

May 5, 2011  
Report to the  
Faculty, Administration, Staff, Trustees, Students of  
HAMILTON COLLEGE  
Clinton, NY 13323

by  
An Evaluation Team representing the  
Middle States Commission on Higher Education

Prepared after study of the institution's self-study report  
and a visit to the campus on April 10-13, 2011

The Members of the Team:

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This report is a confidential document prepared as an educational service for the benefit of the institution. All comments in the report are made in good faith, in an effort to assist Hamilton College. This report is based solely on an educational evaluation of the institution and of the manner in which it appears to be carrying out its educational objectives.

AT THE TIME OF THE VISIT

President:

Joan Hinde Stewart

Chief Academic Officer:

Patrick Reynolds, Interim Dean of Faculty and Professor of Biology

Chair of the Board of Trustees:

A.G. Lafley

Hamilton College

198 College Hill Road

Clinton, NY 13323

## **I. Context and Nature of the Visit**

Hamilton College is a private residential liberal arts college, founded in 1793 as the Hamilton-Oneida Academy and chartered in 1812. It enrolled only males until 1978, when it merged with Kirkland College and became a coeducational institution. Today it enrolls just over 1800 students and has as its mission “to provide an educational experience that emphasizes academic excellence and the development of students as human beings.”

Hamilton College offers the Bachelor’s degree. It has no branch campuses, additional locations, or distance learning programs. Other instructional sites include the Hamilton Program in New York City and the Term in Washington, D.C.

Hamilton’s self-study was comprehensive with three areas of emphasis: diversity, the open curriculum, and the effective use of resources in the current challenging economic environment. The Interim Dean of Faculty and the Assistant Dean of Faculty for Institutional Research co-chaired the Self-Study Steering Committee which included ten additional members of the faculty and administrative staff. Eight working groups, each of which was co-chaired by a member of the Steering Committee, addressed one or more of the Middle States standards. These groups included faculty, staff, and students.

## **II. Affirmation of Continued Compliance with Requirements of Affiliation**

Based on review of the self-study, interviews, the certification statement supplied by Hamilton College, and other institutional documents, the visiting team certifies that Hamilton College continues to meet the eligibility requirements in *Characteristics of Excellence*.

## **III. Compliance with Federal Requirements; Issues Relative to State Regulatory or Other Accrediting Agency Requirements**

Based on review of the Self-Study Report, certification by the institution, other institutional documents, and interviews, the team affirms that the institution’s Title IV cohort default rate is within federal limits. The team also affirms that the institution meets relevant requirements under the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008. The team relied primarily on institutional certification to make these determinations.

## **IV. Evaluation Overview**

The Visiting Team’s visit to Hamilton confirmed our initial sense, derived from the Self-Study Report and many other supporting documents, that Hamilton College meets the *Standards of Excellence*. The Self Study Report was well organized and informative, as well as helpful in establishing that Hamilton continues to meet the standards for accreditation. There was a wealth of supporting information that was organized in such a way that it was readily accessible to the Visiting Team.

We found a College that is clear about and unified around its mission. We commend Hamilton for the strong and supportive learning environment that it provides for its students. Given the high level of student satisfaction with their educational experience, it is perhaps not surprising that Hamilton has a strong record of alumni support. The Visiting Team commends Hamilton

for its excellence in financial planning, for its strength in the area of institutional assessment, and for their strong focus on goal-setting and achievement which is modeled well by the President and members of the Senior Staff.

Our non-binding suggestions for improvement are many, but all are focused on helping an already excellent institution make continued progress. Most importantly, we suggest that Hamilton move quickly to complete the process of identifying institutional and departmental learning goals and that the College work to assure that data collected about student learning be used in ways that will improve even further the fine quality of teaching and learning that goes on at Hamilton. We encourage Hamilton to enhance and assess faculty advising in ways that will assure strong support of individual student achievement of the College's learning goals. We also applaud Hamilton's focus on diversity and encourage Hamilton to integrate the many efforts under way by articulating and implementing a renewed college diversity plan.

## **V. Compliance with Accreditation Standards**

### **Chapter 2: Mission and Goals**

**This section covers the following standard:**

#### **Standard 1: Mission and Goals**

**The institution meets this standard.**

#### Summary of evidence and findings:

The mission of Hamilton College is "to provide an educational experience that emphasizes academic excellence and the development of students as human beings, as we prepare them to make choices and accept responsibilities of citizenship in a democratic world of intellect and diversity." This mission statement (or close variations on it) appears in multiple publications and websites and is well understood and endorsed by faculty, administrators, staff, trustees, and students.

The self-study articulates a list of desired outcomes of a Hamilton education that appear in various places, including the College Catalogue, the Faculty Handbook, and the 2009 Strategic Plan. A fundamental element of the Hamilton undergraduate experience emphasizes the development of students through its open curriculum which "provides highly motivated students with both the freedom and responsibility to make educational choices that emphasize breadth and depth — all the while supported by strong faculty-student advising and an emphasis on oral and written communication" (cited from Hamilton College website). The College also fosters personal growth and leadership development in its extracurricular residential life programs and activities.

#### Significant accomplishments:

- The 2009 strategic planning process is exemplary in its engagement of the College community and in its focus on institutional mission. The four strategic themes articulated in the plan are accompanied by action steps that outline how these themes will be pursued and provide a blueprint for the assessment of progress towards the goals presented.

- The 2009 strategic plan includes a commitment to “being a school of opportunity,” and outlines a plan for the recruitment and retention of under-represented students to enrich the social and cultural experiences of the campus community. A significant accomplishment is the opening of the Days-Massolo Center to support and promote diversity awareness and foster dialogue among members of the College community, a goal articulated in the 2004 Diversity Plan. The Trustees’ financial commitment to a need-blind admissions policy (coupled with a commitment to meet full financial need) clearly advances Hamilton’s mission as a school of opportunity.

Non-binding findings for improvement:

- In their Self-Study Report, the Steering Committee recommends that the President and Trustees constitute a panel to update the formal mission statement and develop corresponding goals statements that refer to the basic learning outcomes that Hamilton students should achieve. We have learned from our conversations on campus that Hamilton has already begun to move towards the development of a clear set of educational goals that the faculty will vote on in the near future. We applaud these efforts and would like to reinforce the importance of a continuing clear connection between mission and learning goals.
- Given Hamilton’s focus on the development of students as human beings, we would suggest that the goals of the residential, co-curricular, and extra-curricular programs be clearly articulated and tied directly to the overall mission of the College.
- The Visiting Team endorses Hamilton’s recommendation that they commit to a continuing study of alumni outcomes to determine the degree to which the College is meeting its goals for their graduates.
- Hamilton has made progress in the recruitment of a more diverse student body. Given the emphasis on diversity in the Self-Study Report, we suggest the development of a renewed, coherent, integrated institutional diversity plan that includes a focus on continuing student recruitment and retention, faculty recruitment and retention, campus climate, curricular integration, and assessment.

### **Chapter 3: Planning, Resource Allocation, and Institutional Resources**

**This section covers the following standards:**

**Standard 2: Planning, Resource Allocation, and Institutional Renewal**

**Standard 3: Institutional Resources**

**The institution meets these standards.**

Summary of evidence and findings:

**Planning, Resource Allocation, and Institutional Renewal**

Hamilton College has been committed to a sustained comprehensive strategic planning process. Since the last accreditation review in 2001, the College developed new strategic plans in 2002 and 2009. The 2009 plan utilized a transparent process that sought community involvement and continuous feedback. This new plan established four clear priorities for the institution that focused on the challenges of changing demographics and the downturn in the economy:

1. An academic program that is rigorous, challenging and relevant to a new generation of students

2. Student services that encourage and support personal development and responsibility
3. Financial aid that meets the demonstrated need of every student, and a long-term goal of being need-blind in admission
4. An inclusive community whose demographics reflect those of the coming generation of faculty and college-bound students

The responsibility for each of the action items of the strategic plan have been assigned to one or more members of the Senior Staff for implementation. College progress on accomplishing these action items is updated on a regular basis and posted on the strategic plan website.

The institution is committed to ongoing long-range planning beyond the development of its recent strategic plan. The institution has established two standing committees committed to discussing strategic issues: the on-campus Planning Committee composed of senior staff, faculty, and students, and the Trustee Committee on Planning.

The College has used benchmarks, surveys, and peer analysis to make decisions, improve its programs and services, and to provide guidance in the development of new goals and initiatives. Examples of these assessment instruments and sources of data include campus surveys (e.g., National Survey of Student Engagement, Senior Survey), Campus Planning Notebook, Strategic Indicators Dashboard, Equity Scorecard, long range enrollment projections, five-year financial projections, Financial Indicators Survey, and Moody's financial peer analysis.

College goals are set by the Senior Staff on an annual basis and are linked to the strategic goals. Progress on the College goals are discussed and documented by senior staff on a monthly basis. The College makes resource allocations based on the strategic plan goals and priorities. For example, in the 2010-2011 budget proposal, the College proposed to fund the Need-Blind Promise by a combination of Trustee bridge gifts, Bicentennial Initiatives gifts for the new endowment, and an increased Annual Fund goal.

Other planning efforts of the College include an annual study by Sightlines that reviews progress on overall facilities renewal, an Integrated Facilities Plan, 2004 Diversity Strategic Plan, Information Technology strategic directions, and academic program reviews.

### **Institutional Resources**

The College has been financially managed very effectively over the past ten years. Hamilton's financial resources are strong, and external confidence in those resources is evidenced by the College's Aa2 Moody's rating. This strength in institutional resources can be attributed to prudent financial management, a low discount rate, a strong endowment, a low endowment spending rate, a strong alumni participation rate, a growing annual fund, and the ability of the College to control costs.

In 2008-2009, the College adopted a new endowment spending formula called the "mixed rule." This formula uses 70% of the previous year's spending plus the Higher Education Price Index, plus 5% of the average of the prior four quarters endowment value weighted at 30%. The endowment spending rate for 2011-2012 will be 5.1%. The spending rate for the previous five years has ranged from 3.6% to 5.1%. The College plans to add a special endowment draw for campaign operating expenses for three years and an additional draw for need-blind financial

aid as new endowment monies are raised for this strategic initiative. The discount rate for 2011-2012 will be 33.7%. The discount rate for the previous five years has ranged from 30.2% to 32.45%.

The College's total institutional debt was \$139,006,000 as of June 30, 2010. For the 2011-2012 budget, the College's annual debt service will be \$8,397,700 representing 7.3% of the College's \$114,746,000 operating budget. In 2010, the College refinanced its Series 1999 debt resulting in debt service reductions of approximately \$2.6 million over the term of the bonds.

The College has continued to develop and use financial benchmarks and metrics to track performance and has analyzed itself against its peers in the areas of tuition, room, board, staffing levels, salaries, and other financial indicators. The College uses extensive modeling for financial forecasting and to test financial assumptions and plans.

The College has established a process and guidelines for requests for new or replaced faculty positions. Since 2006, the College has not added faculty positions except for those funded by grants or situations that provided the College with the opportunity to increase the diversity of the faculty. This process has resulted in five faculty positions being reallocated from one department to another since 2006. When a non-faculty position becomes vacant, the responsible Senior Staff member brings a proposal to the Senior Staff for discussion before being considered by the President. In 2002, a non-faculty staffing review resulted in \$1 million in personnel and non-personnel cost reductions. In 2008, the College eliminated another five non-faculty positions to provide relief to the College's operating budget.

The College's budget process is aligned with the College's mission, goals, and strategic plan, which provides for an annual budget and five-year budget projections. The College utilizes an online budget tool for collecting the budget requests of campus units and cost centers. The institution provides clear operating budget guidelines for the submission of budget requests. The guidelines communicate the priorities of the institution and set realistic expectations for budget submissions. The College asks units to look for ways to reduce costs, reorganize wherever possible and appropriate, and eliminate non-essential expenses.

The budget process is transparent and iterative. The process involves the campus community, department chairs, on-campus Budget Committee, Senior Staff, and the Board of Trustees. Budget requests are evaluated in light of addressing the strategic plan priorities, enhancing the quality of the academic programs, and increasing access for a student to a Hamilton education.

In December 2010, the College publicly launched its "Bicentennial Initiatives," a \$117 million capital campaign that will conclude in June 2013. The campaign's top priority is \$40 million in new endowment to fund the need-blind admissions strategic initiative. The College is also seeking to raise \$35 million to construct three arts facilities, \$30 million in unrestricted contributions to the Annual Fund, and \$12 million to address college priorities based on donor interest. The commitment of the Trustees to the need-blind admissions strategic goal and the capital campaign is to be commended. In the midst of the recession, the Trustees pledged over \$3 million in bridge money to make need-blind admissions an immediate reality. The Trustees' financial commitment and support has inspired the campus community. Despite the downturn in the economy, the College has experienced continued growth in the Annual Fund and the alumni giving rate continues to be above 50%.

The College operates over 1.8 million square feet of facilities and formally maintains 600 of the 1450 acres that the College owns. The College developed an Integrated Facilities plan in Fall 2005. The College updated the plan in response to the 2002 strategic plan and the new 2009 strategic plan. On an annual basis, the College uses Sightlines to conduct an evaluation of Hamilton's facilities and to develop a comparison with its peer institutions. The College has continued to increase the annual contribution for plant renewal and is striving to reach a goal of \$9.4 million per year as recommended by the annual Sightlines report.

The annual operating budget for technology equipment and initiatives includes support for projects as well as funding for replacement equipment, such as computers, networks, servers and projectors. Information Technology continually updates the College's replacement and upgrade plans for each of these areas to adapt to the current and projected level of funding. Funds in the general equipment budget are used to purchase and renew non-computer related capital items such as furniture, vehicles, electronic devices, classroom instrumentation, etc. A clearly articulated process has been established for submitting, evaluating, and prioritizing general equipment requests.

#### Significant accomplishments:

- The development of the 2009 strategic plan which engaged the community in a transparent process, provided continuous feedback, and established four clear priorities.
- The College has expressed strong commitment to student access in setting a strategic goal of need-blind admissions and eliciting the support to make that a reality from Trustees and through a campaign.
- The College's funding of Posse, diversity staffing, and the new cultural education center, recently named the Days-Massolo Center, demonstrates a strong institutional commitment to increasing the diversity of the College community.
- In the area of finance, the use of financial benchmarks and peer comparisons is excellent, as is the regular Sightlines evaluation of facilities.
- The College has invested in excellent teaching facilities.
- The Hamilton community engaged in campus-wide cost-cutting initiatives in order to weather the economic downturn.
- The support the College receives from alumni through annual giving is enviable, especially in this difficult economy.
- The College has an impressive history of strong management of the endowment and its spending rate.
- The College's "Aa2" rating from Moody's is an indicator of strong financial health.

#### Non-binding findings for improvement:

- The visiting team affirms the College's desire to focus on addressing strategic issues as they arise, to regularly update the strategic plan, and to focus on the College's competitive position in future strategic planning exercises. The team also agrees that it would be helpful to continue to provide clear internal communication of the College's priorities and goals.
- The College should publicize progress on the future fundamental priorities in addition to the action items on the strategic plan website.

- The visiting team encourages the College to renew the 2004 diversity plan and to integrate and coordinate diversity initiatives across the campus.

#### **Chapter 4: Leadership, Governance and Administration**

**This section covers the following standards:**

**Standard 4: Leadership and Governance**

**Standard 5: Administration**

**The institution meets these standards.**

##### **Leadership and Governance**

###### Summary of evidence and findings:

The College has a clearly defined governance structure that enables it to realize its mission in an effective manner. The Trustees describe the Board as strong, collegial, and engaging with campus constituencies and alumni, while exercising appropriate fiduciary responsibilities. The Board members individually and collectively clearly value and support the mission of Hamilton College. The Board is composed of actively involved members, who participate in a large structure of 11 committees, through which the Board carries out its work. The Board engages appropriately in oversight and policy-making, and collaborates with the Senior Staff in long-range strategic planning. The Senior Staff described a healthy and beneficial partnership with trustee committee chairs. The Hamilton Board annually assesses the President and Senior Staff based upon annual goals. In addition, the Board regularly assesses its process after each quarterly meeting, making adjustments for productivity and efficiency as needed.

Additional evidence includes written and accessible Board documents and minutes, and the *Board Statement of Commitment and Responsibilities* includes clear language about conflict of interest and expectations about participation in fundraising. Hamilton strives for more diverse representation on the Board, and that remains a goal that continues from the 2002 Plan into the 2009 Plan.

Faculty governance is conducted through a series of committees whose members are active and animated, clearly providing significant input and service to the College. The committee structure is described as involving a significant amount of time and effort which, perhaps, could be streamlined without losing valuable faculty input. While this is a perennial issue in higher education, as suggested in the Self-Study Report, there may be value in review of the composition and function of governance committees that have a broad charge and a heavy agenda for possible realignment of the workload so that faculty stay engaged and issues do not get delayed in the committee system.

Student governance is conducted through the Student Assembly which is viewed by participants as an effective vehicle for participating in policy decisions. As part of the 2009 Plan implementation, student representatives now serve on the Faculty Committee on Budget and Finance and the Faculty Committee on Admission and Financial Aid. In addition, students are actively engaged in all aspects of campus life, with a robust set of activities and the ability to formulate new groups readily.

Overall, Hamilton College operates in a climate of shared collegial governance with involvement of all constituencies. The 2009 Strategic Plan includes a strategic theme entitled Self-Governing Community and action items for improving participation of all constituent groups.

## **Administration**

### Summary of evidence and findings:

Hamilton College's administration is organized with an appropriate structure to support the College's mission. The President has been in office since 2003 and is the clear leader of strategic planning. Many members of the Senior Staff bring considerable experience. The team works collegially, they effectively engage in data-driven decision-making, and they clearly share a passion to continue the traditions of excellence of Hamilton College into the future. Information Technology is highly regarded as providing excellent resources and service, particularly in support of teaching and learning.

The administrative structure includes shared responsibility for carrying out strategic plans, with Senior Staff members assigned to shepherd specific goals in the 2009 Plan. The Senior Staff also develops annual goals and tracks progress with a monthly updating process. There is adequate information sharing among faculty and administrators, and decision-making systems are in place and understood.

### Significant accomplishments:

- The strength of Board commitment to Hamilton College and its mission was evidenced in the extraordinary pledge to provide bridge funding required to move forward with need-blind admissions. This commitment was especially compelling since it was made at a time of economic uncertainty.
- There are strong traditions and regular opportunities for students to interact with Trustees throughout their Hamilton years.
- The design of the Board structure includes Alumni Trustees which provides an exceptional grooming process for future trustees.
- The commitment to diversity is evident in the appointment of the new Senior Staff position of Chief Diversity Officer.
- The recent establishment of a Staff Assembly that is currently defining its charge and procedures will improve communication and is likely to enhance the way employees view their value to the college.

### Non-binding findings for improvement:

- The Visiting Team encourages the College to continue its focus on building a diverse Board that includes more women and people of color, as noted in the Self-Study.
- The College should consider ways to help faculty governance committees work more efficiently.
- A standard orientation process for new staff should be implemented and perhaps offered quarterly through collaboration between the Staff Assembly and Human Resources.
- The employee performance review processes should be enhanced to include professional and personal development action plans.

## Chapter 5: Integrity

**This section covers the following standard:**

### **Standard 6: Integrity**

**The institution meets this standard.**

#### Summary of evidence and findings:

In the conduct of its programs and activities involving the public and the constituencies it serves, Hamilton College demonstrates adherence to ethical standards and its own stated goals and policies, providing support for academic and intellectual freedom. With a mission “to provide an educational experience that emphasizes academic excellence and the development of students as human beings,” the institution emphasizes that graduates will be intellectually and personally developed, flexible, and prepared for a lifetime of continuing education, careers, and civic engagement. While the institutional focus on diversity, resource management, and the open curriculum is still in process, much progress seems to have been made and there is a commitment to next steps in regard to diversity planning and coordination.

#### Significant accomplishments:

- Policies, procedures and public announcements related to grievance procedures, employee hiring and firing practices, and intellectual freedom are well publicized and widely available.
- A climate of openness, respect, and honesty is discussed in publications and is supported with data and the personal interactions that the Visiting Team had with the campus community.
- The institution communicates mission, goals, and expectations to students and employees in multiple formats.
- In general, faculty, administrators, staff, and students are highly satisfied with their experience at the institution.

#### Non-binding findings for improvement:

- The team agrees with all three recommendations from the Self Study Report, including the development of a single handbook (for administrators, staff, and Maintenance & Operations), conducting exit interviews with all departing employees, and administering employee satisfaction surveys.

## Chapter 6: Institutional Assessment

**This section covers the following standard:**

### **Standard 7: Institutional Assessment**

**The institution meets this standard.**

#### Summary of evidence and findings:

Evaluation activities are well documented through a rich series of reports that examine appropriate questions and regularly provide clear presentations of data and interpretations. Hamilton is exemplary in the degree to which it makes use of sophisticated qualitative analysis

to complement high quality quantitative approaches to assessment. The serious, sustained, and productive involvement of Hamilton faculty in designing and preparing evaluation materials is a notable and distinctive feature of their approach.

Assessment initiatives are initiated by faculty, staff, and administrators, and most often organized by the Office of Institutional Research in collaboration with a range of committees and with the senior administration. Institutional reports and analyses are made available through the IR office's web site and in presentations across the campus. An impressively wide range of analytic techniques is employed across the College—there are some longitudinal data, and reports sometimes include multiple measures of the same phenomena.

Hamilton's assessment efforts reflect serious, ongoing evaluation in most departments and programs across campus. Hamilton is well on its way to integrating successfully the many related aspects of its assessment work, with some admirably clear examples of the use of assessment data to guide planning and resource allocation.

Significant accomplishments:

- The College uses sophisticated qualitative analysis to complement high quality quantitative approaches to assessment.
- The Office of Institutional Research produces prolific, high quality research and analysis.
- The College uses strategic and effective data-driven planning and analysis in the areas of budget and finance.
- The involvement of Hamilton faculty in designing or creating evaluation approaches and materials is both sustained and productive.

Non-binding findings for improvement:

- The College should develop a more formal institution-wide assessment plan that maximizes the use of data to motivate and to document improvement in programs and initiatives across the college.
- The Visiting Team supports the goal noted in the Self-Study Report to document the link between goals, strategy, and outcomes in regard to overcoming differences in satisfaction between majority and minority students.

## **Chapter 7: Student Admissions, Retention and Support Services**

**This section covers the following standards:**

**Standard 8: Student Admissions and Retention**

**Standard 9: Student Support Services**

**The institution meets these standards.**

Summary of evidence and findings:

Hamilton College has developed and implemented admissions and student success policies and practices that support its students and its mission. There is clear evidence that the College is transparent and accurate in its reporting of all requisite information to its prospective student constituencies such as financial aid, transfer credit policies, retention, etc. Students are well supported through athletics, financial aid policies, diversity services and student organizations serving diverse populations, residence life, career services, academic support services and

more. Hamilton College uses a variety of research methods and participates in a number of national assessment programs to acquire data and evaluate its services to students and, more importantly, to improve continuously upon those services. Students' private information is well guarded and its dissemination is governed by the appropriate rules and procedures.

Significant accomplishments:

- To paraphrase the Dean of Admissions, Hamilton College uses data with a soul. The accumulation and assessment of data inform the College's actions, but the College also reviews its mission before making decisions that impact students. This is evident in the decision to become fully need blind in admissions to carry out the College's mission of being a school of opportunity. Likewise, it is apparent that the College will not be satisfied with its retention of students of color, although results are exemplary, until there is no disparity between racial and ethnic groups.
- The College's efforts to make the Hamilton experience one of lasting importance to its students has led to student satisfaction levels, retention rates, and graduation figures of which many institutions would be envious.
- Efforts to recruit and retain diverse populations have been highly successful because of the College's genuine concern for and dedication to its students and their development as individuals.

Non-binding findings for improvement:

- The Team concurs with the Self Study Report's suggestions for improvement.
- The College should continue to expand its extensive evaluation of diversity, based on ethnicity, with equally robust evaluations based on sexual orientation, gender, religion, socio-economic status, disabilities, and/or other constituencies of importance to the institution. Some students with whom the Visiting Team met are proud that their efforts have helped the College create the Cultural Education Center. They want it to be a safe place for discourse and support, for community education about vital issues, and perhaps most importantly for diverse groups to meet. They support the analysis of its use right from the start to assure that it is meeting the needs of the student body.
- The College should seek the intentional integration of diversity, advising, and academic support into its lifeblood. To gain its most impactful foothold, Hamilton might consider how best to integrate diversity across the curriculum.
- The College should think further about the integration of academic programs, academic support services, and student life offerings. Given Hamilton's focus on the whole person, students could benefit from the development of co-curricular learning goals that support and/or are in conjunction with academic learning goals.

## **Chapter 8: Faculty**

**This section covers the following standard:**

**Standard 10: Faculty**

**The institution meets this standard.**

### Summary of evidence and findings:

The faculty is well qualified to design and implement the College's academic program. Faculty and students receive strong support from the Library, IT, and the academic support centers. Attention is paid to integrating new faculty into the College through orientation and mentoring. The College has in place multiple systems to collect and discuss teaching quality, including peer review, and research progress. On-line course evaluations are thought to provide a reliable source of information. The physical education program uses a modified form to adjust for the different type of teaching being done by physical education faculty. A new process for formal annual reviews has been in place since 2007. These systems work well for continuing faculty.

The Faculty Handbook addresses expectations for tenure and promotion. Newly created department-specific guidelines for renewal, tenure, and promotion have been developed (with the exception of a few departments) and articulate department specific interpretation of the college-wide standards for teaching, research, and service. They have generally been well received.

Consistent with goals articulated in its 2009 Strategic Plan, the College pays considerable attention to attracting and retaining a diverse faculty.

### Significant accomplishments:

- The College has worked on and continues to be committed to recruiting and retaining a diverse faculty.
- The College has sought to address ambiguity about reappointment, tenure, and promotion expectations by creation of departmental guidelines which have been well received.
- The College has added beautiful new academic buildings, including the Science Center and Kirner- Johnson building, which offer wonderful spaces for teaching, formal and informal interaction, and group work.

### Non-binding findings for improvement:

- The College should complement its well-designed process for assessing faculty performance and providing feedback with a process to assess the performance of one-year visiting faculty and adjuncts early in their first term, as recommended in the Self-Study Report.
- The College should sustain its plan for recruiting and retaining a diverse faculty to continue progress in this area as faculty positions open up in coming years.
- New faculty orientation should be reorganized so that it is spread throughout the first year, with less time at the beginning of the semester. Support should be provided to help junior faculty develop as advisors.
- The College should provide an annual opportunity for a meeting among junior faculty, the Dean of Faculty, and the chair of the committee on appointments in order to ensure that junior faculty understand renewal and tenure procedures.
- Hamilton's faculty would appreciate increased staff support to manage more effectively the work of faculty committees.
- The College should consider opportunities to streamline the committee structure without reducing the faculty's role in governance; for example, when possible the

College should consider relying on standing committees to take on ad hoc tasks rather than constituting new committees.

### **Chapter 9 (part 1): Educational Offerings, General Education, Related Educational Activities**

**This section covers the following standards:**

**Standard 11: Educational offerings**

**Standard 12: General Education**

**Standard 13: Related Educational Activities**

**The institution meets this standard.**

#### Summary of evidence and findings:

Hamilton College is a residential college featuring an emphasis on liberal education and offering courses and concentrations (including 40 concentrations and 37 minors) in traditional liberal arts areas. A review of these offerings reveals that they are consistent with and very appropriate for the College's educational mission. There is evidence from written materials and from conversations with faculty members and students that Hamilton College offers a very fine academic program.

The Hamilton Catalogue appropriately describes academic policies, including degree requirements, grading scales, transfer credit policy, policies with respect to off-campus study, etc. The Catalogue clearly indicates compliance with FERPA regulations.

Shortly after the last reaccreditation review the College moved to an open curriculum, with the degree requirements being a total number of credits, completion of a concentration, a quantitative and symbolic literacy requirement (one course), a writing requirement (three writing intensive courses), and a second year seminar. More recently the second year seminar requirement was dropped. Students must complete a senior capstone experience in their concentration. The requirements, as well as those for completion of concentrations, are appropriate for Hamilton's institutional mission.

Although the College has no breadth or distribution requirements, there are clear statements of the goals of liberal education in the College Catalogue and the Advisors Handbook, and students are asked to be attentive to those goals. Over the past ten years, Hamilton has recognized that good academic advising is necessary for the success of their curricular structure and philosophy and that it could use some improvement. Steps are being taken to recognize advising as a key academic activity and to support faculty development focused upon improving advising.

It appears that there is strong support for the open curriculum among faculty and students, but that there remains work to be done to gain widespread understanding of the nature and strengths of that structure and to develop academic advising to serve that curricular structure more effectively. First, the faculty needs to engage in frequent, on-going conversations to develop a shared sense of what constitutes a liberal education at Hamilton. Second, the College needs to support faculty development activities to move academic advising from a model perceived as service (are the requirements fulfilled?) to a model that is fundamentally teaching, where faculty members are guiding students through the development of an

appropriate model of liberal education designed specifically for them. The College has been looking carefully at institutions with similar curricular structures to see what it can learn from their longer experience.

The College has a number of professionally staffed (with appropriate use of peer tutors) academic support centers in Writing, Oral Communications, language learning, English for Speakers of Other Languages, and Quantitative Literacy. Centers provide support for students in applying those skills in their courses, and also offer some of their own courses for students who need particular development in these areas. The needs for such services have increased as the College has become more diverse. Although these support services appear to be of high quality, there appears to be little effort to coordinate the centers and their efforts with each other or with the library and instructional technology. The HILL group, **H**amilton **I**nformation & **L**earning **L**iaisons, is a collaboration of the Library, Instructional Technology Services, and the Oral Communication Center, and could serve as an example of such collaboration.

The College offers a wide array of courses on cultural diversity and Non-Western traditions. Although a substantial number of graduates complete such courses, NSSE results indicate less experience and exposure to diversity than peer institutions. The College is not satisfied with these results, and should work on ways in which to encourage more widespread enrollment in such courses.

The College runs or co-sponsors four academic programs abroad in France, Spain, China, and India. In addition the College runs three domestic off-campus programs in New York City, Washington DC, and Boston. Combined, these programs enroll over 200 students (close to 200 for the international and 50 for the domestic programs); the majority of students attending the overseas programs are matriculated at colleges other than Hamilton. The Spain, China, and India programs are operated in collaboration with similar institutions. The domestic and Paris programs tend to enroll a majority of Hamilton students. Programs typically include a faculty director who is either a regular Hamilton faculty member or who is on the faculty of one of its collaborating institutions. These programs appear to be of very high quality, and hold to academic standards similar to on-campus programs.

One member of the team visited the Hamilton College Junior Year in France (HCJYF) program on March 27-30, 2011. Prior to his visit, he was provided with promotional materials on the program, various student guides and handouts, reports for the program directors, and CVs of faculty involved in teaching some courses. On site he met with the faculty director, faculty members teaching courses for the program, staff of the affiliated local universities, and students enrolled in the program. The HCJYF is a year-long program, in which a minority of students participates for only one semester. Faculty members in the Department of French serve as the resident director for an academic year on a rotational basis. The program shares space with several other programs operated by American universities in Reed Hall. Students typically enroll in four or five courses, some of which are offered by faculty members that Hamilton College employs and additional courses in which they directly enroll through local universities including the University of Paris 3 and 6, the Institut d'Etudes Politiques or Sciences Po, and the Institut Catholique, as well as other more specialized classes from other institutions. Currently, about two-thirds of the students in the program are Hamilton students and the remaining third come from peer liberal arts colleges.

The number of credit hours given for courses taken from Hamilton and from other universities is appropriate, and, if anything, on the conservative side. It is clear that the students are well prepared for the program. The faculty members teaching courses for Hamilton are well qualified, with all but one having a PhD; the only one who does not is a writing instructor who is a specialist in French fiction and who is well-connected in the writing community. The institutions where the students are enrolled in regular university courses are first-rate institutions, with international reputations. The students live with local individuals or families in the Paris area and note that this is one of the best aspects of the program as they gain language facility and learn French culture from interaction with their hosts. Part of the orientation and one of the courses that students can take focuses upon the French approach to teaching and learning. The students are provided with individual tutors to assist them with their courses and to help them adjust to living and studying in Paris. The program director spends considerable time with the students upon their arrival, helping them to select courses and then assisting with the registration process, and later, with their course work.

Students, both in groups and individually, are very positive about their courses, experiences, and the overall program. They observe that the Hamilton- offered courses are of high quality and challenging. The courses offered in universities are also of high quality; however, students note difficulties in adjusting to the different large university and French style pedagogies.

There has been a marked increase in the number of Hamilton students who study off-campus, particularly outside the US. Hamilton encourages students and provides generous financial aid. In addition, the open curriculum provides flexibility that is supportive. However, the increase in enrollment makes the issues that are in need of institutional attention all the more significant. First, when asked about what the learning goals for off-campus study were, neither the Assessment Advisory Group nor the Committee on Academic Policy were able to respond. Since over half of Hamilton students study off-campus, it would seem important to have clear academic goals. Second, the off-campus study program seems to have little academic or faculty oversight or ownership. The off-campus study director is a former faculty member, but reports through the student life division and also serves to support on-campus international students; staffing in this area seems insufficient to support Hamilton's goals. There is no faculty committee setting goals or with oversight over off-campus study, nor do departments regularly consider which off-campus programs seem appropriate for concentrators to complete courses that contribute to the concentration. No consistent program of visitation of programs by the director or by faculty members exists. Although Hamilton administers its own excellent off-campus programs, many students enroll in programs offered by others. It appears that Hamilton exercises relatively little oversight over these other programs. Since many Hamilton students are investing a semester or a year of their undergraduate education in these programs, it would be wise to develop processes for improved monitoring of their quality and the ways in which these experiences integrate into the rest of the Hamilton experience. Third, students studying off-campus are required to "Declare an Academic Leave of Absence". This is surprising since the students are not really on leave, but simply studying in a Hamilton approved program away from the campus, for which Hamilton will make a transcript entry and award credit toward the degree. Finally, the calendar of applying for off-campus programs appears to complicate management of enrollments. Students may apply and select programs very late in the previous semester, and the College has difficulty in managing the semester-to-semester numbers to maintain a consistent on-campus enrollment. The College could consider requiring students to apply for off-campus study late in the fall or early in the spring for either

semester so that they could work towards achieving a balanced semester-to-semester on-campus enrollment as well as total enrollment (by adjusting admission targets). The College is currently studying these issues with an outside consultant.

Academic programs undergo periodic program review roughly every ten years. There is flexibility in the structure of this process, which typically involves some peers from outside the institution.

There appears to be a less than ideal level of discussion among the faculty on a variety of academic issues including the role of general education and ways of delivering it, advising, how issues like diversity enter into general education, and the role of off-campus study. In the context of the open curriculum and the discussions of educational goals, the time seems ripe to engage the faculty in more thought about these and other curricular and pedagogical topics. Currently it does not appear that the office of the Dean of Faculty is structured in such a way to promote engagement of the faculty in sustained, long-term discussions and initiatives to address these issues. The new Dean of Faculty and the Associate Dean should consider a level of staffing and organization of duties to support the faculty in small groups and as a whole in these important discussions.

#### Significant accomplishments:

- In the time since the last comprehensive review the College has undertaken a major curricular reorganization with the introduction of the open curriculum and with the introduction, assessment and removal of second year seminars.
- The College has a strong commitment to developing written and oral communication skills. Discussions with students and faculty members as well as alumni survey data indicate that these are widely held goals that are valued.
- The senior project in the concentration provides an excellent opportunity to integrate the learning that students have accomplished, both in their liberal education as well as in the concentration.

#### Non-binding findings for improvement:

- The Dean of Faculty should increasingly engage the faculty in thoughtful discussion of a variety of academic topics including: educational goals, how the educational offerings contribute to general education, strategies for academic advising, and the goals of off-campus study in a Hamilton education. This would provide a rich agenda for faculty discussion and action in the near future.
- Hamilton should continue its discussion of the administration of off-campus study and develop more appropriate staffing levels and structure for the support of what has become a very important part of the College curriculum. As noted, Hamilton should engage faculty in a discussion of the goals for off-campus study both at the institutional level and at the level where it intersects with concentrations and minors. In addition Hamilton should examine and clarify the leave status of students in off-campus programs (should they be classified as on academic leave or be classified as enrolled students, but in an off-campus program), and strategies for improved management of on-campus enrollment.
- While there is currently an impressive level of academic support for students, these efforts appear to be largely separated without sufficient coordination or collaboration.

The College should consider ways in which to better coordinate academic support centers and the program for information literacy.

- The College should carefully examine whether the currently very lean professional staffing in the Dean of Faculty office is sufficient to support the academic program to which the College aspires.
- The College should continue to refine its transcript analysis to monitor student course completion, how student course completion patterns change, and how they tie to the College's learning goals for its students.

## **Chapter 9 (part 2): The Assessment of Student Learning**

**This section covers the following standard:**

### **Standard 14: Assessment of Student Learning**

**The institution meets this standard.**

#### Summary of evidence and findings:

The Self-Study Report identifies critical thinking, oral communication, writing, quantitative and scientific reasoning, information literacy, and interdisciplinary perspective as basic competencies that are inculcated in Hamilton students, regardless of their area of concentration (and which derive from Hamilton's mission as a liberal arts college). These goals have not been formally adopted by the faculty, but there is a plan to adopt these (or related learning goals) formally in the near future in combination with systematic, outcome-oriented assessment.

For several of these capacities, there is evidence of a curricular strategy designed to promulgate the desired competency. For example, there is a well-articulated writing requirement (supported by an excellent Writing Center with an innovative peer writing tutor program) designed to enhance Hamilton students' writing abilities. There is also direct evidence (through the Mellon Writing Project) of Hamilton's success in teaching writing.

There are centers for oral communication and quantitative literacy (as well as a new quantitative and symbolic reasoning requirement with explicit learning goals) intended to support the development of those related capacities. The focus on communication capacity can be found through syllabus review and faculty survey data. Student surveys are employed to determine students' sense of institutional impact on learning.

For scientific reasoning, Hamilton provides evidence in the form of course completion in science, math, and computer science (pointing out that engagement in these areas has fallen slightly under the open curriculum). In all these cases, Hamilton has variously analyzed course-taking patterns and faculty surveys to determine whether students are generally exposed to appropriate courses and coursework.

Although there is no particular course curriculum in support of the information literacy goal, the Self-Study Report presents indirect evidence from the Educause Center for Applied Research study and the National Survey of Student Engagement indicating that Hamilton students report significant engagement and a high level of skill in this area, especially—in the latter case—for seniors. The Self-Study Report goes on to articulate plans to improve the

freshman information literacy experience, and indicates that Hamilton is pursuing direct measures of information literacy through participation in the Research Practices Survey.

The Self-Study Report identifies critical thinking as a “meta-skill” in support of inquiry and analysis across the curriculum. The study indicates that the faculty has not formally articulated “critical thinking,” but does offer an excellent description of this crucial outcome in the document. Indirect evidence from NSSE and some direct evidence from the Wabash National Study are marshaled to substantiate Hamilton students’ level of engagement and achievement. These studies indicate that virtually all freshman and senior Hamilton students believe that the College contributed substantially to their capacity for critical thinking; the degree of improvement in critical thinking (for freshman, as measured by the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency) was typical of other liberal arts colleges.

After presenting some interesting research findings on the meaning of interdisciplinarity (part of the intriguing reports composing the Mellon Assessment Initiative), the Self-Study Report presents distribution evidence documenting the degree to which students explore the curriculum broadly. This section concludes with a discussion of diversity in which student satisfaction data, student participation data, and faculty survey data are presented.

At the departmental level, many (but not all) departments have articulated clear learning goals. There is a range of practice with regard to how (and how systematically) departments evaluate student progress on these goals, both at the individual and at the departmental level of analysis. The 2006 Middle States Evaluation Report had previously suggested that “...Hamilton ... begin work toward assessing student learning within its academic disciplines, the majors, minors, and concentrations.” More progress must still be made here, particularly in regard to the systematic use of direct outcomes measures to improve teaching and student learning. Two additional observations identified in the 2001 Accreditation Report are the need to increase the number of “...those who are incorporating systematic assessment techniques in their courses...” which “remain[s] small”, and the suggestion that “it is critical that an assessment system for advising be developed.” This second item takes on increased significance given Hamilton’s transition to the open curriculum a decade ago. Both of these challenges require further attention at the time of this review.

Hamilton correctly perceives the great opportunity senior projects present as powerful, authentic evidence of student learning. However, departments vary in the degree to which their senior project goals are articulated and in whether there is systematic assessment of achievement and progress at the individual student and departmental levels of analysis. We encourage the College to continue documenting that systematic evaluation of senior projects across department leads to improvements in student learning.

Departments periodically undergo program reviews, often with an outside evaluative component, and these reviews have led to improvements in curriculum and in the design of the senior project. At the institutional level, examples of the use of assessment data to support improvement include the elimination of the Sophomore Seminar Program, the modification and strengthening of the quantitative literacy requirement, and the development of the Writing and Oral Communication Centers.

Finally, the College is engaged in five recent or ongoing initiatives that demonstrate innovative and compelling assessment work at Hamilton (some of which are mentioned above): The Mellon Assessment Project, The Wabash National Study, The Longitudinal Study of Post-formal Reasoning, The Mellon Curricular Leaders Project, and the advent of the Assessment Advisory Group.

Collectively these programs and activities represent an increasing institutional focus on assessment and assessment-related research at the College. Particularly impressive here is the range of qualitative and quantitative methodologies employed, the extent to which this work is being jointly undertaken (and driven) by faculty and staff, and rigor and timeliness of the work. In many cases, this work defines the leading edge of excellence in research on student learning.

At the same time, the Visiting Team struggled to understand how the separate components of Hamilton's assessment efforts integrate into a coherent, systematic approach to assessment. Hamilton's strengths in institutional research and in faculty-led assessment work present a marvelous, but as yet not fully realized, opportunity to combine an extremely impressive research-based approach to assessment with a more systematic effort to: fully articulate learning goals (at all levels of the institution), make more systematic use of direct evidence of student learning, develop appropriate actions based on student learning data, implement these plans as practical, and determine the impact of these data-driven innovations on teaching and student learning.

#### Significant accomplishments:

- The College has great strength in the range of cutting-edge qualitatively and quantitatively sophisticated research and analysis employed in assessment.
- Work on assessment is being developed and driven jointly by faculty and staff (rather than as an essentially administrative initiative).

#### Non-binding findings for improvement:

- In the very near future the College should complete initiatives to formalize and disseminate general learning goals.
- The College should continue to develop appropriate outcome measures for general learning objectives, some of which directly measure the extent to which each Hamilton student succeeds in achieving the expected level of competency.
- The College should complete the process of developing departmentally-based goals for concentrations and senior projects and an approach to evaluating senior work that is used continuously to improve the curriculum, teaching, and learning.
- The College should also maximize the use of institutional and research-based data and analyses to improve teaching and student learning.
- The College should continue developing a sustainable, systematic plan for assessing student learning outcomes that regularly measures individual, departmental, and institutional progress on the most important institutional and departmental goals.
- The College should continue to develop a clear sense on the part of the faculty, administration, and staff of the systematic role that assessment of student learning outcomes should play in the evaluation of student achievement and departmental/institutional practice.

## **VI. Summary of Recommendations for Continuing Compliance and Requirements**

The Visiting Team made many suggestions that were included in this report. However, the Team made no recommendations and did not stipulate any requirements for continuing compliance.