Hamilton College Strategic Planning Subcommittee Report, Summer 2008
Shared Governance and Administration

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Background

The College's Strategic Plan of June, 2002 stated as its aspiration the development of "an even better educational program for [its] increasingly talented and diverse students," and identified two core strategies towards that end. The first recognized the importance of "effective communication in all forms," and set a range of curricular, programmatic, and resource goals to support the development of communication skills. The second centered around major changes to the curriculum and the advising system in the interest of encouraging students to "take responsibility for their academic and personal development."

As regards governance, objectives that support the core strategies included "sustaining a work environment that is supportive of all employees," "increase[ing] its support for students, faculty, and all other employees, particularly with respect to diversity," "strengthen[ing] communication between students and administration," "expand[ing] opportunities for student involvement in decision-making," and "digitizing Hamilton resources" by replacing print materials with web-accessible formats.

Significant progress has been made on most of these fronts. Still, changes in the College have, not unexpectedly, brought with them expanded interpretations of these objectives, and new issues of their own that have come to this committee's attention over the past months. With the combined benefits of hindsight and a wealth of insights from current members of the Board of Trustees, the administration, the faculty, the staff, and the student body, we set out to re-evaluate and, as necessary, re-interpret all of these issues as they might apply to the College's governance and administrative structures in the next 5-7 years.

Current and Developing Issues

All of the subcommittees have been asked to consider, among other things, what differentiates Hamilton College from its peer institutions. This is a complex question that is certain to raise different issues for each subcommittee. In the context of governance and administration, one differentiating feature stands out. Hamilton is distinguished by the deep investment in the institution displayed by all of its constituencies.

Examples of this investment are numerous and obvious across the campus. Trustees, many of whom are alumni, regularly donate their time and energy to Board service, and are among the College's most devoted supporters. The alumni body as a whole is as deeply devoted to and supportive of the College as any we are familiar with. The administration works endlessly to direct, support, and improve the quality of everything at the College. The faculty readily and actively embraces its role as the leader of the College's academic mission. The staff works tirelessly to enable the wide variety of day-to-day operations of the College. Furthermore, there is a universal sense across all of these constituencies that our students come first, as well as a universal recognition that all of these constituencies must contribute and cooperate if the College is to reach its full potential. Indeed, it is clear from the quality of our own interactions and

deliberations that every member of this subcommittee feels some sense of ownership of the College, and has a deep commitment to continuing the College's tradition of excellence.

It is perhaps because of this sense of ownership that these deeply committed and vested constituencies – people – feel strongly that the College can be a better place in terms of its governance and administration. The phrase "silos of governance" has come up repeatedly as an indication that governance of individual constituencies occurs in relative isolation. Junior faculty have expressed concerns about having a voice at faculty meetings, and lacking a direct connection to the administration. Administrators report that they are unclear as to their responsibilities, particularly as regards conflict resolution. Many students feel the need for formal channels of communication that would allow them to voice concerns and to raise issues to the faculty as a whole. Staff members feel that they "don't even have a silo," lacking any appropriate and adhered to means for expressing and resolving their grievances to the administration. Members of the alumni body want the College to act more proactively in keeping them informed of issues of governance as they relate to the "real world."

Recommendations

As we undertook this mission, we were encouraged by Dean Urgo to think imaginatively and broadly, without being encumbered by the issues of implementation. We have taken this "encouragement" to heart and have formulated a series of recommendations aimed at redressing many of the aforementioned concerns. Collectively, these recommendations are intended to internalize the notion of diversity prevalent in the June, 2002 Strategic Plan. The College should direct its energies towards making our governance processes and structures as inclusive, representative, and participatory across the College's constituencies as are our admissions programs, our hiring practices, our curriculum, and our programming initiatives. In short, we encourage the institution to take a next step towards "operationalizing diversity."

Our specific recommendations fall into three categories describing (1) ways to enhance the transparency of the College's governance and administrative processes, and to facilitate access to all information related to these processes, (2) ways to foster communication between the College's many constituencies, (3) new opportunities for joint governance that reflect our deeply vested and increasingly diverse campus, and (4) reformed procedures to address.

(1) Transparency and Accessibility

Separate "handbooks" exist for various constituencies, but they are in many cases incomplete, outdated, inconsistent with practice, not readily accessible, and/or difficult to navigate. All members of the College community need to be aware of, and have ready and easy access to, the governance and administrative structures and processes that relate to them. Toward those ends, **we recommend that the College take the necessary steps to make all governance procedures and structures clear, and to make all materials describing the structures and processes appropriately accessible from the College's web site**. Necessary steps may include the following:

- The College form committees to review (or assign existing committees the task of reviewing) all handbooks to insure accuracy and agreement with practice
- The College engage its lawyers to review all handbooks to guarantee legality and to ensure consistency across handbooks
- The College expand its web site to provide all members of the community with easily-navigated online access to all governance and administrative procedures, mechanisms, and contact points

(2) Communication among Constituencies

It comes as no surprise that many of the misunderstandings between various constituencies are the result of lacks in communication between the constituencies. Productive steps have already been taken to build bridges of communication between constituencies. The President regularly meets with students during "open hours," faculty members host dinners for trustees, and the administration hosts staff recognition lunches. Still, there are connections that need to be made, both on and off-campus, formal and informal. Furthermore, how to make such connections should be clear to all parties. Towards that end, **we recommend that the College continue to investigate and implement means by which different constituencies can readily, regularly, and confidentially communicate with one another**. Such means may include the following:

- Build on the aforementioned successful models to establish new communication bridges between the staff and administration, between students and faculty, between the administration and the trustees
- Establish an "ombudsman" system (or some similar structure) to facilitate grievance reporting and processing, so that staff concerns can be addressed by administrators when appropriate; also, support efforts to promote, publicize, and make use of the Ethics Point system
- Further develop the College web site to serve as a means for communicating with the alumni body about campus governance issues
- Review all ways in which College officials (from the Administration, Dean of Students, Campus Safety, etc.) interact with our local/regional communities; coordinate and formalize them to the extents possible to help all parties to act in proactive ways to promote common goals, and to foster the town/gown relationship

(3) Options for Joint/Shared Governance

There are already functioning (and, in some cases, fruitful and productive) examples of shared governance on campus. For example, students, administrators, and faculty work together on the Honor Court and the Judicial Board. Many Trustee committees include representatives from the administration, faculty, and/or student body. Departmental search committees interact directly with the administration, and often include student representatives. There are, though, many examples where a constituency's participation in governance is more representational than truly participatory, and other examples where interested and involved constituencies are left out of the governance processes altogether. **We recommend that the College undertake a full review of how its existing committee structures can be augmented and supplemented to produce decision-making bodies that are collaborative and fully participatory for all vested constituencies.** Examples of such collaborations might include the following:

- Student participation in existing faculty committees
- Trustee, administration, faculty, and student collaboration on academic issues as they relate to the overall College mission
- Trustee, administration, faculty, staff, and student collaboration on matters of "campus climate" and other issues of immediate and/or common concern

Conclusion

Even without worrying about the details of how these recommendations might be implemented, no recommendation for change comes completely free of charge. Each of the above would require not only the acceptance of all of the constituencies involved, but also that resources be devoted to them. The good news is that the required resources are resources the College already has at its disposal – eager and committed constituents, and a talented staff of technologists.

Similarly, all of the above recommendations come with trade-offs. In particular, matters of governance regularly involve issues of confidentiality. Shared governance implies shared

responsibility for adhering to agreed-upon (and legally imposed) standards for confidentiality. There are, though, already examples on campus of shared governance and administration involving issues of confidentiality where such issues have been addressed successfully.

This subcommittee, like all others, was provided with a list of issues of College-wide concern to consider as appropriate. This list includes demographics, globalization, local/regional development, the nature of the liberal arts education, and technology. The last three of these relate more or less directly to our recommendations above. We should continue to reach out to our local and regional communities in creative and participatory ways. We should continue to expand our web-based technologies to support open and clear communication. Finally, we should – and can - empower all of the College's constituencies, by means of transparent and readily accessible policies and procedures, communication bridges, and ample opportunities for shared governance, to participate fully in the future governance and administration of the College that we all feel so vested in.