

COUNCIL ON ACADEMIC ASSESSMENT (CAA)

MINUTES, APRIL 4, 2006

LC-31J; 3:00 – 4:30 PM

Maria Brown, Joel Berkowitz, Kristina Bendikas, Joette Stefl-Mabry, Bill Lanford, Malcolm Sherman, Carol Jewell, Stephen DeLong, Leslie Saint-Vil, Helmut Hirsch, Barbara Wilkinson

Minutes were approved. While waiting for one of the guests to arrive, Lanford introduced a report available to the University through Academic Analytics. The organization uses information technology to get numbers of publications and citations for faculty members. The totals are then aggregated by department, on a per-faculty basis, and compared with departments at the university's peer institutions. It may be a spin-off from Stony Brook. The report was made available at a SUNY Senate meeting. The quality of the report depends on choice of peer institutions, and period of time it covers. The report covers a two year period. This seems too short to adequately represent departments/faculty who write books vs. articles.

The Council then discussed the strengths and weaknesses of the report. Comments included that the report doesn't seem to distinguish quality of publication. Use of this type of data for faculty tenure and promotion may push the process in a quantitative direction, resulting in faculty opting not to publish fewer but more important work. Publication rates also differ dramatically depending on area within a department, for example a lifelong opus on Plato versus contemporary Philosophy. This problem, however, would depend on how the data is used by evaluators. There may also be complications with multiple authored papers. It seems this council may want to look into using this type of information. Numbers of publications for each department are not currently available at the University level, although the library does this for its own. It may be a good starting place. We can look into this further, and maybe ask the Provost or Dean of Graduate Studies to present on this.

The Council began discussing Project Renaissance. Sherman introduced Helmut Hirsch, Biology, Stephen DeLong and Leslie Saint-Vil, Project Renaissance. Sherman stated that some have disputed the quality of academics in this program. As the grant has run out, few or no faculty is involved in teaching. The graduation rates are good. At the last meeting, it was said that the four-year graduation rate of Project Renaissance students is higher than the University six-year graduation rates. It therefore seems quite reasonable for the council to look at Project Renaissance. Sherman asked Wilkinson what has been done as far as reviewing the program. Wilkinson responded that a program review has begun, but is not complete. DeLong explained that initial parameters are begun, and he is prepared to speak about an overview of Project Renaissance and answer questions.

Questions were raised about the review process. How should we conduct a review? Would the council play the role of external reviewers?

DeLong distributed a handout describing the program, saying that it is a complicated program to explain. It is academic, and it's not. It's a freshman living/learning community. Those who developed the program were providing an alternative entry to a large university, and an ongoing docuverse (an ongoing document that each cohort adds to). Project Renaissance is no longer doing the docuverse. It was noted that the list of faculty on the handout differs from the website. There are two reasons for the change: student demand and funding. In addition, Hirsch added, faculty in Biology who had participated was thought to be less focused on research; at least that was the perception. Will the new president say that interdisciplinary teaching is important? The president has stated that environmental awareness and sustainability be taught to every undergraduate. Maybe there is a way to combine the two programs. Project Renaissance had a community focus, students worked with low SES students from Troy, and the service component could be revived. It is not enough to lecture to students, students must do a project. It would be great to begin the environmental awareness/sustainability project with Project Renaissance. Public Health has begun recycling on East Campus. We could replace docuverse with econoverse!

The council returned to the topic of old faculty versus new faculty, and the reason of student interest. The present model combines two courses, one UNI course and one department course. For example, the pre-health track would have one UNI course taught by Nancy Dunlop and students would enroll in BIO110 and BIO111. There is a similar model in pre-business and pre-law. This model replaced the team model of previous years. It was noted that the tracks suggest a move towards specialization, while the name suggests a broad based liberal education, and asked what is the essence of Project Renaissance? Responses included being part of a community is a positive experience, that it provides a way to address the forgotten middle (who are neither Presidential Scholars nor EOP), who we are otherwise losing in large numbers, and students knowing each other and the faculty. When asked what you would never allow to change, DeLong responded the program being residential, the small class size, and the arrangements with courses for seats. It was agreed that the essence is good.

Hirsch recalled having differing notions of Biology than Dunlop, and suggested that a graduate student in Biology may be able to provide the depth, have the background, and do the job. In the past, the faculty involved in the teams tried to coordinate the lessons and come together on perspectives.

Project Renaissance admits students on a first come, first served basis. Approximately 1/2 to 2/3 of students who apply to Project Renaissance get in. It is the parents, however, who were typically enthusiastic about the program. About five years ago it was learned, anecdotally, a start of student-to-student word of mouth recommendations of Project Renaissance as a residential program. The students who were in Project Renaissance then took Bio112 together and this continued for four years. The faculty has been noticing that the students stay together to 300 and 400 level courses.

How much does the program cost? \$400,000.

What does the faculty teach? UNI courses, students take two per semester. There is a common syllabus. They meet the Humanities and Social Science General Education requirements. This is for the General Program. This program has students on four floors of the Quad. In contrast, the tracks have students on sixteen floors.

What is the role of the Council for the Project Renaissance program review? Should we be external reviewers? Do comparable programs exist elsewhere? DeLong responded that the closest program is at California State Sonoma. As an alternative, it may be good to bring in a dean of students, who is familiar with residential programs and can look at things more broadly. Freshman dorm experiences are powerful. Students comment that they don't like feeling no one cares.

Concerns exist for the academics. On the other hand, the students, due in part to the study sessions in the dorms, come to learn what it is to be an academic. It seems that Project Renaissance has a public relations problem on campus. Maybe as Director, DeLong must address it. The Provost and President could be asked to fund the academic quality changes, and support faculty teaching in the program. There is a need to address the lack of faculty, perhaps by naming the faculty members who are teaching the track courses.

It was noted that Project Renaissance students were perceived as poor writers. DeLong responded that the program review will look at writing quality by getting grades in Upper Division Writing Intensive courses and comparing those students who were part of Project Renaissance during their freshmen year with those who were not. It was agreed that a control group is necessary, as student writing in general is awful!

It was suggested that the Council meet again to prepare a statement and share it with DeLong. Ideas about review procedures could be circulated and consensus reached by email through Wilkinson. Faerman could also play a role in this.

Respectfully submitted by Barbara Wilkinson.