has not been examined sufficiently in literature on student life, and yet for many students, and many student cultures, it is definitive. Future surveys and interviews should cover this issue, as current data is, unfortunately, insufficient.

Alcohol plays a central role for many students' social life, and many students in our study admitted to being "big drinkers." However, their type of heavy drinking differs significantly from that of typical alcoholism—student drinking is inherently social, and takes place in a network of social reinforcements and justifications. Solitary drinking (a major sign of alcoholism) is rare: "People definitely do drink here, but it's just I don't see too much of a point just to like getting drunk and then sitting in a room. I could do that sober. When I get drunk, I like to do things." ["Jack" 01-02]. One student even commented that large parties could actually help stop alcoholism: "They should have more big parties. I think that in your room, closed door, alcoholism is a problem because we don't sponsor enough big parties" [Reanna 01-02] and some other students suggested the same: that large parties, 1) because they are so public and social to begin with, 2) because alcohol is typically more difficult to get than smaller parties (larger parties often have long lines and alcohol supply problems), and 3) because large parties are typically regulated better than smaller ones (campus safety is ever-present, and more student event staff are required) that these events could actually reduce alcoholic behavior and overdrinking. Whether this is the case or not, it is a fascinating reversal of traditional (and perhaps administrative) logic towards these events. Drinking at Hamilton is, instead, quite active, public, and well-accepted (even encouraged), but to focus on the alcohol

only is to miss a large part of the picture.

Many students stated simply that Hamilton's social life is centered around drinking, and judging from the social habits of many students, in a way it is. The parties that compose the focal point of many students' social lives, are highly ritualistic, and intensely social occasions, and alcohol plays the role of the common denominator for everyone. Drinking games and competitions can form the center of the life of a party, but the focus is not simply on the alcohol, but on the people and the ritual in which it is consumed. The ritual—whether it be a drinking game, the mixing of drinks, moving back and forth from the bar to the table, moving through the crowded room and greeting people—is the life of the party, which is stimulated, sometimes to the point of excess, by alcohol. Hence, many students who are concerned concerns with alcohol on campus, are concerned with the "alcohol culture," or, the formula of rituals that students so enjoy, which can *only* take place in the presence of alcohol.

Regardless of the specific policy the administration decides upon regarding alcohol on campus, it must recognize two things: 1) That the major social problems associated with alcohol are restricted to a slim portion of the student body, almost always male, and that the majority of students do not take part in the vandalism that are the most visible problem associated with alcohol. 2) That efforts to restrict consumption of alcohol must recognize the setting in which the alcohol is consumed, as the specific social setting will specifically and regularly determine what kind of alcohol is consumed, and how much.

4. People come first—the social essence of extracurriculars

What seems central to the creation, success, and student-benefit of campus organizations are the *people*. The activity itself does matter, 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.

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" 04-05]

"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" 04-05]

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 events 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" 04-05]

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" 04-05]

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" 04-05]

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.

A. 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" 04-05]

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" 04-05]

"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" 04-05]

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" 04-05]

"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.

Extracurricular activities at Hamilton represent the potential for bridging the gaps between various activities, interests, social groups, and studies at Hamilton. Students participate in structured activities that frequently develop beneficial skills, while at the same time doing so in a highly social setting (which in turn enhances the quality of the learning, and generally makes the experience more fun). As students frequently commented, both in this and other studies[21], that a significant amount (sometimes the majority) of their education occurs outside the classroom, and even outside of academic learning, and since extracurriculars are almost always student run and designed, the faculty and administration could learn a great deal by examining, and perhaps copying some aspects of extracurriculars when designing the curriculum. Students have themselves created structured, social, and meaningful systems of learning outside of the curriculum, and students regularly comment that their most memorable experiences, and most positive learning, came out of these activities. There is no obvious reason why students could not say the same about classes and curricular activities, if these were designed so as to further increase social learning, and to transcend the divisions of student life.

[21] Specifically, Richard Light's book *Making the Most of College.*

VII. Conclusion

1) Making liberal arts matter beyond college: A focus on skills

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.[22]

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,[23] is by student accounts the primary way students' writing improves. While numerous arts, humanities, history, and social sciences classes are writing intensive, far

[22] 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.

[23] 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

fewer mathematics and sciences classes are (relative to the number of classes available in 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, many students never face a presentation requirement and hence never have the opportunity to develop these skills.

3) Quantitative Skills:

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," 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 the 2003-2004 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 affects enrolment in certain academic fields, and may also have a direct affect 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." Lastly, related to the above reasons, many students do not even believe that “quantitative skills” are skills at all, but are content, and that as content, learning them is a matter of academic taste and not intellectual well-roundedness.

4) Other Skills:

There are other academic skills that the curriculum could emphasize (and which could potentially be of great benefit) such as reading, critical reasoning, and foreign language[24] skills, and even moral reasoning and judgement skills.[25] Some students

[24] There is no formal reading requirement for students at Hamilton, and no structured facility or program to specifically improve reading skills, aside from facilities available to students for whom English is a second language. Critical reasoning skills are generally assumed to be developed throughout the curriculum, and from student responses, this is the case. Hamilton does not have a foreign language or foreign studies requirement, though there are numerous facilities and departments available to help students who are interested in foreign language and studies.

[25] Hamilton used to require students to take at least one course that qualified as examining moral issues.

commented that they would like more formal explanation of some areas of learning that transcend academic content.

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 attempt 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 troublesome discrepancies between quantitative skills among students in different academic 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 go through 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 the right 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 content and learning. 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 formal institutional means beyond the efforts of individual professors and departments to encourage these.[26]

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.

[26] The exception to this is the language lab, which assists students' foreign language studies.

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. Further, as so many course decisions are already made for students, via the inherent restrictions of the course selection process, the notion of advising is moot.

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, academic life, and social life, and encourage such integration when prompted by students. The current division between academic, extracurricular, and social life is unnecessary and in many cases detrimental to all three. This should be attempted in a non-institutionalized way, but in a way such that the structure of all three encourages and promotes it naturally.