

Hamilton College  
Strategic Planning: Preliminary Report. February 2008  
**Subcommittee on Ethics and Academic Freedom**

The Subcommittee on Ethics and Academic Freedom is exploring two general areas: (a) What can the College do in the future to foster an ethical environment on campus? (b) What can the College do to foster academic freedom?

In our initial discussions, we have charted out four broad areas for further study:

1. **Bedrock Ethical Values:** Beyond the intellectual ideals that ground the College as an educational institution, there are other principles that ground us as an ethical community. In general, we believe that it is better to create, nurture, and support a community in which members act according to shared values than to try to regulate behavior through rules imposed from above. Thus, for instance, a hate-speech code may be, in the long run, less effective and desirable than a community in which people act with respect for difference—and in which the community support for racial, religious, political, ethnic, sexual, and intellectual diversity is so strong that particular instances of intolerance do not have a serious psychological impact on those toward whom they are directed and the community at large. Several terms have been suggested for the bedrock values that we believe should guide the College's policies on ethics and academic freedom: respect, equitable treatment, tolerance, inclusiveness, creativity, fairness, honesty (in taking exams, writing papers, giving speeches and in personal interaction), open communication, an appreciation of the value of spirited intellectual discourse, and transparency. Which of these terms best suit our institution? What would they mean in practice? How can they best be fostered?

2. **Confidentiality/transparency/communication:** No institution can work without a certain measure of confidentiality, both within the community and with respect to outside institutions. Personnel decisions are especially delicate in this regard. Nonetheless, at least some members of the community believe that Hamilton sometimes imposes confidentiality where it is not necessary. This perceived lack of transparency sometimes results in unnecessary speculation and negative assumptions, and may possibly have an impact on academic freedom and the ethical conduct of the work of the College. This is an area that the College needs to think about seriously.

3. **Adjudication and Appeals Procedures:** We have been looking at the whole range of adjudication and appeals procedures as they apply to all constituencies. Ideally (a) all constituents of the College should feel they have a mechanism for appeal should there be a dispute or grievance where they feel they have been wronged and (b) that the mechanism(s) in place be well understood, deemed fair, and be as predictable as possible. We have yet to schedule open meetings on this subject, but as far as we can tell, some of the procedures seem to be doing very well (e.g., Judicial Board and Honor Court), while others are seriously in need of attention (the Staff Grievance Advisory Committee, although described in the Staff Handbook, does not exist).

4. **Institutional Learning:** Over the past five years, with challenging situations that have touched the entire Hamilton community—including the Tobin plagiarism case, the Rosenberg-Churchill affair, and the Alexander Hamilton Center—Hamilton has found itself in uncomfortable situations, both on-campus and off-campus. We believe that there is little good to be gained by revisiting old situations in order to assess blame. At the same time, we are looking into ways in which (a) we can learn from our past mistakes so that we do not repeat them in the future (b) we can heal some of wounds that, while rarely discussed explicitly, continue to interfere with effective operation of the College.

Over the next month or two, we will not only hold open meetings but will also ask for email suggestions from the larger community as we try to determine our next steps—whether that involves adding new issues or refining those that we have already outlined.

**Ethics and Academic Freedom Subcommittee Members**

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