

Report from the Curricular Planning and Policy Committee to the Academic  
Affairs Committee of the Board of Trustees

October 11, 2018

---

Thank you for this opportunity to discuss with you the curriculum at DePauw. I'm David Alvarez, chair of the Curricular Policy and Planning Committee and chair of the English department. My comments represent the thinking of the committee and of faculty members who have shared their concerns about the current state and future of DePauw's curriculum and academic programs. We're very glad to be able to communicate with you about the value of DePauw's curriculum and the challenges it faces, and we hope to build on this process today of mutual sharing and learning from one another, a process we consider crucial for DePauw's future.

Let me start by saying that faculty members are committed to the continued success of the liberal arts curriculum at DePauw. We're committed to it because we see that it is working. Our graduates recognize the value of their liberal arts education. As a recent survey of young alumni (August 2017) prepared by Hanover Research reported (I've shared this item with you), "Ninety-seven percent" of our recent graduates "are satisfied with DePauw's quality of faculty, 93% with the quality of academic programs/majors." These are incredible numbers that we believe DePauw should be proud of and that we should build on. The numbers show that our curriculum works and that graduates strongly value it. These numbers are why, despite all the disruption and

upheaval we are experiencing, the faculty have confidence in our curriculum and in our ability to provide our students with an excellent liberal arts education.

Now, I realize that I don't need to tell any of you this. You're here because of a DePauw education and your continued deep commitment to it. Thank you. But I do want to emphasize that whatever else one might say about DePauw's challenges and struggles, these numbers also make clear that the work of faculty members is not the problem. We're committed to our students' success. That's why we're here. And that's why our students come here. [I wish I could show you a few video clips of our students at a recent academic banquet]. DePauw's academic programs change lives. Our work with students in our classrooms and during office hours, the conversations in the hallways and on the quad, and in our collaborations on faculty-student research projects is transformative. One big frustration for faculty members is that prospective students and their parents do not hear enough about the success of our academic programs and the quality of their faculty members' teaching and research. We hear a lot about internships and co-curricular programming, but what we don't hear enough about is that "Ninety-seven percent" of our recent graduates "are satisfied with DePauw's quality of faculty, 93% with the quality of academic programs/majors."

Internships and co-curricular programming are all wonderful and important things, but what's a pretty liberal arts campus without students learning about the liberal arts? How can students achieve success in internships without an education that has helped them develop an agile mind with the ability to see connections and opportunities quickly and to communicate clearly? Today, the knowledge that jobs require changes so fast that the most important skill is to learn how to learn. That's exactly what our

curriculum offers. [And I'd be glad to talk more about this in relation to the hiring of the McDermond Center director]

DePauw's academic curriculum is its core. Faculty members, however, are concerned that the center of the university—its academic programs—is being displaced. The increase in the number of Centers on campus—ten and counting—and the push by those Centers to get students involved in “co-curricular” activities is undermining our Curriculum and moving us away from a focus on our core academic mission. Increases in funding and in staff positions for the Centers, as well as increased demands on our students' time, are shifting DePauw's focus away from its academic programs. Accordingly, one of the most important challenges that the Curriculum committee is addressing this year is the relationship between the Centers and the curriculum. It is unfortunate that this fundamental question had not been resolved earlier while the Gold Commitment was being planned and implemented by the administration. Faculty members report that the Gold Commitment rollout has been confusing— to put it charitably, it has been a continual work in progress--and that it appears to add costly quasi-administrative roles while doing very little to add to DePauw's core academic mission. Indeed, many faculty members would argue that it is detracting from this mission.

The curriculum committee is asking the Board to help us, in the words of one of my colleagues, to “Center the Academic Mission, which means placing faculty (and support staff) at the center of all budget considerations.” Faculty are concerned that the values of our core academic enterprise are not being reflected in the financial decisions of the University. We are seeking a better alignment of new investments with support of the

academic programs so that our core mission--educating our students—can be sustained and strengthened. Thanks to the amazing generosity of donors to DePauw, the Prindle, the Tenzer, and 21CM are all fully endowed. This is incredible! And it presents some distinctive opportunities for DePauw. And yet while these centers are fully-endowed, academic departments get budget cuts and faculty positions are reduced. For the curriculum committee, this is an alarming and confusing mismatch between the University's core academic mission and its funding priorities. Moreover, we're concerned that the investments in the Centers are not being leveraged as effectively as they might be because of their lack of connection with the curriculum. The Centers need to be integrated into the University's core mission, and the committee will be considering how the Centers might be able to contribute to the curriculum and to strengthening our academic programs. We have been provided with several ideas to leverage and market the centers more effectively. These include a variety of faculty and student leadership roles, a focus on faculty-student research, and the development of Centers like the Center for Diversity and Inclusion, the Prindle Center for Ethics, and others so that they can create and share state of the art research and pedagogical expertise. (We've been provided suggestions on these items with a consultant on DePauw's marketing academic programs.) We also believe that a long-term solution to this perceived mismatch between the University's core academic mission and its funding priorities requires finding better organizational structures to align the passions of donors with the needs of the university. No such institutional structures currently exist.

Faculty members' concern about centering the academic mission extends to the leadership of the university. We need leadership that values our liberal arts curriculum at

least as much as our graduates do. Leadership that is inspired, articulate, anchored in the legacy of the liberal arts at DePauw and that faces the future with the innovative optimism that such an education provides--this is essential for our work. The current campus mood, however, is best captured by a note I received this week from a colleague in the sciences:

“My students are hurting. They are disillusioned, sad, and pessimistic about their time at DePauw. Not all of them. Many are still fine, I think. But many, many talk about their frustrations and sorrow. Many regret having come to DePauw. These are students of all races and ethnicities. They are in my office crying. Or in class literally asking me "how do you do it?" and proceeding to tell me how discouraged they are. *I think it is a problem that has developed in part because DePauw no longer has a sense of vision.* Teenagers have always had a lot on their shoulders. Our job is to guide them to a new place in their lives that is in keeping with their own values and their own hopes. But DePauw no longer seems to provide them with this.”

It's very tough to hear how our students' experience and education at DePauw are being undermined by a constant sense of turmoil. We lurch from one crisis to the next. Students see and feel the effect this is having on faculty members and staff. These are difficult times for the university, but it has been deeply frustrating and alarming to see the unnecessary distress caused to students, staff, and my colleagues by a leadership style that can unfortunately be summed up in three words: ready, fire, aim. (the rollout of the Gold commitment, responses to racist incidents on campus, the health care rollout). As the above quotation makes too clear, the risks posed by our current leadership to the curriculum and the institution are very high.

The curriculum committee believes that one way to move forward is to improve communication between the faculty members and the Board of Trustees through formal institutional structures such as this one. We need this not only during times of crisis like the present but more urgently for “regular” times so that we can avoid such crises. We

suffer from mutual miscomprehension. As one of my colleagues wrote, “I don't understand what it means to be either an administrator or a student or a staff person, and they don't understand what it's like to be a faculty member.” This is why we need institutional structures of communication that bring us all together. University presidents agree with my colleague. Earlier this year, I attended a panel on shared governance that was put together by the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB). It was made up of university presidents and administrators, and I was inspired by their repeated emphasis on thinking about shared governance in terms of aligning goals. Such efforts, however, are stymied by a lack of communication. Here are two statistics that stuck with me: in terms of how well boards and faculty members understand one another, only 32% of university presidents think that board members understand the work and responsibilities of faculty members. Even worse, presidents think that only 23% of faculty members understand the responsibilities and authority of the governing board. This mutual lack of understanding makes it very difficult to align priorities and goals. During this panel, Raynard Kington, President of Grinnell College, urged for more face-to-face interaction between faculty members, students, and boards of trustees. Grinnell has a non-voting faculty member on a board of trustees committee, as well as student government representatives. President Kington also explained that he instituted a group of board and faculty members who regularly meet without the President. He felt that such an institutional structure allowed for healthy discussion and the creation of trust. It is too evident that there's a lack of trust on campus, and we believe that regular dialogue through institutional structures of communication such as these could go a long way towards renewing trust. Without formalized communication channels, the risk of

mutual miscomprehension makes the effort to align goals a very difficult task. [In the discussion that followed this presentation, some suggestions were made for improving communication between the board of trustees, faculty members, and students: linking faculty governance committees with board committees in a formalized structure, a non-voting faculty member on the board of trustees, more face-to-face interaction between faculty members, students, and board members in classes and other campus events. I would add that faculty and board of trustee members might benefit from learning more about each other's roles during annual orientations.]

I teach literature of the Enlightenment, so I recognize the value of older texts. And I was excited about Howard's discovery of a copy of the University Charter and by-laws in the dusty archives of our library. But the committee wonders if the communication structures in those by-laws might be a little out of date for the twenty-first century, and so we're asking that the charter be revised to create regular channels of communication between the board and faculty, the board and staff, and the board and students. We request this because we are eager to work together to keep the academic mission of the university the center of the university. We also believe that our mutual lack of knowledge is generating mistrust, confusion, poor planning, and malaise. We have too much to learn from one another, and we're putting the institution too much at risk by our lack of formal dialogue.

As I said at the beginning, faculty members are fully and enthusiastically committed to the success of the liberal arts curriculum at DePauw. The numbers show that our graduates strongly value what the faculty offer. We look forward to working with you to build on the strengths of the faculty and our academic programs. We know that

hard decisions need to be made, and we believe that the best way to make them is through informed, collaborative discussion and the alignment of shared goals. As one of my colleagues explained to me once, we need “to steward academic disciplines and to steward dollars.” A university requires both forms of stewardship, and we need dialogue with one another to achieve success. I remain confident that all parties have the best interests of the university at heart and that we can find a path forward regardless of how challenging that path might be. Thank you.