

Dean of Studies Restructuring Review
October 6, 2008

This report is jointly submitted by the Dean of Studies Restructuring Review subcommittee and the Committee on Education Policies and Planning. The subcommittee's work has shed new light on the complex workings of both the DOS and SAS offices. The recommendations in this document are intended to enhance their relationship and to clarify the work of these offices for the faculty in order to benefit Skidmore students.

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I. Introduction.

In Spring 2007, the Committee on Education Policies and Planning (CEPP) formed a subcommittee to review the restructuring of the Dean of Studies Office (DOS) and charged the group with the following:

CEPP charges a subcommittee (consisting of two members of CEPP, one member of the Committee on Academic Standing [CAS], one member of the Faculty Executive Committee [FEC], and one representative from the Registrar) with reviewing the restructuring of the Office of the Dean of Studies and the relationship between the Office of the Dean of Studies and the new Office of Student Academic Services (SAS).

The subcommittee will address three broad issues:

- 1) What does the restructuring consist of?
- 2) Is the restructuring working?
- 3) Are changes needed to make the restructuring more effective?

The information contained in this report summarizes the subcommittee's investigative work, findings, and recommendations.

The subcommittee was constituted in the Spring of 2007 and began its work in the Fall of 2007, following an organizational meeting in June. The committee consisted of:

Dan Curley, Associate Professor, Classics, FEC
Deb Hall, Associate Professor, Art, CEPP
Ann Henderson, Registrar
Tillman Nectman, Assistant Professor, History, CAS
Kyle Nichols, Assistant Professor, Geosciences, CEPP, Chair

II. Process.

In an effort to be inclusive, the DOS Restructuring Review Committee met with eight members each from Student Affairs and Academic Affairs. The committee met weekly throughout the fall of 2007 and the spring of 2008 with the intention of reporting back its findings to CEPP in April of 2008. Interviews were conducted with the following individuals (listed here in chronological order):

John Brueggemann, chair of the DOS study group
Grace Burton, DOS 2004-2006
Pat Oles, DOSA
Chuck Joseph, VPAA 2003-2006
Muriel Poston, DOF 2005-present
Sue Layden, Associate Dean of Student Affairs
Michael Ennis-McMillan, DOS 2006 - present
Beau Breslin, FYE Director 2007 - present
Michael Arnush, FYE Director 2005-2007
Kathy Hemingway-Jones, Associate Director SAS
Darren Drabek, International Student Coordinator
Jamin Totino, Coordinator for Students with Disabilities
Gail Cummings-Danson, Director of Athletics
Julia Routbort, Director of the Counseling Center
Monica Minor, Director of HEOP
Susan Kress, VPAA 2006-present

In addition to the interviews, the subcommittee also consulted the following documents in its deliberations:

Retention Report 2003
Dean of Studies Study Group Report 2004
Dean of Studies Annual Report 2003-04
Dean of Studies Annual Report 2004-05
Dean of Studies Annual Report 2005-06
DOS/SAS Collaboration Report 2006-07
HEOP Study Group Final Report 2005
Student Affairs Annual Report 2005-06
Student Academic Services Annual Report 2006-07

Retention and Graduation Rates
Term GPA Exploration (Fall '02 to Fall '07)
Regarding Reconfiguration of DOS- SAS commencing Fall '05
CEPP Archives
Dean of Studies reports from the early 1990s

III. Background.

In approximately 2002, the College identified trends in our student body indicating that there were problems associated with both retention and engagement. Among the patterns that were identified, the following were raised as issues to be addressed: higher rates of attrition than desired, high-achieving females leaving the college, non-HEOP students of color leaving involuntarily, weaker engagement in 1st and 2nd years than hoped for (as indicated by NSSE data collected in Spring 2003), a disproportionate number of athletes with behavioral and/or academic performance problems, smaller natural science enrollments than desired, and a perceived need to challenge our best students more.

In 2003, the Retention Group was formed to consider how to retain and engage students. At approximately the same time, Skidmore received a Mellon Grant to assist in creating a partnership between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs. Concurrently, service learning, mentoring, and advising were all growing areas of interest for some faculty. These factors, combined with the retirement of Dean of Studies Jon Ramsey, led to a rethinking of the Dean of Studies Office. During Ramsey's tenure the reporting structure had changed from a direct report to the Dean of Student Affairs (DOSA) to a dual report including the Dean of the Faculty (DOF). This system was an outgrowth of intentional "bridging" activities between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs and remained in place until the current restructuring. In December 2004, the Dean of Studies Study Group issued its recommendation to divide the functions of the Dean of Studies into two separate offices, one in Academic Affairs and one in Student Affairs.

While it is beyond the scope of the subcommittee's charge to detail how the former DOS office became two separate offices, it should be noted that the separation happened relatively quickly, resulting in the old CFG and the new FEC, along with other members of the Faculty, raising concerns that the process occurred without either proper consultation with or vetting by the appropriate college committees. These concerns were acknowledged by DOSA Oles, President Glotzbach, and then-VPAA Joseph at the Faculty Caucus of September 23, 2005. There was insufficient time for the administration to establish clearly-defined roles both for those in the restructured DOS office and for those in the newly-created SAS office. As a result, the new structure faced challenges from the beginning, not least of which was the Faculty's lack of understanding of the mission for the newly formed SAS and its functions. Furthermore, as one might expect, it took many months for the offices to establish their current working relationships. The transition also involved significant changes in staff and job descriptions: these occurred throughout the 2006-2007 academic year (as stated in the 2007 DOS and SAS collaboration report to the DOF and the DOSA) and into the beginning of the 2007-2008 academic year.

As a result of the events surrounding the implementation of the new structure, FEC raised concerns about the process. In September of 2005, CEPP determined that a review of the

changes should take place in two years. Hence, in 2007 the DOS Restructuring Review Committee was formed as a subcommittee of CEPP.

IV. Findings.

Having established some background and historical context, this report will focus on the contemporary relationship between the DOS and SAS offices and their functions as outlined by the three questions in the charge. Below we address each question.

A. What does the restructuring consist of?

In June of 2005 the Dean of Studies Office was moved to Academic Affairs. At the same time, a new position, Associate Dean of Student Affairs, was established to provide primary academic support to students. Prior to this shift, the Dean of Studies served as an Associate Dean of Student Affairs and reported to both the DOSA and to the DOF. The initial charge was for these two restructured offices to work collaboratively in developing an improved system for supporting students. The following year Dean Oles and Dean Poston formalized the collaboration between the DOS and SAS by requiring an annual collaboration report from the DOS and SAS offices to the DOSA and DOF.

The restructuring of the DOS office broadly consisted of separating the “advising and policy functions” from the “support functions.” As indicated on the DOS website, the restructured Office of the Dean of Studies “oversees Skidmore’s academic advising system and participates in reviewing and reporting student academic status. The office is also involved in many of the faculty’s academic processes and committees and offers assistance in developing and implementing academic policies, curricular goals, advising issues, academic opportunities and support services for students, academic problems or dispute resolution, and interactions between faculty and parents.” The DOS also provides assistance to students submitting applications for specialized post-graduation scholarships.

The mission of the Office of Student Academic Services is to “promote student engagement, excellence and retention.” The services that SAS offers are intended to improve academic skills and help all students who want to take full advantage of the academic opportunities at Skidmore. Some of the support services are academically focused, such as organizing peer tutoring, study groups, and support for students with academic problems, often identified through Unsatisfactory Work Notices. Because the retention report identified target populations as high risk, SAS specifically supports international students, students of color, athletes, English as a Second Language (ESL) students, and students with disabilities. In addition, SAS also provides support for some of our highest achieving students by sponsoring workshops and study groups.

B. Is the restructuring working?

Yes, on many levels the restructuring is working.

Accountability for monitoring students' academic progress and for the faculty's role as mentors ultimately lies within Academic Affairs. The DOS office (in conjunction with the CAS) upholds college policy and the importance of academic excellence, challenge, and rigor. CAS works effectively as the final arbiter on issues of academic standing. SAS provides the support needed to have students successfully meet academic challenges. We find this division of labor effective; each office contributes a different component, working collaboratively and with transparency. DOS and SAS have been actively involved with creating day-to-day operations that work effectively. However, as these offices continue to establish their individual roles, further clarification of responsibilities and clear communication with the faculty is needed.

A positive change in the DOS office that has assisted in student advising and support has been the change to an electronic note system (E-note) from a paper file arrangement. Such a system is necessary for both DOS and SAS to have easy access to student information, considering that the two offices are not geographically adjacent. This system also allows the office to track important data such as the point of entry and progress of each student as well as grades.

In addition to the E-note system, DOS and SAS have developed other forms of collaboration to maintain relevant information exchange. DOS and SAS hold several joint meetings throughout the year, and a weekly Academic Support meeting keeps both offices abreast of the latest information about students in the system. Either office may initiate an academic alert that will signal the other office to track the progress of a particular student. The academic alerts are warnings that may be due to unsatisfactory work notices, parental or faculty concerns, or a combination of social or academic infractions.

Presently, there is no direct involvement of the Director of the First-Year Experience (DFYE) in the E-note system or the Academic Support meetings. This exclusion from the Academic Support meetings may seem reasonable given that the DFYE only has responsibility for approximately one quarter of the student population. However, the E-note system may contain important information for the DFYE in advising students. We have been assured by both the DOS and DFYE that when an issue that arises with a first-year student, the DOS relays the appropriate information to the DFYE.

The DOS and SAS also collaborate in other ways. The DOS attends the Student Affairs Deans and Directors meetings and the Director of SAS attends DOF staff meetings. Such joint attendance contributes to the goal of understanding students' lives as a whole.

Another joint effort that seems to be working well is summer advising. Summer advisors assist all incoming first-year students with selecting a course schedule for the fall. SAS staff members assist certain groups of students such as international students, athletes, and students with disabilities because of their specific scheduling needs. Other groups are also targeted, such as students interested in the natural sciences, with special advising handled by interested faculty

members. In general, needs may be quite different and specialized for a variety of incoming students. It should be noted that once a student enrolls in a Scribner Seminar (SS), the faculty member who teaches the SS becomes the regular academic advisor.

There is empirical evidence that the joint efforts of the DOS and SAS offices have improved academic performance for the SAS target populations. There is a marked decline in Unsatisfactory Work Notices (UWN) for SAS target populations, from 46% of all UWN in Fall 2006 to 28% in Spring 2007. Additional data show targeted SAS populations shows a potential increase in GPA. However, it must be noted that there are many factors that affect GPA in addition to the services from SAS, and it would be inappropriate to assume a direct and single causal relationship.

C. Are changes needed to make the restructuring more effective?

Following the restructuring, the DOS and SAS offices have enjoyed significant improvements in individual and cooperative operations over the last two years. It is clear that both offices have focused on the most pressing issues to smooth the rough transition that contributed to a higher than usual turnover of staff. While most aspects of the transition are working well, there are a few areas where additional attention might improve the functioning of both offices.

Although communication between DOS and SAS seems to be effective, communication with the broader college community, specifically the faculty, could be enhanced. We understand that a major problem with the rapid pace of the restructuring was the Faculty's lack of understanding about the changes that were implemented and the roles of each office. Such lack of clarity has led to some, and sometimes significant, misunderstandings.

Indeed, some members of the subcommittee themselves came into the process with only partial information about the nature of the two operations. We had our own impressions of the process and had heard of problems from our colleagues. Many of us did not understand the current workings of both offices. The discovery process undertaken as a result of our work has shed new, and generally positive, light onto the complex workings of both areas.

The following are the most common concerns raised by those with whom the subcommittee spoke, although it should be noted that it sometimes heard conflicting views from its interviewees. These represent some of the most significant questions that surfaced during the subcommittee's work. Acknowledging that people may have reasonable differences of opinion on these questions, the subcommittee's work nonetheless generated the following answers.

1. Does the revised structure rely too much on personalities to be effective?

Personalities matter, yet the Director of SAS and the DOS have said that the infrastructure and organizational structure have thus far taken care of problems before they arise; the subcommittee has found no evidence of recent unresolved conflicts. Nevertheless, we understand that personalities will play some role in any administrative structure, and so the mandate for collaboration is paramount.

2. Do different messages come from each office?

Some have concerns that students and parents may get different messages from the DOS and SAS which in turn may encourage “shopping around” for the desired answer. We find that there is a complex relationship between support and academic standards, yet we do not see the two offices in conflict, as they both share a commitment to excellence. We see no reason to fear that a student or her/his parents will shop around as long as all involved are clear about the roles and obligations of both offices. Members of SAS must continue to be clear with students and parents that, although they may function in some instances as an advocate for the student, College policy and expectations for high achievement must be met. In the same manner, DOS staff members cannot disregard students’ need for support in their efforts to maintain standards. We therefore do not see these enterprises as mutually exclusive.

3. What is the balance between rigor and support?

There is perhaps inevitable tension between the ways we rigorously challenge our students to reach high standards and the ways we support their efforts to do so; yet a balance needs to be struck. Sometimes this issue is framed as the opposition between the intellectual autonomy of our students (which includes the possibility of failing a course or failing to do well in it) and the mandate of our various student services to support those students to succeed. However, this framework may not be the most productive way to approach rigor and support, as it is indeed possible to be both rigorous and supportive.

In the course of its work, the DOS Review subcommittee heard that a few faculty members believe that some SAS staff members may be too supportive. Nevertheless, in the process of its interviews, the subcommittee found that both the DOS and SAS offices are working daily to balance the tension between rigor and support. To help make this more widely known, it is important for SAS to communicate clearly to both students and faculty its policies and procedures regarding paper revisions, tutorials, and other support services.

4. Why does SAS only work with certain groups?

Some faculty members do not understand why SAS works with only certain groups. We understand the administrative and resource constraints that necessitated SAS’s initial work to focus on the target populations identified in the Retention Report; at the same time, any student is welcome in the Center to take advantage of the services. With time and resources SAS may be able to expand its services to assist a wider student population.

V. Specific recommendations.

CEPP has several recommendations for the appropriate offices and administrators that should allow the DOS and SAS offices to function more effectively in the future. Our recommendations fall within the broad categories below:

A. Office of the Dean of Studies

- The subcommittee's investigation revealed the complex role of the DOS as it relates to both Academic Affairs and Student Affairs. Because of this complexity, we recommend that the DOS appointment rotate on four- or five-year cycles where the position is filled by a faculty member with classroom experience. We recognize that such a cycle has resource implications. But it is clear that there is just too much to learn to be effective in only two years. Furthermore, an extended appointment will give more stability to the collaborative structure.
- The DOS has an important role in the First-Year Experience. Currently, the DOS relays relevant information to the DFYE. This important connection occurs organically at the present, aided by the geographic proximity of the two offices and their structural position under the DOF. To ensure that such a relationship is maintained in the future, we recommend that the terms for the DOS and DFYE be staggered. Otherwise, without a clear policy or mandate, this important relationship may be lost for a period of time.
- Several times during its investigation, the subcommittee heard that there needed to be more intentional advising for sophomores. We realize that the implementation of the Teagle Grant will help address this issue, and we urge the development of programs that direct attention to second-year students.
- A single point of contact for faculty might ease the confusion regarding whom to contact with questions, problems, or concerns about students. In the past the Faculty would contact the Associate Director of the Dean of Studies Office, so perhaps identifying Laurie Baker as the person now filling that role and communicating her role more widely would be helpful.
- There needs to be more clarity (beyond an email sent at the beginning of every school year and a webpage) regarding the functions of the DOS and SAS offices. As a result, these offices need to take the initiative to educate the Faculty about their respective responsibilities. We suggest that the conversation be initiated by a survey of both faculty and students on the issue of student support. Such data would allow the College community to understand what support means to the different community groups and allow DOS and SAS to lead a conversation and address any gap in understanding, if one is found to exist.

B. Student Academic Services

- SAS should consult and work with the DOS in developing and analyzing the data from the student support survey recommended above. SAS should also be a partner in the conversation about and the communication of the survey's results.
- SAS should continue to offer services to the entire of student population, and should consider increasing the services it offers to our highest performing students. Scholarly inquiry requires support and collaboration, and that perceptions of academic support have changed in recent years. Support is no longer stigmatized as remedial; rather, we see support as defined by an interactive exploration of intellectual questions.
- SAS should consult with the Writing Center regarding potential redundancy with Writing Center services. Both the Writing Center and SAS might better serve students if such redundancy was reduced so services could be implemented and resources allocated more efficiently.
- SAS should consult with the DFYE regarding potential redundancy with the FYE's 4th credit hour programs. Both offices, for example, have presented workshops on study skills and support services to first-year students. New students might be better served by presentations from one or the other office, or (perhaps ideally) both offices in collaboration with each other.
- SAS should articulate its policies and procedures for support services to Faculty, and SAS should consider a formal process to notify Faculty, with students' approval, when services are rendered. One possible model for this process would be the Writing Center, which gives students the option of notifying faculty when help is sought.
- SAS should continue data collection and assessment to meet students' needs most effectively. We are aware that this is happening now and it should continue to evolve.

C. First-Year Experience

While we were not charged with reviewing the FYE, and we did not, we found that the FYE office has important intersections with both DOS and SAS. Our recommendation is meant to be helpful to all offices and is not intended to force changes in their interactions.

- The FYE office should consider establishing a formal working relationship with SAS. Specifically, as noted above, FYE should communicate with SAS regarding overlap in potential 4th hour topics. In addition, SAS could offer traveling 4th credit hour information session that would better inform students and faculty of what types of support they offer.
- The DOS office and the office of SAS might reconsider whether the DFYE should have access to E-note system for advising purposes.

D. The Faculty

- The Faculty should take a more active role in learning about the DOS and SAS offices. One way of doing this is to respond to the survey issued to by the DOS and SAS on student support. These offices support our work and our input will only make them more effective.
- An important role of DOS and SAS is the ability to help students with Unsatisfactory Work Notices (UWNs). SAS would appreciate more deliberate and expeditious use of UWNs in order to offer support to students in a timely fashion. In particular, referrals made at the very end of the term are not helpful to the student and leave few options for resolving problems.

E. Other recommendations and observations

- The success of the DOS and SAS offices requires ongoing communication between the DOSA and the DOF.
- We encourage DOS and SAS, in consultation with the DFYE, to clarify the roles and responsibilities of each office with particular regard to advising and mentoring. It will be important for these offices to facilitate conversations with the faculty around the important questions of how support and excellence are defined and realized at Skidmore, how our students can be encouraged to become independent thinkers, and how we can talk across divisional boundaries about common topics.
- In the spirit of bridging Academic Affairs and Student Affairs, FEC may wish to review the role of Student Affairs on committees within the shared governance system. Certainly, the complexity of student life extends beyond just DOS and SAS.
- Future restructuring of college offices of the sort made in this instance will require that roles and responsibilities be thoroughly considered in advance of any changes to avoid unnecessary and/or premature turnover of valuable employees. Time ought to be taken to consult with affected parties to insure a smooth transition.

Respectfully submitted,

Dean of Studies Restructuring Review subcommittee

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