Minutes of the Faculty Meeting
January 11, 2017

I. Report from the Secretary

The minutes of the December meeting have been posted and accepted without comment.

II. Reports from College Officers

A. The President’s Report  President Greene reported on the impressive success of our recent fundraising efforts. The story of our vision and our goals is resonating; the entire Colby community has stepped up. Greene acknowledged the common belief that fundraising must be a thankless and miserable task but, after granting that it is partially true, insisted it is only partially true. There can also be something deeply gratifying about, e.g., when conversations with philanthropists about our mission dovetail with their own plans and what it is they hope to accomplish. Whether it comes in the form of receiving continued support from stalwarts or welcoming newcomers to the roster of donors, “You realize how deeply personal these relations are.” Nowhere is it more profound than when connection occurs with someone from the “I’m-through-with-Colby” cohort who rejoins the fold. Thanks to Dan Lugo and his staff, over $26 million was collected in the first six months, a quantum leap above the median for corresponding periods in recent years, and participation is up 9%.

Sharon Corwin gave us a preview of a bold new initiative: the establishment of an Institute for American Art in connection with the Art Museum. There will be a formal announcement of its creation and the founding donors in February. The Institute will be able to expand and deepen the work that the Museum is already doing with the faculty in the curriculum through four programmatic initiatives: (1) A residency program for visiting scholars in the summer, as well as one or two positions in the academic year for scholars and artists who could be embedded in the academic program; (2) Conferences and symposia that would bring participants from around the world to Colby; (3) Institutional partnerships, such as the one with the Whistler Institute in which we currently participate, to create a variety of academic opportunities, including opening doors to internships for our students; (4) Greatly enhanced resources for research exhibitions and projects. Corwin hoped the Institute can become a “crossroads of intellectual exchange,” perhaps in collaboration with other entities on campus. She showed just how exciting this can be with a series of slides representing a sampling of recent acquisitions, including works by the American artists Romare Bearden and Rosalyn Drexler, as well as the international artists Olafur Eliasson (Iceland), Ai Weiwei (China), Zilia Sanchez (Cuba), and Shirin Neshat (Iran). These might not all be canonical figures – yet; part of the Institute’s mission is to help expand the canon. The timetable following the
February announcement will be to search for a founding Director with the goal of having the Institute up and running by September.

Matt Proto, VP and Dean of Admissions, rose to the podium to give the Admissions report and rose to the challenge of following Greene’s and Corwin’s upbeat reports with good news of his own. The results from the Early Decision rounds as well as data about the general applicant pool are very strong all around. Proto reminded us of a New York Times article from three years about a new college president with wild delusions of doubling the applicant pool of his school in central Maine within three years. Somehow, this year we have indeed exceeded that goal of 10,000 applicants with a total standing at 11,165! This represent a 14% increase from last year, a 47% increase in two years, and a whopping 115% increase from three years ago. Domestic applications have more than doubled in that period, and international applicants nearly so. China was the source for the most international applications (over 800), followed by Pakistan and India. Domestically, California, Texas, Illinois, and Florida, were the 2nd, 6th, 8th, and 10th most represented states, with the rest of the top ten coming from the northeast. This bodes well for future years because the pool of New England high school graduates is declining, and the competition for them among schools in the northeast has escalated.

The Early Decision pools also set historical high-water marks. Our partnering with Questbridge deserves a lot of the credit for this; we matched with thirty students this way. The mean SAT and ACT scores, the percentage of applicants graduating in the top 10% of their high schools, and the percentage of students of color all showed significant improvement. (Now the task becomes the alchemical transformation of successful applicants into matriculated students.)

B. The Provost’s Report  Provost Kletzer added her own gratitude to Corwin for the work on the upcoming Institute. She also expressed thanks to all those who have expended efforts on search committees for faculty hiring. The candidate pools have grown larger and more diverse, so the work of these committees has become greater, but the results have been very good. She also announced that Dean of the College Karlene Burrell-McRae will soon be rolling out new protocols and applications for the Faculty in Residence program.

Kletzer then turned to the most recent report on faculty salaries by rank and gender, all the information from which will go on the Provost’s web page. Mercifully, the details of the regression analysis were withheld, but they are available for inspection, should anyone be so inclined. At the Full professor level, the gap between male and female compensation, while shrinking – $9,790 this year, $14,000 last year – is persistent and still both economically and statistically significant. Much of the explanation is to be found in historic hiring and retention practices, which also help account for the (falling, but still present) gap in average years at rank. When the pool is restricted to full professors with sixteen years or less at rank, the gap narrows considerably. At the Associate level, the male-over-female gap is $230, a figure that does not count as statistically significant – and is less than last year’s female-over-male compensation gap, which was also statistically insignificant. The story at the Assistant level is more complicated. There is more volatility in the year-to-year changes as senior Assistants are tenured and promoted to Associates, and
we have tenured more women recently. There is also a real effect from the presence of a large cohort of young economists who account for seven of the ten highest Assistant salaries. The Provost (and former Economics professor) then econosplained the situation to us by justifying the salary premium for economists (“they have other career opportunities”) and noting the dramatic nation-wide and historic gender imbalance in the discipline. Looking forward, of the six applicants invited to campus for positions in Economics that begin next year, five are women.

III. Committee Reports

On behalf of the Honorary Degree subcommittee of the Board, Mary Beth Mills and Katherine Stubbs (and Das Thamattoor in absentia) invited nominations for honorees for Commencement 2018. There is an on-line interface for making nominations. The deadline for submission is January 20.

Margaret McFadden, for the Academic Affairs Committee, opened up a discussion of the changes in the distribution of student grades in recent years. For some, the worrisome grade is A+ because it is awarded unevenly by disciplines, departments, programs, and individual professors, and it has the effect of skewing class rank and Latin honors. The data show, however, that while the percentage of A and A– grades has steadily increased, from a combined 38% to 49%, in the 15-year period covered, the percentage of A+ grades has actually remained fairly constant in the 2-3% range. The AAC does not have a recommendation or proposal at this time, but it is seeking input and hoping to occasion discussions at the department level.

Veronique Plesch began the discussion by noting that the percentage increase in A’s is accompanied by a corresponding decrease in B’s and C’s, so this is not merely distribution change but actual grade inflation (modal warming?). Denise Bruesewitz asked whether there were data about grade distributions available by department. McFadden answered that departments did have access to their own distributions. Whitney King reminded us that we used to get that information but that practice was discontinued, perhaps as controversial and divisive. He added that perhaps we should just eliminate the under-used grades of C+ and below. Tanya Sheehan asked whether these data could be correlated with teaching evaluations and rank: there are broad correlations between teaching evaluations and expected grades, so junior faculty might feel a disproportionate amount of pressure.

McFadden acknowledged the correlation but noted that there could well be other, non-worrisome factors in play, such as an academically stronger student body and improved pedagogies. Laurie Osborne wondered whether a numerical scale with its finer-grained options might be an improvement over the letter system. That had not been considered, McFadden replied, but Bob Nelson reported that in places where it had been tried, it opened the floodgates to waves of more quibbling. Joe Reisert asked what conclusions could be drawn regarding A+ grades. One, apparently, is that if being class marshal is your goal, you need to be taking courses from professors where A+ grades are a possibility. Marta Ameri said that the committee discussions included the possibility of keeping the A+ grade, but counting it as a 4.0 rather than a 4.3 for GPA calculations on the table, a possibility that garnered some expressions of support, in that it kept the distinction conferred by the A+ grade
without skewing GPA’s and class ranks. Donihue said the topic of uneven grade distributions across departments and programs is one that students often raise, suggesting that we might include information about individual course grade distributions on student transcripts.

IV. Announcements

Joe Reisert, incoming director of the Integrated Studies Program, invited faculty to consider participating in or proposing ISP clusters for next year. Without such proposals, he threatened to come knocking on our doors.

Betty Sasaki made several announcements concerning the variety of entries on the program surrounding Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, including a faculty panel discussion on civil rights now and the Drum Major for Justice award. The highlight will be the keynote address, “Du Bois at the Center: From Science to Martin Luther King to Black Lives Matter,” by Aldon Morris, the Leon Morris Professor of Sociology and African-American Studies at Northwestern. It is scheduled for Monday, January 16th at 7:30 p.m. in the Ostrove Auditorium.

McFadden announced a sequence of faculty panel discussions on economics, civil liberties, and the environment, to be led by Kletzer, Joe Atkins, and Gail Carlson, respectively.

The secretary issued a last call for participation in the Noontime Faculty Forum: a few openings remain available for the spring semester.

Osborne did the Maisel.

Submitted with all due earnestness,

Dan Cohen

Faculty Secretary

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