

Report to
Faculty, Administration, Trustees, Students
of

Hamilton College
Clinton, New York

Prepared following review of the institution's
Periodic Review Report

First Reviewer:
Michael Curry
Vice President and Academic Dean
Goucher College

Second Reviewer:
Constance Cain Hungerford
Provost
Swarthmore College

August 1, 2006

Introduction

Hamilton College is a first-rate institution of higher education in the liberal arts tradition. It is clearly, and rightfully, proud of its long history of excellence. It is also an institution that is willing to look at itself critically and make adjustments to the way it operates in order to better provide its students, as is stated in the executive summary, "with an excellent environment worthy of their talents and abilities."

The Periodic Review Report prepared and submitted by Hamilton College is a model of clarity and focus. It is thoughtful, concise and well organized. The readers especially appreciate the candor with which the college let its imperfections show. All of the accompanying materials helped the readers form a clear picture of the institution, and its goals and accomplishments.

In all of the materials provided it is clear that there is a strong connection between the accreditation process, the college's strategic planning processes, budgeting, campaign planning, institutional assessment, and constituent governance.

Accomplishments in the last 5 years

The college has navigated several major changes in the five years since its Re-accreditation Review. There have been several significant changes in its administration. The college has welcomed a new president, Joan Hinde Stewart, and will introduce a new Vice President for Academic Affairs this coming year. Other key personnel changes include a new Dean of Admission, and a new Director of Financial Aid.

The college has implemented a new and distinctive curriculum that emphasizes writing and oral communication skills as important tools for liberal learning. To support its emphasis on communication, the college has beefed up its teaching of oral presentation skills by creating the Oral Communication Center and the Multimedia Presentation Center, two new centers that complement the Nesbitt-Johnson Writing Center, the Quantitative Literacy Center, the Peer Tutoring Program, and the Language Learning Center.

The new curriculum has replaced the traditional prescribed menu of required distribution courses with recommended first-year pro-seminars, and required team-taught sophomore seminars, which are the centerpiece of the new general education curriculum. With the aid of a Mellon Foundation grant, Hamilton has been engaged in an in-depth assessment of this new curriculum.

In addition to implementing the new general education experience, the college has also expanded its disciplinary offerings. Two new majors have been created in Communications and Environmental Studies, and a new minor in Japanese has been added.

Partially in response to the Middle States Accreditation review, the college has been engaged in the development and implementation of a new strategic plan. In addition to implementing the curriculum changes already mentioned, the other five goals of the strategic plan include

- Becoming national leaders in offering challenging academic programs, including opportunities for student-faculty collaborations.
- Providing the infrastructure necessary to support the academic program
- Increasing support for employees, particularly with respect to diversity
- Promoting distinctive academic programs
- Assessing student academic performance

The PRR appendixes provide evidence that progress has been made in all of these areas. Two important features of the strategic planning implementation process are the development of an integrated budget and a long-range facilities plan.

Strong progress has been made in the last five years in the recruitment and retention of a diverse student and faculty population. Of particular note is the effective diversification of the faculty: "Approximately 40% of the tenure-track hires in the last five years have been from underrepresented groups, and roughly half were women." This success is attributed to formalized procedures for recruiting a diverse faculty, and to the efforts of individual departments.

The college opened a new \$56 million science center, There have also been a number of renovations, expansions, acquisitions and improvements to the capital assets of the institution, most of which are directly related to improving academic and living conditions for students. In addition, the college has increased its support for faculty scholarship, teaching, faculty development and faculty diversity.

The college has launched an ambitious new capital campaign, the Excelsior Campaign, which is grounded in the themes of the strategic plan. The Campaign was officially launched in December 2004 with a \$175 million goal, but \$80 million had already been raised by the time of the kick-off.

Hamilton's Physical Education department has been going through a number of significant changes. The college has committed to having several of its teams play full schedules in the New England Small College Athletic Conference, and is considering increasing its participation even more. The Physical Education department is carefully weighing the benefits and disadvantages of this more demanding commitment, and is also carefully considering issues of staffing and staff workload, gender equity, facilities management, club finances, the academic success of its athletes, and the relationship between athletics and the rest of the college.

Other important accomplishments include successful efforts to attract more attention and greater visibility to the college and improve support for student access to information through the work of the library, the ITS staff, and often through the combined efforts of both groups. The college has also implemented a number of new policies and practices designed to improve the campus life experience for students, including regenerating the

Campus Coalition on Alcohol and Other Drugs, and efforts to better integrate academic and residential life on campus.

Institution's response to the 2001 team report

It appears that the greatest number of suggestions made by the 2001 team concerned issues of planning, and, in particular, to planning that involved the community broadly and transparently. Hamilton has addressed these suggestions in several ways. First, the drafting of the strategic plan itself seems to have been largely in response to the Middle States Visiting Team's recommendations. It also appears that, through a number of efforts at the college to make the planning process more inclusive and transparent, there is a wider representation from the faculty, students and staff in strategic decision making. For one thing, President Stewart has resumed chairing the Campus Planning Committee, and the role and membership of the committee have been changed following the recommendations of the Middle States Visiting team. The group identifies concerns for the college's development, looks at data related to the individual concerns, and then advises the president about potential courses of action.

There also appears to be a clear process of decision making that involves gathering and sharing pertinent, discussion with a wide array of community constituent groups, specific articulation of desired actions, and then assessment of the outcomes. The assessment and analysis is then used to drive future discussion and decision making. It appears that there is a strong commitment to consulting, participation and communication with regard to decision making at the college. Certainly one example of this commitment is the effort to make pertinent information readily available to faculty committees and other working groups. In addition, faculty committees have been encouraged to report more regularly to the faculty as a whole, with the intention of improving communication and transparency. Participation and transparency have also been important goals in the financial planning of the college.

Current and financial status and projections

Hamilton College is financially healthy. It consistently runs a balanced budget each year, and the endowment, about \$626 million as of January 2006, continues to perform very well. Hamilton recently set up a separate investment office to provide closer oversight of the endowment; it works closely with a Trustee oversight committee.

There were two overarching goals at Hamilton College connected to financial and budgetary practices. The first was to improve budgetary transparency at the institution. Several actions, including moving data and reports on-line, establishing a new On-line Budget Tool, and making more frequent presentations to constituents of the college, all contribute to a more open budgetary process.

The second budgetary goal was to maximize the use of financial resources. The PRR lists a dozen actions that have been taken to reach this goal, including the improvement of a significant number of internal controls, the careful review of replacement staff positions to ensure efficiency, and the implementation of a number of energy conservation measures.

As the institution begins an ambitious period of growth that will include an aggressive capital campaign paired with taking on additional debt, there is an acknowledgement that debt service will need to be controlled, particularly if student enrollments stay constant. The intention to develop a formal debt policy is mentioned briefly in the PRR.

Current status of the institution's outcomes assessment

Institutional effectiveness

Hamilton College has been involved in a comprehensive assessment project that effectively measures the success of many facets of the institution's operations. Funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the assessment project provides the college with a clear picture of liberal education at Hamilton. The project findings include those related to student-professor relations, student learning (particularly in the areas most closely related to the new curriculum: writing and oral communication, the sophomore seminars), advising, and how the Hamilton experience does or does not change students' values and perspectives.

The quality and quantity of data gathered and analyzed by this assessment project are to be commended. The college, too, should be applauded for its efforts toward institutional effectiveness assessment. The college now has a great deal of material to look at and work from as it begins to plan for the future.

The development of a new post-tenure review process is another indication of the college's commitment to quality and self-examination. That individual faculty members are encouraged to develop a plan for their own career development that is shared with the VPAA and the departments is further proof that the college is also committed to tying assessment with planning as a way of achieving excellence.

Student learning

Hamilton has been intensely examining the new liberal education experience with as part of the Mellon Foundation grant, and is focusing its attention on the assessment results from the first class to graduate under the new curriculum ('05). Not all the results are positive, as can be expected when a new curriculum is launched. However, in spite of some concerns with the effectiveness of the sophomore seminars, the academic programs are strong and enjoy high regard from the students. The Mellon Assessment Report also shows that the new advising system, a concern of the 2001 accrediting review, has likewise had uneven success. Nevertheless, students are satisfied with most of the changes to the advising system.

In addition to the Mellon Foundation assessment project, Hamilton College is participating in two consortial studies assessing different parts of the curriculum, one through a Teagle Foundation grant, and one through the Center for Inquiry in the Liberal Arts. This participation is further evidence of the college's commitment to student learning assessment.

On another front, the college has developed guidelines for the assessment of departmental effectiveness within individual disciplines. The assessment plans will include departmental reviews, including the opportunity for input from outside peer reviewers. Departments are encouraged to combine assessment with long term, articulated plans. A plan or system for assessing student learning within specific disciplines is not evident. However, "assessing student academic performance" is a stated goal of the 2002 strategic plan, and the implementation planning document indicates that the expected date of its completion is July 2006, after the PRR document needed to be submitted. It may be that assessment of individual learning within majors and minors is included in that plan, and will be available at a later time.

The important thing to remember is that the college is actively engaged in serious and ongoing assessment of its academic programs and of student learning. The college is candid and self-critical about those areas where there is clear evidence that improvement is needed. We are confident that steps will be taken by the college, based on evidence, for continued improvement of the educational experience.

Linkage between institutional planning and budgeting processes

Throughout the materials provided, there is ample evidence that there are clear links between strategic planning and the budgeting process. The connection between planning and budgeting is evident in the college's governance structures, in the capital campaign materials, and in the Campus Integrated Master Plan. The fact that the college has developed a long-range (15 year) development plan for the college is a good indication that there is an institutional commitment to thoughtful planning.

Challenges

The PRR thoughtfully outlines a number of financial challenges that Hamilton faces in the future, particularly if the student body remains constant. Containing the number of employees, preserving the existing facilities, and improving management practices of the college's housing facilities are all measures under consideration. As the economic conditions of the surrounding area evolve/devolve, it is likely that the college will be asked to take on a more prominent role in the development of the neighboring municipalities.

The college will continue its efforts to present itself visually and editorially with greater consistency. Efforts have been made to develop of a new graphic identity, and to publicize the college's significant assets, such as its new and distinctive curriculum. It will also seek greater visibility. The college is also committed to developing a new marketing plan.

Conclusion with suggestions

The PRR's executive summary concludes with the sentence "There are no particular weaknesses or pressing problems, and the future looks very bright." The reviewers concur. Hamilton College is a strong institution that has a clear mission, that has specific and obtainable goals, is engaged in ongoing self-assessment, engages the community in decisions, and uses evidence to make planning effective.

The following are a few suggestions for the college to consider as it faces the challenges of the next five years.

- With the new emphasis on oral communication at the college linked to the parallel emphasis on writing, it would help to have opportunities for the faculty to develop its skills in teaching oral communication. Faculty members develop skills as academic writers through their own disciplines, and can pass these on to their students. However, they don't always have formal training in oral communication. Just as the students' good writing is developed through practice and constant reinforcement in all their academic courses, good speaking can be reinforced if the faculty themselves have some useful advice to pass on to the students in any course.
- The college will need to address many issues related to the sophomore seminars. The college now has a good deal of data to suggest what are the problems with the courses that are intended to be "the centerpiece of the new curriculum." It will be a challenge for the college to go back to the drawing board and either redesign the program to be more effective, or to find new ways to accomplish the intended goals that stimulated the program's creation.
- Hamilton College has been very successful in their efforts to assess the effectiveness of the institution, and to assess student learning related to the general education experience. It is suggested that Hamilton also begin work toward assessing student learning within its academic disciplines, the majors, minors and concentrations. A way to start might be to focus on the contribution of individual academic departments to the general education experience, particularly looking at how departments support the emphasis on writing and speaking.
- We endorse the college's encouragement of greater communication between faculty governance committees and the faculty as a whole, and suggest that those efforts remain a priority.
- We support the suggestion made briefly in the PRR that a formal debt policy be developed soon, especially in light of the future plans for capital development at the college.