

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT*Williams » Office of the President » Letters from the President » Alignment of Senior Administration*

Alignment of Senior Administration

September 18, 2010

To the Williams Community,

I am writing to expand campus-wide a discussion I've begun about a topic of importance to the College: the alignment of senior administrative responsibilities.

A hallmark of Williams is the strength of its system of faculty governance. Without a doubt, this is one of its attributes that drew me here; it's a key reason for the excellence that the College has attained. In particular, Williams has been very well served by the practice of rotating faculty into the positions of Dean of the Faculty, Provost, and Dean of the College, which embeds faculty at the center of our prioritizing and planning.

Many dedicated faculty, past and present, have done great work in these roles. They've done so, I've come to realize, despite significant drawbacks to how their positions are configured. It's critical that the faculty in these positions be focused on advancing our top academic priorities, but unfortunately they increasingly find themselves needing to burrow into detailed administrative and management duties, which in our ever more complicated world require technical knowledge and skills. These responsibilities limit, often extensively, the time needed for strategic thinking and leadership. Meanwhile, the steep learning curves involved in these positions can make them less attractive to faculty, and the technical skills required of the Provost seem to limit its candidates to faculty in certain academic disciplines.

With the right realignment of responsibilities, I believe, we could re-focus these positions to recapture their original purpose — to think, plan, and see carried out our core academic mission.

As I've begun to talk with committee chairs and with faculty who have held these positions, I've insisted that our discussions of this matter reflect certain essentials. Any realignment of senior administration must:

- encourage strong faculty leadership and governance,
- enable faculty to set priorities,
- preserve the number of faculty in senior roles and ensure that each of these positions be open to faculty in all disciplines represented in the College,
- design senior faculty positions that are attractive and manageable in scope,
- minimize any growth in senior administration,
- value the need for professional and technical knowledge in certain areas, and
- minimize the costs of rotating leadership.

Let me try to make these notions somewhat more tangible. Our current administrative organization chart can be seen here: http://president.williams.edu/?page_id=414.

Let's start with the Dean of the College position, which is currently sprawling in its scope. It seems to me that it would be logical and sensible to focus it somewhat more on academic matters. We could do that by moving responsibility for Health Services, Safety and Security, Chaplains, and Campus Life (residential life and student activities) to a position that I'll call for now Vice President for Student Life.

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We have, in Vice President for Operations Steve Klass, someone who could take on this position, having done so previously at the University of Chicago. He'd retain the parts of his portfolio most relevant to students, namely Dining Services and Facilities. Naturally, he and Sarah Bolton, and those who report to them, would need to work in close collaboration. But she'd then be able to focus on many essential academic issues, such as strengthening our advising program and developing and integrating the programs that provide students with academic support. At the same time, his newly configured operation could focus on the quality of student life outside the classroom.

Another move, which has been considered for some time, is that of Career Counseling from the Dean of the College's area to that of Alumni Relations and Development, where natural connections would exist between this work and the strong interest among our alumni and parents to play active roles.

The responsibilities of the Provost have also grown considerably in the past decade, and I believe we should consider some refocusing here as well. It's critical that this position remain one in which Bill Lenhart's successors are responsible for the College's overall budget priorities and the marshalling of academic resources for new and existing programs. It's also important that faculty continue to exert leadership in such areas as Admissions, Financial Aid, the Museum, the Libraries, and Information Technology. But the financially challenging world that we've entered and are likely to remain in for the foreseeable future requires sophisticated leadership in complex areas such as treasury, finance, audit, reporting, debt management, and budget operations.

To provide this, we should consider creating a position perhaps called Vice President for Finance, which could take these technical duties, along with allied functions currently under Steve Klass, such as Human Resources, Real Estate, and Legal Affairs. Doing so would open the Provost's position to faculty in all departments, and bring to bear the kind of experienced financial expertise that I believe the College needs in these increasingly challenging times. The Provost then could be freed to focus on moving forward our top academic priorities. Close collaboration between the Provost and the Vice President for Finance would be essential, especially in developing the annual budget. In this key process, the Provost's responsibility would be to develop the College's budgetary priorities, and the Vice President for Finance's to see that those priorities are reflected in the actual budget that is presented to the Board.

There isn't space here to detail every College operation that reports to the three current positions, but I'm convinced that some kind of realignment such as this would benefit all students, faculty, and staff, and I believe that achieving it is important enough to set ourselves the goal of having a new structure in place by the end of this academic year. Since that would involve a national search for a Vice President for Finance, who might need time to transition from his or her current position, I intend in October to propose a plan to the Board, which needs to approve any changes in senior administration.



My main focus between now and the mid-October Board meeting will be to discuss as widely on campus as possible these ideas, the details of which need to be worked out. I raised the matter at this afternoon's meeting of the faculty and will continue that dialogue in a special meeting with the faculty next week, with relevant governance committees, and in conversations with individuals. The Faculty Steering Committee will be collecting comments on the subject. This will also be a topic at the staff forums that are taking place this week and at a meeting of the President's Administrative Group. If there are other groups on campus I should be meeting with, I've kept my calendar as clear as possible to enable that to occur. I'll report on the results of these conversations at the time of the Faculty Meeting on October 6.

I'm very much looking forward to these discussions. I believe that there's an opportunity here to do something very significant for Williams. And I know that the deep knowledge and caring about Williams that characterizes our faculty, staff, and students will lead to the kinds of thoughtful and energetic dialogues that I love.

Best wishes,

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