

Findings of the Committee Reviewing the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of Iowa. January 21, 2013

Introduction

The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS or “the College”) at the University of Iowa is among the oldest and most distinguished such comprehensive colleges in the Big Ten. The history of Arthur Schlesinger, the psychology of Carl Seashore, the physics of James Van Allen, the writings of Paul Engle, were produced here and had major impacts on multiple fields and disciplines. The Review Committee understands and appreciates this long and distinguished history and, indeed, we offer advice in the spirit of assuring its impact and significance will continue on into the future.

The College was last reviewed by the University during the 2003-04 academic year. Since then the College has launched new degree programs and certificates to accommodate student interests, built new classrooms to adapt technology to its teaching, expanded and professionalized student advising, cooperated with University-wide activities such as the first-year seminar program and living learning communities, and raised its four-year undergraduate graduation rate. These are substantial evidences of the College’s commitment to undergraduate success and its role as a good partner in University activities that facilitate and expand that success.

The College also cooperated with the graduate program review process conducted by the Graduate College, resulting in the prudent closure of some doctoral programs and some improvement in completion rates and time to degree. At the very least this now means that the College’s approach to graduate education is more self-consciously focused on nationally-recognized measures of success.

The sources of information for the review included an excellent self-study document written by a committee of faculty and staff as well as extensive meetings on campus including with the Provost and his staff and the Dean and his staff. Within CLAS we also met with the self-study committee, DEOs, faculty assembly members, senior Dean’s office staff, elected CLAS faculty executive committee members, elected CLAS faculty educational policy committee members, unit level administrators, and associate deans. We also met with a wide variety of representatives from units outside CLAS, including the deans and associate deans of other colleges, representatives from finance and operations, information technology services, the graduate college, continuing education, international studies, diversity, research administration, development, and undergraduate education. In addition, we received a number of emails of advice and comments from CLAS constituents. Our response to the charges, and our observations and recommendations come entirely from these sources.

Part I: Response to Charges

Provost Butler charged the Review Committee with addressing several key aspects of the University of Iowa Strategic Plan. To illustrate his intentions for our review, he provided several specific questions with each charge. In Part I, we provide direct response to those questions.

Charge 1. Student Success. Is the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences optimally deploying instructional resources to achieve the UI strategic plan objectives of higher quality education experiences and cost containment through efficiency and innovation?

The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences provides a diverse array of high quality educational experiences to its students. However, the College administration and faculty find it very difficult to make changes that would improve efficiency and promote innovation. Although a diminished budget is the most frequently mentioned explanation, we conclude that more financial resources alone would not resolve the issue.

Instead, we recommend attention to the following major issues that directly affect student success: improvement in financial transparency and communication at all levels of leadership; a greater focus on data-driven strategic planning; engagement of faculty leadership; an assessment of the distribution of instructional resources; and consideration of a change in the administrative structure. More discussion about these findings and recommendations can be found below.

Charge 2. Knowledge and Practice. Is the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences successfully promoting the University of Iowa research mission by supporting and advancing UI's cross-disciplinary cluster initiatives and tactically reorganizing available faculty positions to build areas of research strength and meet student demand?

The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences has been an active and engaged partner to the majority of University cross-disciplinary cluster initiatives. Future participation will require the College to be more strategic about use of departmental and collegiate funds. For example, the College should construct and articulate clear plans for meeting faculty startup costs for new hires associated with university-wide cluster hires.

The College should identify strategic areas for growth and investment. Due its size and diversity, the College is well-situated to develop its own cluster hire initiatives, and to develop and support existing clusters of faculty research excellence. This will require a reallocation of faculty lines toward areas of research strength. The research mission would also be enhanced by establishing additional interdisciplinary research centers to provide infrastructure for collaborative research. Building on centers such as the Delta Center and the Optical Science and Technology Center would increase the College's competitiveness for large interdisciplinary grants.

The College has struggled to respond to enrollment pressure and student demand, particularly in undergraduate service courses and gateway courses to popular majors. At the same time, there has

been a decline in the number and diversity of course offerings in graduate and specialized courses needed for a research-intensive university. To address these problems, we recommend greater use of the fixed-term lecturer role. These lecturers could be deployed to programs that have service courses with larger numbers of lower-division students. This would free tenure track faculty to teach more highly specialized, upper-level undergraduate, or graduate level courses. Regardless of approach, the College should implement a strategy for staffing and supporting courses that is based on institutional data and considers departmental trends in student success and enrollment, as well as the interests of constituents like employers, parents, and alumni.

Charge 3. New Frontier in the Arts. Is the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences using the opportunity to rebuild the arts campus in the wake of the 2008 flood to reimagine arts programming – especially cross-unit collaborative programming – in education, presentation, and performance?

The College's arts and music infrastructure was severely damaged by the historic flood of 2008 and the investment in the recovery from that flood has delayed some of the College's own infrastructure priorities. It appears that faculty in the affected units in the College have cooperated magnificently in the recovery from this tragedy and the planning underway for the reconstruction of the buildings has given the affected units the chance to rethink the way they deliver their curricula and work together more broadly.

We were very impressed by the enthusiastic and widespread support for the arts. The campus as a whole is committed to not only rebuilding the physical infrastructure but also expanding and enhancing the impact of the arts across the university, the state, the nation and the world. At the same time though, the unplanned (at the time) need to replace these buildings has postponed other projects (for example, new space for the highly ranked psychology department) and redirected funding and attention from normal infrastructure renewal and replacement.

Charge 4. Better futures for lowans. Is the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences actively encouraging and rewarding faculty for high-quality publically engaged research and teaching and working to align collegiate resources and messaging with important state needs?

With the exception of the performing and visual arts, the College does not have a uniform view of the meaning of public engagement. Therefore it is difficult for the College to reward faculty who do engage in high quality publically-engaged research and teaching. Similarly, the College is not very effective in demonstrating its alignment with state needs for teaching, service, and scholarship. This may be due to inconsistent messages from university and college leadership. Improving internal and external communications could be the most effective response to this challenge.

Part II: Observations and Recommendations

The Review Committee learned a great deal about the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS) that does not fit within any one of the specific charges we were asked to address. Several topics came up repeatedly and we regard them as over-arching themes. Each of the six themes we identified plays a major role in the opportunities and challenges that the College faces. In fact, due to their ubiquity and importance, all the recommendations we submit are those associated with these themes.

1. Financial Transparency

When we asked the CLAS faculty members who had prepared the self-study to, “Tell us the most important thing this review can accomplish,” their answer was, “Get us our fair share of funding from the University.” It was striking to the Review Committee how much this theme dominated the committee’s two days of information gathering. What we came to call, “The Budget Situation,” pervaded all conversations with faculty and staff in CLAS and seemed to obscure the ability of CLAS faculty members and administrators to see a path forward for the College. “The Budget Situation” comprises a set of statements, beliefs, behaviors, and rhetoric that serves to prevent the College from taking responsibility for its own future.

Observations

Every group of faculty members with whom we met was unanimous in its belief that the CLAS budget is inadequate to its mission. There is a widespread belief that the size of the faculty is shrinking, that there are little or no slack resources in the College, that good ideas for either teaching or research cannot be pursued because of a lack of resources, and that the College is forced, therefore, to micromanage even small amounts of money in the departments. Faculty members declared that there was little or no reason to bring forward good ideas if the answer from the College’s leaders was frequently – if not always – “no,” with “no” being attributed to inadequate resources. This pervasive set of views, whether correct or incorrect, is the greatest obstacle to the College’s forward momentum. As the Review Committee sees it, the greatest challenge facing the College will be to effectively deal with these views and attitudes. The College will need to change its own behavior, which reinforces these views and attitudes, and will also need to make the hard decisions necessary to chart a different path forward.

At the heart of this problem, in the Review Committee’s opinion, is a significant lack of transparency and, therefore, understanding of the budget situation. This lack of transparency extends from the financial officers in the Office of the Provost to the departmental administration in CLAS. (The external members of the Review Committee felt this situation was worse here than in their home units.) It appears to be difficult for faculty members and administrators to understand the University’s budgeting system and priorities. This lack of understanding leads to theories of resource allocation that are not helpful for planning. The same is true within the College where the Review Committee also found a strikingly-low level of understanding of collegiate budgetary principles and practices.

The College does not have an effective strategy for communicating about and budgeting for strategic goals. The lack of communication was an issue repeatedly mentioned during the review process and reflected the fact that faculty generally feel they do not know how to communicate with the Dean’s office, nor do they feel they understand what is happening in that office. This underscores the general sense that decisions are made unilaterally and without reference to data.

Recommendations

- The Provost and the Dean must untangle the complexities of the CLAS budget situation; it is both urgent and important.
- The College should articulate more clearly and frequently how budget decisions are made.
- The Provost and his staff should conduct training sessions on the University budget system for CLAS Deans, DEOs and their support staff.
- The Dean's office should communicate principles and goals to administrative and financial staff early in the academic year. These staff members and faculty leaders should be involved in discussions of best practices and policy developments related to the budget.

2. Strategic Planning

Two themes related to strategic planning emerged clearly and consistently throughout the review: 1) there is an absence of awareness of the collegiate strategic plan within CLAS itself, and 2) very few faculty and staff members in CLAS are able to articulate an understanding of, or commitment to, the University strategic plan.

Observations

Throughout our many meetings and conversations with CLAS administration, faculty and staff, there was no reference to, or acknowledgement of the CLAS Strategic Plan. Without knowledge of the Strategic Plan, it is difficult for departments to prioritize funding, explain budget complexities, provide incentives for change, and celebrate achievements. Neither the University nor CLAS seems to have an agreed-upon and realistic aspirational goal for CLAS. The recent change in deans provides an opportunity for the College's current leadership team to reformulate a plan.

CLAS is perceived as slow to respond and considerably less strategic than other colleges. Many units of the College are inattentive to the University Strategic Plan. For example, some departments seem unconcerned with student success - Goal 1 in the CLAS Strategic Plan. DEOs and faculty members misunderstood, did not appreciate, or were unable to describe or articulate relevant College efforts related to the Student Success Pillar of the University Strategic Plan.

We noticed a distinct lack of vision and mission for undergraduate education. One external reviewer commented that CLAS simply doesn't seem like an exciting place for undergraduates. This may be a product of the "budget situation" dialogue described above. Nevertheless, the environment is not conducive to improving the College's undergraduate operations.

Recommendations

- The College should create strategic initiatives that assume that no new funds will flow from the state or from central administration.
- CLAS should develop a set of realistic aspirational goals linked to existing and projected strengths.

- Thought leaders inside and outside the College should be engaged and charged with addressing long-range planning in ways that acknowledge the College’s current financial position.
- Annual strategic planning meetings with DEOs and their administrators should be required. These meetings would simultaneously increase transparency and serve as a means for outlining how DEOs and their administrative staff members could use their budgets to support strategic priorities.

3. Institutional Data

The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences requires accurate institutional data to move forward on any of these recommendations. We noticed a lack of reliable and widely shared data about many aspects of college functioning. The lack of (or lack of use of) institutional data was most noticeable when discussing the appropriate use of faculty resources. Better institutional data might be used, for example, to encourage faculty to submit more grant applications; compare student/faculty ratios to other institutions by major or department; make decisions about investment in fixed-term lecturers in physics, biology, math, computer science and other areas that have heavy service loads; and help faculty members become more involved in difficult strategic decisions about eliminating majors or reducing faculty size.

4. Faculty Leadership

The Self-Study notes that involving faculty members in College-wide planning and intellectual leadership has been and remains a challenge. This finding was reinforced in interviews with the Faculty Assembly and the College's two elected committees, the Executive Committee and the Educational Policy Committee.

Members of all three faculty governance bodies expressed frustration with their perceived inability to provide meaningful feedback to the Dean’s office on important changes to policies and academic programs. DEOs also reported that collegiate DEO meetings fail to provide a chance for them to provide input into the College’s decision-making process.

Observations

Members of the faculty elected and appointed to important advisory or decision-making positions (e.g., DEOs, Executive Committee, and Educational Policy Committee) have been underutilized. Input from junior faculty (assistant and associate professors) is also noticeably absent.

As a result, faculty members believe they have become disconnected from collegiate leadership and that shared governance practices are not engaged. The important work of setting priorities and policy is perceived to occur exclusively in the Dean’s Caucus.

Recommendations

- The CLAS administration should find ways to engage elected and appointed faculty leadership in defining aspirational goals and metrics.

- CLAS should better engage and use the three representative faculty committees as a channel for two-way communication between the Dean's office and the College.
- DEO meetings should be restructured to allow for creative problem solving and a two-way exchange of ideas between the deans and the DEOs.
- Faculty leaders should play an advisory role in resource reallocation following a strategic planning process.
- The College should actively elicit feedback from faculty at all career stages. The recently established Humanities Advisory Board is one example of a platform that could be used to bring forth the perspectives of junior faculty.

5. Instructional Resources

The Review Committee appreciates the complexity in distributing instructional resources in a college of the size and diversity of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. It is difficult for the College to make simple strategic rules for allocation of resources and it is clear that the College leadership works hard to satisfy the many competing demands. At this time, however, the College seems unable to effectively respond to those demands and faculty, students, and other college partners are frequently dissatisfied. Courses that are gateways to popular majors, especially in biology, physics, chemistry, math, and computer science are not always available to qualified students due to enrollment caps and faculty availability. Instructors for large courses are sometimes identified at the last minute and teaching quality suffers. At the same time, departments are unable to offer small courses that are necessary for the development and support of graduate programs and research initiatives.

Observations

The committee was surprised with the large variance in faculty across departments: student ratio, particularly when calculated using the number of majors graduated each year. Table 4 in Appendix B of the Self Study provides a good snapshot of the faculty and student data in each department and illustrated the problem to the Review Committee. It is not apparent what data the College uses in allocating faculty lines and the role factors such as majors, graduate students, credit hours taught, and research productivity may play in the process.

Compared to peer institutions, the College relies disproportionately on tenure-track faculty to cover instructional responsibilities. The College is overinvested in tenure-track faculty lines and underinvested in more flexible fixed-term lecturers. The College has long prioritized faculty lines at the expense of flexible funds for incentives and rewards.

The deployment of instructional resources has an effect on efforts to build research strengths and to develop new interdisciplinary research initiatives. By following legacy commitments to faculty lines, research opportunities may be lost. In addition, the lack of flexibility in the budget attributable to the disproportionate reliance on tenure-track lines contributes to an environment where resources for change and experimentation are severely limited.

Recommendations

- Invest in full-time lecturers to provide flexibility to respond to changes in student demand, to better serve other colleges, and to provide opportunities for departments to provide lower enrollment specialty courses.
- Provide incentives for faculty members to develop innovations in teaching and course delivery.
- Provide incentives for departments to improve large enrollment lecture and laboratory courses.
- Improve the accessibility and use of institutional data to allocate faculty resources across departments. Connect these decisions to student retention and graduation rates by major, minor or department; student career goals; and enrollment trends.
- Review the assignment of all tenure-track and lecturer lines with respect to undergraduate enrollments. Rather than automatically following legacy decisions, define and communicate the factors used in determining new or continued tenure-track lines.
- Encourage DEOs to assess and adjust teaching responsibilities as a function of institutional data regarding research productivity, faculty development, student demand, and enrollment trends.

6. Administrative Structure

The current structure of the CLAS administration is based on function rather than academic divisions, with nearly all decisions flowing through the Executive Associate Dean. The Dean's office includes two associate deans, who have responsibility for, respectively, Research & Infrastructure and Undergraduate Programs & Curriculum. The College is currently searching for an additional associate dean, who will have responsibility for Graduate & Online Education.

The Executive Associate Dean and associate deans leading the College are very experienced and enjoy broad respect among their colleagues. Each has served the College for at least 30 years and both associate deans have served in their administrative roles since 2004. The Executive Associate Dean has served in this administrative capacity since 1998.

The Dean's office employs a number of other staff, including a Director of Business and Financial Administration, Executive Director of Development, Director of Information Technology, and Director of Human Resources. These staff members provide important financial and structural leadership throughout the College.

Observations

CLAS is an extremely large and complex organizational unit. It is not surprising that the Dean's office struggles to handle, in an efficient and timely manner, the volume of information and decision-making required by this unit. The small number of senior administrators further impedes rapid response. The Review Committee perceived that nearly all College decisions must flow through the Dean's office – typically via the Executive Associate Dean – and this has contributed to the perception that academic departments are not trusted to make decisions, even those limited to their budgets.

The DEOs and CLAS department administrators believe they should be granted more autonomy to make decisions, particularly those related to internal fiscal matters. They would like more responsibility for

many decisions that currently must go through the Dean's office. They report frequent delays in getting answers and decisions from the dean's office, in part due to the associate deans being overworked.

The Dean currently doesn't require annual budget meetings with DEOs and administrative staff from individual departments. As a result, individual units are not required to identify priorities and construct spending plans.

Recommendations

- The Dean should consider reorganizing the College's administrative leadership along divisional lines. It may be that the scale of the College is too large to allow associate deans organized by function to manage the flow of information and participate in strategic planning. The College already operates according to a divisional model in many ways and similar academic units at other CIC institutions have moved to a divisional associate dean structure. A reorganization of this type might result in a more efficient and strategic operation that could guarantee a voice at the table for the diverse scholarly traditions in the College.
- The Dean should clarify the role of other administrative staff in his office, particularly with regard to the roles of the senior budget staff.
- CLAS administration should grant more autonomy to units for making fiscal decisions. This would lessen the burden on central administrators and decrease processing time.
- Eliminate three-year DEO appointments and increase the DEO standard appointment period to five years.

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