

Committee for Educational Planning and Policy - Annual Report (6/4/01)

INTRODUCTION:

The Committee on Educational Policies and Planning met 37 times during the academic year 2000-2001. CEPP representatives met with the Board of Trustees' Sub-Committee on Academic Affairs three times to discuss the faculty's work on revising all-college requirements. CEPP representatives met with Academic Staff five different times to discuss the committee's work. A CEPP representative met with the Student Government Association's Senate to discuss CEPP's proposal to amend all-college requirements. There were also a number of other meetings of various CEPP subcommittees (e.g., Sub-Committee on Academic Standards and Expectations, Sub-Committee on Guidelines for Culture-Centered Inquiry, Sub-Committee on Guidelines for Humanities, Sub-Committee on Guidelines for Arts, Sub-Committee on Guidelines for Social Sciences, Sub-Committee on Guidelines for Natural Sciences, etc.) and committees that jointly include CEPP members (e.g., Institutional Planning Committee, Committee on Committees).

REGULAR BUSINESS:

While the year was dominated by attention to the core curriculum, CEPP carried out a number of more routine tasks. We approved a proposal for Skidmore to join the Biosphere 2 Partnership in Arizona. CEPP engaged in preliminary discussion and research related to the extension of Skidmore's affiliation with the study abroad program in Spain to Alcala (located near Madrid). CEPP approved the Academic Calendar for the year after next. Along the way, the committee had ongoing conversations about the structure of the college's calendar, with particular consideration for the timing of Academic Festival. We agreed to hold the Festival after the last day of classes this year, May 2, and to review that policy again next year with an eye toward developing a more long-term policy. CEPP studied the merits of a plan for a new pilot program in which a small cohort of first-year students study in London during their first semester of college. We also reviewed selected sections of the Middle States Report pertaining to educational policy. Like many others on campus, CEPP actively participated in the Institutional Planning Committee's Strategic Planning Initiative. (The suggestions we offered are delineated below.) CEPP drafted and adopted a new operating code (none has existed in recent memory), which the committee agreed to review at the beginning of next school year.

REVISION OF ALL-COLLEGE REQUIREMENTS:

The most substantial work that occupied CEPP this year has been an effort to revise the all-college requirements. This process began several years ago when various colleagues recognized a number of constraints in our current system (e.g., students having difficulty registering, going abroad, double-majoring etc.). The Offices of the Registrar and the Dean of Studies reported such constraints dating back at least six years. The process of Reconfiguration then added to this problem in the last two years. Colleagues have also expressed concerns as to whether our curriculum has been serving particular educational goals in the best possible way.

During last summer and early fall, CEPP continued its efforts to consult numerous parties in planning for a new curriculum (e.g., Offices of the Dean of the Faculty's Office, the President, the Dean of Studies, the Registrar, Student Affairs, Academic Staff, Student Government Association Senate, SGA Academic Council, Admissions, selected departments and numerous individual faculty, especially previous CEPP members). The committee brought a preliminary proposal to the faculty at a Special Faculty Meeting on September 22, 2000.

With the generous help of Leo Geoffrion and Ann Henderson, we established a web-site with several sources of information and means for communication. These included links to AAC&U white papers, data analyses (generated by CEPP and the Registrar) and SGA documents. We also set up a newsgroup discussion to facilitate more dialogue, which generated a cluster of concerns. CEPP then distributed a short survey to the faculty in an effort to develop a broader sense of the faculty's wishes. In addition, CEPP members continued to have dozens of informal conversations with various individual colleagues.

Based on all these exchanges, CEPP revised its proposal, which it then presented as a formal motion at another Special Faculty Meeting on November 17. Subsequent conversations with key departments most involved in proposed changes led to additional revisions of the proposal, which came to a vote on the faculty floor at the Faculty Meeting of December 1 (see Minutes from Faculty Meeting for a copy of the motion). After several amendments were considered and rejected, CEPP's motion was approved (89 voted "yes," 33 voted "no," 3 Abstentions).

The committee then turned its attention to the many details of implementing the new curriculum. In consultation with the offices of the Dean of Studies, the Registrar, Academic Staff and various departments, CEPP devised a general plan for implementation. Along the way, a concern developed among some faculty about the appropriate procedures for determining the best way to move through the period of transition. CEPP then consulted with the Committee on Faculty Governance and Professor John Thomas (the Parliamentarian) about appropriate procedures. CFG and Professor Thomas indicated that the wording of the motion passed by the faculty on December 1 suggested that all students were now under the new curriculum. Recognizing the logistical problems of that default arrangement and the tight timeframe for making changes in the catalogue and reworking course offerings, CEPP was eager to delineate a specific alternative plan for implementation. The most difficult issue to resolve at this stage was how many classes of students would be under the new curriculum.

CEPP then brought two motions to the Faculty Meeting on March 2. The Chair of the Faculty Meeting, President Studley, concluded that the effective date, class, or method for launching the new core curriculum is not a "major matter of policy" and therefore is not subject to the conditions for being held over for a vote. The first motion, which included a friendly

amendment offered by Professor David Wiess, stated the following: "CEPP moves that the all-college requirements for the Classes of '01 and '02 remain unaffected by the curricular changes voted in by the faculty in December of 2000." This motion passed. The second motion read: "CEPP moves that students in the classes of '03 and '04 who have already met the foreign language requirement according to the curriculum in place when they entered Skidmore will be deemed to have met the foreign language requirement under the newly adopted curriculum." This motion also passed.

We then organized subcommittees (including CEPP members and other faculty) for drafting guidelines for each of the new requirement categories in the core curriculum, which included Culture-Centured Inquiry (Cultural Diversity, Foreign Languages, Non-Western), Arts, Humanities, Natural Sciences, and Social Sciences. This stage of the process entailed regular communication with Curriculum Committee. The Dean of the Faculty's Office made faculty development funding available for workshops linked to new curricular offerings, which are taking place this summer. CEPP members reviewed specific sections in the new Catalogue as well as several College Relations and Admissions documents to ensure accuracy in terms of the new requirements.

CONCERNS:

The members of CEPP recognize with pride a sense of accomplishment in our work this year. The structure of the new core curriculum alleviates constraints that have burdened students as well as others, and enables a number of promising educational possibilities. At least as important, throughout the process of revising the requirements, we met our own goals of inclusiveness, consultation, and integrity. That said, CEPP has several concerns about our work, the process of policy-making in general, and the future of educational planning at Skidmore.

The four most urgent challenges include: (1) the extremely diverse views encompassed within the faculty; (2) the lack of informed, coherent representation and advocacy of faculty interests in our governance system; (3) the lack of time various stake-holders have for moving toward sensible, final decisions; and (4) the lack of systematic data reflecting the degree of success of particular educational goals.

(1) Disparate Views Among Faculty: The first challenge is a multi-faceted issue. The intensive specialization combined with increasing interest in interdisciplinarity in the academy make for many divergent perspectives on the most important curricular goals. A related problem is the lack of institutional perspective among a large number of faculty members. The complexity, multiplicity and diversity among all the activities and orientations of professors contribute to a certain lack of understanding across disciplines, departments and programs. Moreover, faculty members' focus on educational goals they understand forces questions of resources, fairness, and even decision-making itself to the background of many discussions. That CEPP was constantly drawn into ongoing consideration of

campus politics, often at the expense of using valuable time for more substantive conversations about curricular philosophies, logistics and possibilities underscores this problem. Figuring out a better way to negotiate this challenge will be crucial to any future effort to revise the curriculum or for that matter to develop any kind of substantially new direction in educational policy in general. Paying more attention to national trends as well as examples (both positive and negative) set by other colleges may be a productive step toward developing broader institutional perspective.

(2) Ineffective Governance: Having a flexible or loosely defined governance system is certainly appropriate in our type of college community. However, in the context of the first challenge and the widespread disagreements stemming from it, the lack of clear procedures in the midst of a contentious discussion (e.g., the process of implementation) makes decision-making and especially the establishment of closure on any given issue very difficult. The main setting where important decisions are made with the highest degree of legitimacy and closure is the faculty floor. While taking a vote on a particular motion is the best way to establish such credibility in policy, there are a number of decisions that are not appropriate for a vote, indeed perhaps a few in recent years on which we have inappropriately voted. In our current college culture, the development of nuanced policy, which is informed by sophisticated analyses of challenges and implications, is rather difficult on the faculty floor.

(3) Limited Time: Like the second challenge, the third issue is understandable but nevertheless compounds the first problem. So many colleagues at Skidmore work very hard in fulfilling their normal duties. Undertaking a substantial project like overhauling a curriculum on top of all that work is very difficult. It is politically complex, logistically laborious and emotionally draining. Probably the top priority in terms of addressing these issues is communication. Members of CEPP, as well as other parties (e.g., Academic Staff), must constantly communicate with one another, large numbers of individual faculty members, and important offices, departments and programs. And faculty members in general have scarce time for attending extra meetings and studying all the materials necessary for making informed decisions.

(4) Insufficient Use of Data: The first and third challenges contribute to the fact that the college has not yet developed a comprehensive system for evaluating the success (or failure) of various programming and curricular choices. While time-consuming itself, developing the capacity for generating such data would certainly enhance the discussions among a diverse faculty, and would generally make the decision-making process more efficient in terms of setting priorities. That is, we would have a more comprehensive sense of whether our efforts are working.

Neither the challenges nor the suggestions outlined here are new. They relate to common and familiar themes expressed in the data gathered by the

Institutional Planning Committee this year in the Strategic Planning Initiative as well as concerns raised by the Committee on Faculty Governance last year. That the curriculum has been too large is an extension of the broader problem of too many programs combined with too few resources. We could of course use more faculty, more money, more facilities, and more time; and we surely must continue to develop such resources. Meanwhile, in the absence of all our desired resources, a more comprehensive body of data (pertaining to curriculum and educational policy in general), more carefully studied by a committed group of faculty, could be used to generate visionary policy and persuade other faculty of its quality. Such an arrangement would require a greater commitment to collecting, analyzing, using and respecting data. As various AAC&U documents and experience on CEPP suggest, such data could take various forms (e.g., existing qualitative and quantitative evidence from withdrawn students and seniors, and a more comprehensive review of course delivery and fulfillment of college goals). Once in place, a system that generates empirical evidence could inform and rationalize the development of durable and credible policy in a way that transcends the diversity of faculty views and saves time.

Skidmore College is thriving. Given the plight and trajectory of other institutions, the division and destructiveness of other college cultures, we should of course neither ignore that nor take it for granted. And there are few issues more routinely difficult than the curriculum. After a lot of work to improve the core curriculum, however, the enduring belief for many CEPP members is that we can do better. Developing thoughtful, visionary curricula that respond to and anticipate how the world is changing, while honoring our historical commitments in a way that draws us together around the mission of the college is possible. We believe that such work, or any successful educational policy in the future, will require taking the challenges identified here seriously.

AGENDA FOR 2001-2002.

At the final meeting, CEPP generated the following list for possible topics that will comprise next year's agenda: develop policy related to distance learning and intellectual property rights, foster intellectual culture, clarify the role of athletics, collect and disseminate data linked to educational policy (e.g., information from the withdrawn student surveys, the senior survey, academic advising, alumni affairs, information on grades, majors, requirements, etc.), revamp the CEPP web-site, discuss the make-up and function of CEPP, enhance academic advising, consider the possibilities for a Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, revise the Calendar (including Academic Festival) and weekly schedule, articulate the relationship between majors and all-college requirements, facilitate on-going review and evaluation of the curriculum. Sandy Baum agreed to be the next Chair.

Adam Abramowitz (01)
Sandy Baum
Susan Bender
John Brueggemann (Chair)
Pat Fehling
Pat Oles
Lary Opitz
Phil Ortiz
David Peterson