

Hamilton College Strategic Planning Subcommittee Report, Summer 2008 *Student Recruitment and Retention*

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Our effectiveness in the areas of student recruitment and retention is to a large degree determined by our performance in areas addressed elsewhere in this strategic planning process. If, for example, students have a positive residential life experience, they are more likely to remain at Hamilton than if they do not. We have tried not to duplicate the work of other subcommittees, but some of our recommendations will of necessity overlap with other areas and will need to be harmonized therewith.

It is also important to note that even though we will discuss them separately, student recruitment and retention are linked in very basic ways. It seems self-evident, for example, that effective recruitment requires effective marketing, but if we fall into the trap of describing ourselves in ways that we believe will meet the perceived expectations of our target pool with little—or at least insufficient—regard for the accuracy of that description, retention must certainly suffer.

Student Recruitment

The success of our Admission colleagues in recruiting and enrolling increasingly strong classes is well documented, as is their success in making progress towards a more diverse student body. Nonetheless, there are still goals that can be identified, improvements that can be sought. (Monica Inzer and her staff have identified many of these.)

The changing demographics of the socioeconomic, geographic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds of high school graduates in the United States means that Hamilton in the years ahead will need to attract and serve a student population somewhat different from those of the past. If our applicant pool shrinks, both our yield and our selectivity may well decline. We can counter this by moving recruitment resources into new and growing areas.

It is essential that all recruitment materials, both written and electronic, describe with accuracy who we are and who we want to be. It is also important that the college's website be constructed so that prospective students can easily find the information that they seek. Our history is one of clear progress in so many ways, and we must not be reluctant to tell that story, being justly proud of programs such as HEOP and the Writing Center. We should not be shy about identifying and proclaiming our strengths, but we must also be careful not to exaggerate those strengths. This is not to say that we should limit ourselves to an accurate portrayal of the present moment, for our vision of who we hope to become is an essential element of who we are. It is important, however, to make clear the distinction between our present reality and our vision. To this end, it is important that those who market the institution should receive regular feedback on their work from those whom the marketing materials describe. The Faculty Committee on Admission and Financial Aid performed an audit of admissions publications this past year. This should be done on a regular basis and expanded to encompass similar regular reviews by students and residential life staff.

Financial aid has become an arena of competition for the best students. We have made the ethical decision not to use limited financial aid dollars to “buy” students who can afford to

pay for their own education. The next step is to increase the financial aid budget sufficiently so that we can return to need-blind admission. Monica Inzer has suggested a goal of returning to a need-blind admission policy by the college's bicentennial year of 2012, and we embrace that goal.

The packaging of student loans as part of a financial aid package has also become a major competitive arena. As the wealthiest institutions have removed loans from aid packages, those of us who do not are potentially at a competitive disadvantage. As long as the no-loan schools are largely those in the "top tier," we can probably continue to offer loans as part of our packages if the size of the loans remains capped at a reasonable number. By and large, a student accepted at Harvard or Yale will choose that school over Hamilton even if we offer an identical aid package. This will need to be monitored, of course, for if many of the colleges with whom we most directly compete for students should move to no-loan packages, the resulting competitive disadvantage may force us to find a way to offer similar packages. We hope that this does not happen, however, as we see potential motivational value in a student's investment in his or her education and agree with Dean Inzer that need-blind admission is a higher priority than no-loan aid packaging.

A real or potential issue in student retention is the fact that a couple of majors in the social sciences at the college have grown to the point that students and faculty in those majors seldom or never have the advantage of small classes. We suggest that our recruitment materials might highlight other areas to encourage the matriculation of students predisposed to major in academic programs with smaller numbers. It was suggested to us that in the business world a company that had a surplus of widgets in its inventory, but few gadgets, would be foolish to continue to push gadgets in its advertising. There is some aptness to that analogy.

Student Retention

Hamilton's student retention rate is a couple of points below our peers. As our trustee member pointed out, this is still an excellent number and far above most colleges in the country. Nonetheless, every student who does not complete his or her degree at Hamilton may be regarded as a failure at some level, and we embrace the idea of striving for perfection, even as we acknowledge that a 100% retention rate is a quixotic goal.

We have already discussed the importance of admitting students who have the capacity to thrive here, which requires us to portray ourselves to prospective students in ways that are honest and true. We want to take care, however, that we do not identify too narrowly the "right" student for Hamilton: intrinsic in the possibility of change and growth as an institution is a critical number of "misfits," without whom the *status quo* would remain blissfully stagnant and unchallenged.

As the demographics of our student body change, we will need to find ways to meet differing needs and expectations. If more students come from disadvantaged backgrounds, we will need to make certain that our curricular offerings meet them where they are. A failure to do so will result in increasing numbers of students leaving the college for reason of academic difficulty. It will become essential for the faculty Committee on Academic Policy to address this issue.

Historically, the college has made serious efforts to provide academic support for students who need it (Q-Lit program, tutoring program, HEOP tutoring program, and ESL program come quickly to mind). We should continue to provide and outline clear support structures for international, non-traditional, and special needs students to help meet both academic and *social* needs.

As we bring students to the Hill who have cultural/ethnic expressions or tastes that differ from those of the majority culture, we need to help them connect with services and organizations in the wider community that can help to meet their needs. At a larger institution (for example, a

Syracuse University), numbers can be sufficiently large as to provide economic incentive for vendors to gravitate towards the institution. This is not so at a college the size of Hamilton, so we need to make it convenient for our students to get to the services they need.

We must also be cautious not to assume that one medium of communication will meet all student needs. Twenty-five years ago, many students were ignorant of computer technology. Today, few are, but even still, we matriculate a handful of students each year who are not computer literate or have limited access to the Internet. It is conceivable that this number will grow rather than disappear in the next decade. The college should take whatever steps seem necessary to be sure that every matriculated student has access to, becomes comfortable with, and makes good use of the internet, but at the same time needs to remember that the recent practice of using web-based activities for “on-boarding” activities for admitted students in the summer before their matriculation excludes some of them. We need to provide an alternative in those instances.

Quality information is critical to intelligent policy. The college does a good job of gathering data through surveys at various points in a student career, but we would be well served by adding the type of information that qualitative rather than “raw data” surveys could provide. The HEOP practice may serve as a good model here, as they use survey instruments that provide a measure of the quality of the academic and social experiences at the end of each semester. Perhaps for the general student body, this sort of survey midway through the first semester, midway through the sophomore year, and at the beginning of the senior year would serve us well.

Dan Chambliss’s work with the support of the Mellon Foundation suggests that students who quickly develop a small group of good friends and make meaningful connections with one or two faculty are likely to stay. Those who fail to do so are likely to withdraw, perhaps physically, or perhaps emotionally or intellectually. One of the clearest successes in this regard is the Adirondack Adventure program: Students who participate are more likely to develop that group of friends who give them identity and support. Yet there is a down-side, because students who do not participate in the program are worse off than they would be if there were no program, for when they arrive for Orientation, many such bonds have been established from which have been excluded. The college has made certain that no one is excluded from Adirondack Adventure for financial reasons, but we need to go much further, recognize that there will always be incoming students for whom outdoor adventure is not an attraction, and create alternative and simultaneous relationship-building opportunities with the goal of involving all students in some such experience. Ultimately, then, the Adirondack Adventure would become one branch of several in an expanded new student orientation program (no longer pre-orientation, since it is now universal).

We should not give up on trying to develop viable common academic experiences for first-year students, for here too is a place where relationships can be built. Chambliss argues that the *cachet* of small classes is misguided here (our words, not his!), for a large lecture class with a dynamic professor actually provides more opportunities for this sort of relationship than a small first-year seminar.

The faculty element of the Chambliss model is difficult to program. We have experimented with the advising program over the years to try to increase the likelihood of good student-faculty relationships by linking advisors and instructors of first-year classes, but this has always proved ultimately unworkable. Nor is it possible in an environment in which there are large disparities in the number of majors across departments to link every student with an advisor in a probable or even possible concentration. A step down from that model would be to develop a simple database of non-academic interests of advisors (things such as tennis, The Grateful Dead, the Cincinnati Reds [!], quilt-making) that could be matched with interests of new students. If an advisor in the physics department were told that his or her new advisee who expected to major in government had been so assigned because they both had an abiding love of playing the harmonica, there would then be at least a place to start....

Another factor in student contentment (i.e., retention) is the development of a sense of ownership of the institution. This comes from being involved, from investing oneself in some aspect of the institution. At public meetings that were an early part of this strategic planning process, we heard from several students who felt shut out of the process because they were not “in” with student assembly and thus were not able to volunteer to be active participants in this process. Without depriving student assembly of its appropriate prerogatives, we need to provide other avenues to productive participation by students in the governance and life of the college.

One final issue in retention that relates directly to recruitment: the “springboard” effect, in which a student accepts admission to Hamilton with the idea of using that position of strength to effect a transfer to his or her “first choice” at the end of the first year. If the alternative to this is to become an institution that would not provide such an opportunity, then we should probably be content with this small percentage of lost retention. On the other hand, many of us can recall anecdotally students who arrived on campus that first day wishing that they were elsewhere—an attitude that if unaltered becomes self-fulfilling. Some of the things that we have discussed above may have some impact here.