

REPORT ON THE COMMITTEE OF COMMITTEES MEETINGS
AY 2007-2008

Read at the Faculty Meeting, May 14, 2008

The Faculty Executive Committee (FEC) is charged with convening the Committee of Committees (or CoC), which comprises faculty members of FEC; the Institutional Policy and Planning Committee; the Committee on Appointments, Promotion, and Tenure; the Committee on Academic Freedom and Rights; the Committee on Educational Policy and Planning; the Curriculum Committee; the Faculty Development Committee; the Athletic Council and any current ad hoc committees whose presence FEC believes would be helpful. The Committee of Committees convened twice this academic year, once in early December and once in early May, to assess the operation of Skidmore's shared governance system from the perspective of our committee structure.

In general and in almost every particular, our governance system this year functioned effectively. Nearly every committee reported productive and engaging collaboration with members of the Administration, and interactions between committees seemed by and large equally productive and engaging. In sum, the good news is, there is plenty of good governance news to go around. The bad news is, the good news has the potential to overshadow the very real tensions within our governance system as it currently exists.

The tensions, as they have suggested themselves at the CoC meetings this year, are three. First, the governance system has possibly reached the saturation point in terms of the number of committees, subcommittees, task forces, working groups, study groups, advisory boards, and other ad hoc entities that the Faculty can support. We undertook a streamlining of the system three years ago; we have gotten it all back and more three years later. This is not to say that the work does not matter, or that Faculty need not be involved. But involvement by the Faculty in the important work of the College now more than ever means choice: choice from a very complicated and even bewildering menu of standing and ad hoc committees; and choice in terms of prioritizing service within other faculty duties (chiefly teaching and scholarship), which the *Faculty Handbook* makes clear are more important for tenure and promotion than service.

The second tension involves the workload and effectiveness of faculty members who choose to participate in the governance system. On the one hand, there is an argument to be made that, wherever possible, new work should come to an already existing committee rather than create a new committee to do that work. On the other hand, this argument contains a danger, namely that a faculty member, by signing up for one committee, might find himself or herself on two other committees besides. The case in point is IPPC, whose standing subcommittees both replicate some of the work of former standing committees and require the participation of members who already sit on the parent committee. Such a scenario can lead to what could be called the "triple report syndrome," in which a report is heard at the level of subcommittee, then committee, and then on the Faculty Floor. Perhaps this syndrome is unavoidable on some committees.

The main point is that every effort should be made to ensure that the time of faculty — indeed, of any committee member — is being used effectively and productively.

These two tensions are structural, as is the third, which involves the very future of shared governance at Skidmore. How are we as an institution to address these tensions? To recognize service as a duty rather than a burden? To ensure equity across the panoply of service opportunities? To make service matter, really matter, in the professional lives of our Faculty? At this point, FEC has wondered whether nothing less than radical reform will do the trick. If we have reached the point where new committees (in every sense of the word) can only be added, and few-to-none subtracted, perhaps it is time to consider a system of compensation for service — and more on this when the results of the FEC Service Survey are published. Or perhaps it is time for the Faculty to consider and implement new entities of governance, such as a Faculty Senate, which might serve as a broadly consultative body and reduce the need for ad hoc committees on any given issue. Naturally, any such reforms would require frank discussion among and across all the various constituencies of the College.

For the Faculty's part, there seems to be a shift in progress, a shift away from a culture of unremunerated service toward a more balanced and practical point of view. The established generation should perhaps remember that increased expectations for tenure and promotion, to say nothing of the demands of family, place at a premium the time that any given faculty member can devote to service. Members of the more practical generation, however, should perhaps remember that the service question is not about what we are willing to give up, but rather about what we are willing to give here and now in order to build what is currently, and what will hopefully continue to be, our community.

All of this being said, FEC will continue to convene the Committee of Committees, which is currently a most effective barometer for measuring the pressures of our governance system. It is clear from this year's CoC meetings that, within the committee structure as it currently stands, the work is challenging, robust, and even rewarding. As for the future of the structure itself, let us continue to work toward a balance between the needs of the College, the demands on faculty time, and the principles of informed and responsible citizenship.

Respectfully submitted,

Dan Curley
Chair, Faculty Executive Committee