**Some Reflections on Curricular Considerations when Allocating Staffing**

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A good case can be made for having more formal guidelines for judging curricular needs when thinking about allocating faculty positions, and I fully agree with my colleague Jeff Israel about the importance of having good information and carefully examined goals as a basis for making these important judgments. During CPC discussions in the last two years, there have been three factors that have complicated our deliberations when considering changes in staffing: 1) new curricular initiatives, 2) the increasing interdisciplinarity of many fields, and 3) enrollments as curricular factors. Addressing these issues in the coming period of no net growth in the size of the faculty will be difficult, and so increasing our understanding of each of these factors is crucial.

A curriculum without flexibility leads to hardening of the intellectual arteries. We need to be able to find staffing for areas that are both important and new to our curriculum. For example, we recently added positions to meet the demand for Asian-American Studies. New units such as Science and Technology Studies and Cognitive Science also have requested staffing. Once we have weathered the coronavirus, we can return to the Strategic Planning process which will identify areas where the curriculum needs to be expanded and, we hope, set relative priorities for those areas. Allocating faculty positions in new areas means that we will not be able to replace some tenure-track lines in other areas. This process will be painful, and will require us to make difficult decisions – not all proposed new curricular initiatives will get the staffing they request, and there will be painful choices to make about what areas will be reduced in order to “pay” for those initiatives we support with new faculty lines.

Williams has been talking about the interdisciplinarity of the curriculum for decades. Years ago, some faculty participated in a program outside their home department. We have crossed a tipping point, and now nearly all faculty have affiliations with more than one unit, and many are part of three (or even more) units. Multiple affiliations add complications in thinking about allocating faculty to specific departments or programs, as it can be difficult to look at a proposed position and think about it as pertaining to a specific department: for example, an English department request might look like it could fit equally well in Comparative Literature or Latino Studies, and a Biology request might look a lot like a Chemistry request and receive support from the Public Health program. In such cases, it is critical that the CPC and the CAP have a clear sense of how the interlocking pieces fit together, and that they understand the implications of awarding or denying the position not just for the unit making the request, but also for all related units (if a position is awarded to one unit, it will augment the other units’ curricula, but may also compromise the ability of those other units to add staffing). To make informed decisions about requests in interdisciplinary areas will require a careful analysis of the existing curriculum in each interdisciplinary area.

Conversations about enrollments as a factor in allocating staffing tend to treat them as a factor separate from the curriculum. However, differences in the number of student enrollments per faculty member within units represent both a curricular consideration and a potential workload inequity. The inequity arises because faculty members who teach, on average, 100 students per year necessarily spend much more time holding office hours and grading than those who teach 50 students per year. Since many faculty members experiencing high loads are in lab science departments, the inequity is accentuated: lab hours are teaching hours, often require many hours of preparation, and always generate office hour visits and associated grading - yet lab students count only as a fraction of a lecture student towards enrollment figures, artificially lowering the student/faculty FTE ratio for a unit that does much of its teaching in the lab or studio. Faculty members with research labs also usually do ten weeks of unpaid research teaching in the summer. As a consequence of heavy teaching demands, faculty in departments with large student enrollments have less time to spend on governance and committees (and so have less influence on college policies), and far less time to interact with other faculty members, develop new courses, and explore novel ideas than they would like. Faculty members in over-enrolled departments rarely get the chance to develop and teach tutorials, and miss out on the intellectual challenges and rewards of this form of teaching (and also are less likely to receive the generous stipend associated with developing a tutorial). Although there may be too many faculty lines devoted to large departments from the point of view of faculty members in smaller departments with low enrollments, the other side is the much lighter workload and, most often, more freedom to develop new courses. The student experience of larger departments also is not ideal; courses, even upper-level courses, need to be large to satisfy demand, and the variety of courses available in the curriculum is smaller than is desirable given the diversity of interests found in a large group of majors.

When is a department too small, and when is a department too large? These are difficult questions to answer. A department with only three tenure-track faculty members struggles; the baseline administrative load, coupled with leave schedules, make it hard to mount a curriculum. A large department is more administratively efficient, but as size increases the ability to have open and productive departmental discussions decreases, lowering departmental cohesiveness. Merging smaller departments (as has happened with some language programs) can make administration more efficient. Decreasing the size of larger departments could occur by reducing the number of faculty in a large department or by splitting a department into two. Reducing the size, of, say, the Economics Department to 12 FTE would require cutting out a substantial part of the curriculum and dramatically increasing the workload of the remaining department members, accentuating the workload inequities (and likely making it difficult to hire good faculty members). The alternative, splitting large departments, has been done; Computer Science was once part of the Mathematics Department, which is now giving birth to a Statistics department as well. One can imaging splitting off parts of the Biology and Chemistry departments to form a Biochemistry department, and parts of the Psychology and Biology departments to form a Neuroscience department. Similarly, perhaps the Economics department could be split into Macro and Micro sub-departments. The problem with such splits is that they may distort the discipline as a whole: economists need to know the principles of both micro- and macro-economics, and neuroscience draws on biochemistry, reflecting the fact that biology as whole has become more integrative and less compartmentalized in the last decades. Splitting up large departments thus could fragment the curriculum in a way antithetical to the values of a small liberal arts college. Ideally, enrollments would be more evenly distributed across departments, which would allow the large departments to decrease in size and still be effective with a smaller number of faculty. Perhaps departments with low enrollments could develop and teach courses with an eye to attracting students who do not think of themselves as potential majors. Williams students’ interests change with experience, and one role of the curriculum in each department should be to attract students to at least one course and so encourage them to investigate a variety of disciplines – which would result in enrollments that are less concentrated in a few departments.

It is clear that in making decisions about staffing, both curricular content and the curricular implications of enrollment (including the curricular consequences of workload inequities) are important. The committees that weigh the merits of staffing requests need to have access to good information about 1) the college’s curricular priorities going forward, 2) the content and approaches of the existing curriculum (especially in interdisciplinary areas), and 3) about faculty/student enrollment ratios in departments and programs. The Strategic Initiative process will provide guidance about future priorities. The data about faculty/student enrollment ratios is available, but needs to be updated regularly (it is three years out of date as of this writing) by the Dean of Faculty’s office. Gaining an understanding of the existing curriculum is more difficult; each individual faculty member on a committee has a reasonable picture of their own department and related departments, but this may be impressionistic and leaves lacunae (especially on the CAP, where there is only one faculty representative from each division). Perhaps the best sources of information about the changing curriculum are a) the department web pages, which, since the last accreditation review, should include a vision statement and student goals, and b) the course catalog, particularly the header information from each department advising students how to navigate the major. Given the administrative burdens we all carry, it might be best to avoid asking departments to generate yet another report or setting up an ad-hoc committee to generate a one-time report on the state of the curriculum. It would be useful if departments included, as part of the department header in the course catalog, information about how they envision their field in terms of content and methodology and how their curriculum serves that vision.

Williams College relies heavily on institutional memory, and whenever there are gaps in that memory or all the relevant memories are not present among the individuals in a group, it can be difficult to make informed decisions. Making sure that there is a common knowledge base for committees giving advice about or making important staffing decisions should be a high priority, and the allocation of each position takes on even greater importance at a time when the size of the faculty is not growing and may even be shrinking.