

## Remarks for 9/23 “Faculty Only Meeting”

Before discussing the rationale for the changes we have made in the DOS and the creation of the Office of Student Academic Services, I would like to add my personal acknowledgement to those you have already heard: the administration could have consulted more and communicated better as we worked through these issues. I am sorry about the time and energy all of you now are spending on these changes and will work very hard to do better in the future.

### Administrative Changes

Jon Ramsey’s retirement provided the impetus for the organizational changes we are here to discuss today. Chuck Joseph and I were skeptical about the wisdom of a dual reporting structure with a new Dean. Jon Ramsey had managed the role creatively and with grace for many years, but we were not convinced it was a wise structure for a new, presumably less experienced, dean. We did not want to begin a search without reconsidering the role and the reporting relationship.

Concern about engagement and retention also informed our thinking about these offices. You may recall discussions of the Student Cultures Project, the presentation of the NESSE data at the Tang, and a smaller number of you may have been aware of the “retention report.” These reports suggest Skidmore has problems with student culture, academic engagement, and retention.

Skidmore does not graduate students at a satisfactory rate. We have a retention problem. Students leave for a variety of reasons, there is no one explanation for the problem, but poor retention has meaningful consequences. Retention reduces institutional quality in several ways. Most significantly, poor retention hurts academic quality.

We have to accept 6 students for every one student that leaves. This means admissions has to make more offers of admission and this lowers our selectivity, a key indicator prospective students use to judge the competitiveness of the institution. The most selective institutions attract the best students. In this way, high rates of retention promote academic quality.

Poor retention has other insidious consequences. We have to admit larger first year classes, devote disproportionate resources to introductory courses, and our best students (and the faculty) must

contend with the discouragement that results when some of their most qualified peers transfer.

When we ask students why they leave the College we hear a variety of explanations—and the institution is working to address those issues in many ways—one I'll mention here relates to diversity. Students consistently report the lack of diversity in the student body as one of the reasons they leave. At the same time, retention among minority students, especially those who are not part of the HEOP program, is especially low. Retention among international students is also low. Improving the retention rate, especially among these groups of students is an important institutional goal.

We decided that an office that provided academic support services and promoted a community experience that emphasized academic accomplishment—an office that mimicked to some extent the HEOP program—was a wise way to improve retention among these groups of students.

Improved retention depends most significantly on improving *engagement* and *achievement* among all of the students at Skidmore. Student Affairs, is interested in working with the faculty and academic programs to develop an array of programs, workshops, and other non-credit bearing experiences to support student engagement. For example, academic skills training (study skills, note taking, time management, etc.), support for study groups, programs promoting graduate school and fellowships, strengthening support for students working as tutors, and working with faculty and academic departments to identify courses where study groups or supplemental instruction might be especially supportive of student success. All of these ideas are just that ideas, possibilities the office is interested in considering with faculty.

Finally, I should also mention that our understanding of how to bridge the work of academic and student affairs is changing. The DOS is no longer “the bridge” between two relatively distant and unrelated units of the College. Offices and programs across the student affairs division identify with the educational goals of the institution; they are working to promote engagement and excellence, retention, diversity, and citizenship; most of these offices have on going productive working relationships with faculty or academic departments or programs, and in the future “bridging” or working collaboratively across the division is likely to increase.

The study group Chuck described in his remarks looked at the organizational structures at other colleges and discovered that there is considerable variation in how colleges organize the offices and provide

the programs we were considering. The study group looked at several different organizational models, some involving fundamental reorganizations of both academic and student affairs. We did not come to a set of recommendations that were fully satisfactory, but we developed a report recommending that the DOS move to Academic Affairs and retain primary responsibility for those functions, programs, and activities that require the organized and systematic efforts of the faculty. The report also recommended that Student Affairs retain responsibility for those functions, programs, and activities involving direct services to students.

Using this heuristic, Chuck and I developed the plan we implemented. The DOS would report exclusively to DOF and continue organizing academic advising, leading the development of academic policy and publications, and promoting academic integrity. In AY 05-06, the DOS would work with Student Affairs to develop new policy, procedures, and services for students with at risk of failure. Locating the office responsible for academic advising, a fair amount of academic policy, and academic integrity in Academic Affairs seemed especially wise to me. These responsibilities are the work of faculty and the office responsible for organizing this work belongs in academic affairs. I believe it should have the authority to strengthen the advising system and to make real progress on concerns many of you have expressed about academic integrity.

The Office of Student Academic Services grows out of the Student Affairs mission and the concerns of the Dean of Student Affairs as described in the Faculty Handbook. I have brought copies of both with me for your review. In other words, the office is assuming some of the responsibilities, the “student affairs” responsibilities formerly assigned to the DOS. I have also brought copies of the College’s organizational charts—last year’s and the current version.

The proposed mission of the Office of Student Academic Services is to promote student engagement, excellence, and retention. The Office of Student Academic Services hopes to offer a wide variety of services that improve academic skills and help students take full advantage of the academic opportunities available at Skidmore. The Office will work faculty, academic programs, and other student affairs offices to develop programs and initiatives that promote student success and further the College’s strategic plan.

As I indicated in my memo to the community in June, as Chuck mentioned a moment ago, and as Matt said in CEPP’s report last week: we have a lot of work to do before fully launching this new office; we expect to consult with IPPC, CEPP, DOF, DOS, and FYE as we develop the services this office will offer. I hope that the concerns about the

process of forming this office and communicating about this work do not cause of us to lose sight of the important goals we are working to accomplish.