

March 16, 2006

To: Gustavus Faculty

From: The Academic Planning Subcommittee of the Senate

About: Faculty meeting discussion on academic planning

The Academic Planning Subcommittee, a pilot subcommittee created by the Faculty Senate, asked that academic planning be the discussion topic for the March faculty meeting. We have been meeting weekly to decide what a plan should consist of, what external and internal issues it should address, and how best to frame a document that will be useful for planning, both short- and long-term. We are providing here an overview to frame the issues and ask for your help as we explore what the institution could do over the next 5-10 years to improve the academic program generally while anticipating future needs.

Background

The Academic Planning Subcommittee is charged with making recommendations to the Faculty Senate about academic planning. In undertaking this task, we have focused on a broad perspective that examines the context of higher education now and in the near future, envisions what the academic program at the College is and should be, and ultimately will propose some initiatives that may best enhance that vision. We have considered a variety of issues: what does liberal arts mean at Gustavus? What makes us distinctive? What should our ideal prospective student look like? Our ideal graduate? How can we better support our priorities? What external forces, including changing demographics, do we need to take into account?

A number of publications stress the importance of *engagement* for student learning and development. The College seeks to develop independent students with skills that enable them to see connections among different types of knowledge, between their academic work and the outside world, and to consistently ask big questions as they construct a philosophy of life. We have come to the conclusion that strengthening student engagement should be a central theme of our academic plan.

What do we mean by engagement? An engaged student *questions, connects, and acts.*

An engaged student is constantly *questioning*, whether in the class or out. An engaged student's questions go beyond the factual; they arise from reflection on the topic at hand and its connections with other topics and with life as a whole. Some questions are directed at least partially inward: Who am I? What is the world like? What is my role in that world? How shall I change to better fulfill that role? Other questions explicitly call on others to join in an exploration of multidisciplinary connections or to probe unstated assumptions. The questioning attitude mixes skepticism with curiosity; an engaged student's goal is neither to shoot down answers nor to accept them as final, but rather to move steadily, but unendingly, toward improved understanding.

An engaged student *connects* with other people as well as connecting academic disciplines with one another and with their social context. An engaged student interacts intellectually with other students. Thoughtful conversation among students, inside the class and out, is a crucial companion to learning from professors. An engaged student also connects with a broader group of people by venturing beyond the boundaries of campus, whether in domestic or international study, internships, volunteer service, or the activities of co-curricular groups and extra-curricular organizations. By connecting with others, an engaged student learns to appreciate other perspectives and becomes better able to play a positive role in the world, fostering peace and justice.

An engaged student *acts* in ways that serve both to carry a portion of that student's understanding into the world and to provide the context in which the student further develops that understanding. An engaged student performs as an artist, whether directly in front of an audience or indirectly by creating a work for later exhibition. An engaged student performs a role in a research project, whether in the laboratory, field, or library, contributing to the ongoing production of knowledge and then sharing that knowledge through poster presentations, seminar talks, or publication. An engaged student performs acts of service, working with others to jointly address the challenges they face. By performing acts like these, an engaged student appreciates that understanding grows through action as well as through reflection, and develops skills that can be turned toward fulfillment of a vocation.

The questions we would like to discuss during the faculty meeting are these:

- What enhances student engagement?
- What inhibits student engagement?
- What could the institution do in the next 5-10 years to improve engagement?

We also welcome any comments you would like to share before or after the meeting. The members of the subcommittee are:

- June Kloubec (Senate liaison)
- Barbara Fister (Education Division)
- Terry Morrow (Fine Arts Division)
- Matt Panciera (Humanities Division)
- Max Hailperin (Natural Sciences Division)
- Jennifer Ackil (Social Sciences Division)

Minutes and readings are available on the subcommittee's Web page. The easiest way to find the Web page is by searching for "academic planning subcommittee" on the campus Web site.