

**SUNY Potsdam Academic Affairs Visioning Task Force,  
Final Progress Report (May 31, 2018)**

**CHARGE FROM PROVOST BERGERON**

Recent retirements, interim positions, and shifts in responsibilities at our College have resulted in an unprecedented opportunity to examine the structure through which we in Academic Affairs support our mission. I am seeking the assistance of faculty to examine our current structure in Academic Affairs and explore alternate models that would increase opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration and synergy across departments and Schools, support innovative ways to further engage with students, and provide enhanced collegial support and mentoring of new faculty. In addition, this Task Force is asked to consider models that would increase efficiency, reduce the overall administrative footprint, and increase faculty members' ability to focus on teaching and scholarly/creative activities.

The specific charge of this Task Force included:

- Select a Convener from the existing members
- Examine our current structure within Academic Affairs (e.g., departments, Schools)
- Examine models at other colleges and universities to determine best practices for institutions of similar size and mission
- Directly solicit feedback from faculty across the College related to perceptions of challenges and opportunities in our academic structures
- Explore optimal configurations of departments and/or divisions
- In collaboration with the Interdisciplinary Task Force and input from current directors, develop scenarios for the placement of academic programs currently assigned to the Provost's Office (Women's and Gender Studies, US & Global Studies, Writers' Block, Learning Communities)
- Develop models for new structures (e.g., Schools, divisions, departments), including the costs and/or efficiencies associated with any proposed changes
- Seek input from the academic administration, and specifically from the dean liaison, particularly as it relates to administrative responsibilities and financial impacts of proposed models
- By the end of the Spring 2018 semester, share progress made with the Provost in order to identify next steps

## **Task Force Members (10)**

### School of Arts and Sciences (4)

Kimberley Bouchard - Theater and Dance

Lisa Wilson - English and Communication

Hadley Kruczek-Aaron - Anthropology

Victoria Klawitter - Mathematics

### School of Education and Professional Studies (3)

Kathryn Jeror - C&I, Literacy, and Special Education

Anthony Betrus - Business Administration and Instructional Design

Kathleen O'Rourke - Public Health and Human Performance

### Crane School of Music (3)

Michael Schaff - Music Education, Instrumental Conducting

Timothy Sullivan - Music Theory, Composition

Kirk Severtson - Music Performance, Opera

## **Meeting Dates: (all 1 hour unless otherwise noted)**

February 12 - Meeting with Provost to explain charge

February 27 - Working Meeting

March 13 - Working Meeting

March 27 - Working Meeting

April 24 - Working Meeting

May 1 - Working Meeting

May 9 - Working Meeting (2 hours)

May 17 - Working Meeting (2 hours)

May 31 - Working Meeting (2 hours)

## **SUMMARY OF TASK FORCE ACTIVITIES**

The task force received their [charge](#) from Provost Bergeron at the first meeting on February 12, 2018. The task force met for 11 additional hours over the course of the Spring 2018 semester, with reading and document authoring completed between meetings.

After our initial meeting, many members expressed general discomfort with a charge of "restructuring." A result of this discomfort was that the name of the task force was changed from "Academic Affairs Restructuring Task Force" to "Academic Affairs Visioning Task Force."

The next steps were to gather data that would inform recommendations from the group. O'Rourke, Betrus, and Jeror met with the SOEPS Dean, Walt Conley, to discuss what, if anything,

had occurred before this group had formed. The entire group then gathered information about how other [peer institutions](#) were organized (SUNY and others). We also examined the results of the local SUNY Potsdam [COACHE Survey](#), as well as [EAB](#) papers and articles that described a variety of restructuring efforts elsewhere.

Throughout our meetings, the group expressed reservations about our task force making recommendations without more input from the entire campus and constituents. We discussed conducting a survey of the campus, but through this and other discussions, we concluded that the *process* recommendations were as important (if not more so) than any resulting structural recommendations we could make. Most importantly, we felt that it was essential to determine the values that would guide our recommendations. While acknowledging the importance of campus finances, we ultimately felt that the student experience should be the guiding force for any process of reorganization, and that there must be an open and thorough process that involves all faculty and staff affected. Given our short time frame and the concerns laid out above, we were uncomfortable providing specific recommendations and/or models for reorganization. However, based on our research, we have provided several scenarios in an appendix, with our thoughts about potential benefits and concerns elaborated beneath each scenario. As the group unanimously agreed that our short-term task force could not recommend any particular reorganization scenario, we redirected our efforts toward recommending a long-term process that would more effectively tackle the challenges of this monumental task.

### **PROCESS RECOMMENDATIONS**

The task force concluded that, although minor structural adjustments may be found, a significant and substantive reorganization of Academic Affairs would require more time and more resources. Our research, discussions, and data gathering revealed that a more robust and inclusive process might yield a positive and transformative revisioning of our campus. In particular, our task force looked very closely at the [Arkansas Little Rock, 2013](#) restructuring report, which included this recommendation on page 5:

“...the task of establishing the best structure and culture for colleges and departments must be done by the faculty and students who will be the most affected and who are in the best position to make the kind of prudential and academic judgments necessary.”

We feel strongly that the process on our campus should reflect our core values and should be in service to a shared vision of SUNY Potsdam as a vital, inclusive, and innovative community. As such, we recommend that the following steps be part of the SUNY Potsdam restructuring process:

- 1) **Create a *Coordinating Work Group* responsible for and empowered to move the process forward.** The following are suggested means to facilitate the quality and productivity of this working group:
  - a) Reassigned time to oversee the process, collect data, and meet regularly
  - b) Financial support to visit other institutions (2-3) that have undergone similar processes (similar to the process of the Greek Life Task Force) and report their findings to the campus
  - c) Provide timelines and charges for the task force groups (see below)
  - d) Report regularly to President's Council, Faculty Senate, SGA and other constituencies to facilitate broad and regular communication
  
- 2) **Identify multiple task force groups representing the variety of stakeholders/ constituencies at SUNY Potsdam.** The following are suggested means to facilitate the quality and productivity of task force groups:
  - a) Some task forces represent clusters of academic "homes" and interdisciplinary groups
  - b) Some task forces represent intersections of the college community (e.g., Student Support Services, College Writing Center, Food Pantry, etc.)
  - c) Some task forces represent intersections of administrative and support staff offices with academic and other units
  - d) Some task forces represent students (e.g. SGA, student athletes, non-traditional students, geographical and cultural diversity, etc.)
  - e) Empower task force groups to gather data and information from the constituencies they represent
  
- 3) **This process should be time-limited with recommendations to the college community followed by an aggressive implementation plan.**
  
- 4) **The *Coordinating Work Group* should present their findings and recommendations to ALL campus constituencies with support from President's Council.** (Support from the President's Council is imperative for change of this magnitude to be realized.)

#### **SHARED VALUES TO GUIDE A PROCESS OF ACADEMIC RESTRUCTURING AT SUNY POTSDAM**

"Structure is important, but it is secondary to vision and culture."

"The goal of any restructuring must be to create the conditions under which excellence can flourish." [Arkansas Little Rock, 2013](#) (p.3)

We believe that it is essential for our campus to have a shared vision and culture, and the academic structures that will support that goal. We do not endorse creating a structure without first establishing a vision to guide it. Based on our discussions, the following are what we believe are the core values that should guide any changes to our academic structure:

- 1) **Student learning must be at the core of all change decisions**
- 2) **Structural changes must improve campus culture** by facilitating and supporting vibrant and healthy academic units, lift barriers that impede collaboration, facilitate communication, and improve transparency, while eliminating bureaucratic and administrative redundancies.
- 3) Nurture and sustain **honesty of purpose**. Why are we doing this? What do we aspire to become?
- 4) Commit to ongoing **transparency of process** that will facilitate broad engagement and awareness
- 5) Create a **shared vision** through broad discussion; all points of view considered; innovation encouraged
- 6) Establish **deep and broad communication** that is accessible by the largest number of community members as possible and has multiple opportunities for meaningful contact

“Everybody says ‘communication,’ but I can’t emphasize how much that helped,” Randall says. “By communication I really mean going out there and talking to people, not sending emails. You really need to talk to them and listen to what they have to say and report back to them.” [Patel, 2018](#) (p.4)

- 7) Acknowledge that **departments serve as academic homes** for students, faculty, and staff, where their academic and professional lives are experienced most directly and meaningfully

#### **SUMMARY OF PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING ACADEMIC REORGANIZATION**

In addition to insights about process, our work included preliminary discussions about possible reorganization scenarios for SUNY Potsdam, and we have decided to share the general substance of these discussions here. We do so cautiously, however, as we feel strongly that these scenarios be considered by future task forces only after more stakeholders have been consulted and more data has been collected. The summary of our discussion is provided not as any formal recommendation on action, but as potential starting points for discussion by those moving this process forward in the coming academic year.

Our discussions focused on two groups of scenarios ([see “Scenarios” Appendix](#)) relating to potential courses of action:

- 1) Reducing the number of deans from three to two
- 2) Eliminating all deans and/or schools and/or academic departments

At one point we explicitly listed “status quo” as a scenario option, but given that our charge related to reorganization, we focused on change and did not ultimately explore this scenario in depth.

As will be reviewed below, our discussions revealed no clear paths toward achieving the goals outlined in the provost’s charge: to think about academic structures that would promote increased interdisciplinarity and interdepartmental collaboration, encourage creativity in teaching and research, promote student engagement, support new faculty, reduce the size of the administration, and streamline bureaucratic processes. We began to identify the benefits that these courses of action could offer, but each one also raised serious concerns and difficult questions that highlighted the need for more research and more substantial consultation with various members of the campus community.

### ***Potential benefits***

During our discussions, there was consensus among task force members that there are problems with our status quo. Most notably, the COACHE faculty job satisfaction survey revealed numerous areas of concern, including widespread dissatisfaction with campus governance; leadership; as well as current levels of collaboration, departmental engagement, interdisciplinarity, and mentoring, among others. Likewise, we are quite cognizant of the declining enrollment numbers and increasing budget deficits experienced by our campus since 2013. Members of the task force agreed that (when guided by a particular set of values [see above]) changes to our current model of Academic Affairs may foster improvements in these areas.

Rethinking our existing units of organization (schools and/or departments), for example, could create new opportunities for collaboration and sharing across disciplinary/departmental/school boundaries that could energize teaching and scholarship. Our discussions revealed that there are already different models for academic organization being employed in Crane, A & S, and SOEPS, and perhaps the sharing of lessons learned from these respective corners of our college could benefit all. And further, officials from institutions who have initiated more substantial overhauls of their academic structures argue that new ways of thinking about academic organization better serve today’s students as they prepare for life in a rapidly changing 21<sup>st</sup>-century world. At these institutions, it is hoped that new models emphasizing interdisciplinarity might prove appealing to prospective students, and, if effective, might

invigorate teaching, improve faculty morale, stimulate learning, and thus help them retain more students ([Arkansas Little Rock, 2013](#); [Mehl and Stefaniak, 2016](#); [Seltzer, 2016](#); [Patel 2018](#)).

Improving bureaucratic efficiency and saving money was also prioritized by administrators and faculty at institutions overseeing major changes. At Plymouth State University ([See Plymouth State, 2017](#)), for example, a shift to a provost-clusters model in 2017 was undertaken with the goal of reducing the number of deans and saving \$5 million per year ([Seltzer, 2016](#)). Our research suggests that a college of our size could operate with fewer than 3 deans. One of our peers (Geneseo) operates with two deans, despite having 2,000 more undergraduates. And a second peer (Cortland), which is served by three deans, has an undergraduate student body that is more than twice the size of Potsdam's. Additionally, there is a significant imbalance to the number of undergraduates served by each dean at Potsdam, with the dean of Arts & Sciences serving three times as many majors (1747) as the deans of SOEPS (522) and Crane (478). These numbers suggest that rethinking the unit of organization or reducing the number of deans might be beneficial.

Likewise, a reorganization that affected school and/or department-level governance might foster more workload equity by streamlining processes and redistributing responsibilities. The creation of a level of bureaucracy between the level of the department and the school, such as with divisions or clusters, might consolidate tasks among fewer division heads. Such a reorganization could help to alleviate the burdens increasingly placed on departments in recent years (such as in areas of marketing, recruitment, and course scheduling). These burdens have been added without adequate recognition or compensation, and thus any change in this area may be welcomed. Additionally, a reorganization that replaced deans with division heads might improve communication between faculty and the provost's office.

### ***Concerns and questions***

Though changes to Academic Affairs may bring benefits in the areas described above, the task force also raised important questions about the feasibility and impact of various models of academic reorganization. Broadly speaking, our discussion highlighted concerns that the changes would not generate the intended results and that the disruption caused by reorganization could weaken Academic Affairs and further alienate a faculty whose morale is already very low.

Because most major reorganization initiatives implemented by other institutions have taken place recently, information about short- or long-term impacts on recruitment, retention, teaching, research, bureaucratic efficiency, and budgets is lacking. And further, it is unclear that traditional models of academic organization are at the root of recruitment and retention

challenges, or that they contribute to low rates of workplace satisfaction among faculty at Potsdam (or elsewhere). Thus, supporting a vision of reorganization that requires significant structural change would be difficult at this point without more research and significant and meaningful consultation with individuals and groups affected by such an initiative.

Task force members also raised concerns about the impact that restructuring would have on bureaucratic efficiency/effectiveness. While we welcomed the provost's interest in reducing our administrative footprint, we questioned whether reducing the number of deans would actually achieve this result. Other layers of bureaucracy (including multiple division heads) may be created as part of certain reorganization plans. And while the creation of middle-level administrators might improve communication between their respective units and the provost, communication between lower-level units of organization (like departments if they are maintained in some way) and the provost would likely be weakened and cost savings would likely be minimal. If the dean structure is maintained but the number of deans reduced, communication between the deans and departments/units within their respective schools also may be rendered more difficult.

We also discussed the potential impact that a change to the dean/school structure might have on college administration and shared governance. Questions were raised about whether a reduction in the number of deans would weaken the position of Academic Affairs in the context of college-wide decision making, because this would weaken its representation on President's Council. Weakening the position of Academic Affairs at any time, but especially during a time of tremendous resource scarcity, would be ill-advised.

Additionally, we questioned whether existing structures were flexible enough to accommodate the kind of change being considered here. Keeping the Crane School of Music intact will affect what new units or organization can be created, what avenues for interdisciplinarity are possible, and how labor at the level of the dean or the division head can be distributed across Academic Affairs as a whole. Likewise, we questioned how issues relating to accreditation (such as those affecting the programs in SOEPS) would impact what models of reorganization would be possible.

## **CONCLUSION**

To summarize, there is much still to be considered if a significant reorganization of Academic Affairs is planned. Benefits have been identified, and they could be consequential—especially at a time when the college is in need of creative and significant solutions to substantial enrollment and budget challenges. But the concerns outlined here are also quite significant. Data gathering and consultation is absolutely essential if the campus community is to commit to a



reorganization plan that will have major consequences on the lived realities of Potsdam's faculty, staff, and students. Values to guide this process of data gathering, consultation, and change must include transparency, communication, shared vision, honesty of purpose, and consideration of what students, faculty, and staff call their academic "home." In the end, we feel that it is imperative to state again that the student learning experience should be at the core of any change in our academic structures.

## APPENDIX A. SCENARIOS

**NOTE: THE FOLLOWING ARE NOT RECOMMENDATIONS**

**THE FOLLOWING ARE TWO SCENARIOS EXPLORED BY THE TASK FORCE.**

Scenarios are presented in increasing change from current structures

### **SCENARIO #1: REDUCE THE NUMBER OF SCHOOLS/DEANS FROM 3 TO 2**

#### Scenario 1A: Combine A&S and SOEPS.

Benefits:

- This plan could create more opportunities for collaboration between SOEPS and A&S faculty, staff, and students.
- This fix would be well-timed in light of Steve's retirement and the conclusion of Walt's term as Interim Dean of SOEPS in 2019.

Questions/Concerns:

- The easy fix of combining A&S and SOEPS would result in the creation of two schools, one with more than five times (2872) the number of majors than the other (478). This solution is ill advised if efficiency is a primary goal of any reorganization plan.
- All the SUNY comprehensive universities maintain a separate School of Education. SUNY Potsdam would be an outlier in terms of administrative units.
- Eliminating a dean might weaken Academic Affairs in terms of the overall administrative structure of the college (such as in terms of representation at President's Council).
- Will department chairs, faculty, staff, and students find it more difficult to get attention from a dean who now manages more administrative units?
- Would additional administrative structures be needed (such as an additional associate dean or associate provost) to assist with oversight?

#### Scenario 1B: Two new divisions within Academic Affairs are created as part of a broader reorganization project. These two divisions would bring together multiple schools (including Crane) inside each division.

Benefits:

- This plan could create new opportunities for interdisciplinarity and collaboration among Potsdam faculty, staff, and students.
- Depending on how the divisions are made, this plan could bring more equity within the administration at the dean's level.
- This plan would save the college money through the elimination of one dean's salary.

Questions/Concerns:

- Eliminating a dean might weaken Academic Affairs in terms of the overall administrative structure of the college (such as in terms of representation at President's Council).
- Will department chairs, faculty, staff, and students find it more difficult to get attention from a dean who now manages more administrative units?
- Would additional administrative structures be needed (such as an additional associate dean, associate provost, or directors of the schools within each division) to assist with oversight?
- There may be the perception that Crane was losing power/identity under this reorganization plan.

Scenario 1C: Crane and SOEPS are maintained, but A&S loses a dean and its department chairs report directly to the provost.

Benefits:

- This plan would allow for direct contact between department chairs in A&S and the provost's office.
- This plan would preserve the department structure in A&S and thus faculty, staff, and students in that area would not experience significant changes to their everyday experience.
- Crane and SOEPS would be preserved as intact entities.
- One dean's salary would be eliminated.

Questions/Concerns:

- Without a change at the department level, there are no increased opportunities to enhance student experience via collaboration and interdisciplinarity.
- This plan would create a lack of equity in administrative structures for each school.
- Eliminating a dean could weaken Academic Affairs in terms of the overall administrative structure of the college (such as in terms of representation at President's Council).
- Would department chairs, faculty, staff, and students in what is now A&S find it more difficult to get attention from a provost who directly manages many more administrative units?
- Would additional administrative structures be needed (such as an additional associate dean or associate provost) to assist with oversight?

**SCENARIO #2: ELIMINATE DEANS, SCHOOLS, AND/OR DEPARTMENTS**

Scenario 2A: Eliminate the three schools but create smaller, more numerous units of administration while largely preserving the current department structure.

Benefits:

- This plan could create more opportunities for collaboration, interdisciplinarity, advising, and mentoring within administrative units that are larger than departments.

- This plan would preserve the department structure and thus avoid a major reorganization of Academic Affairs.
- This plan would eliminate the salaries of three deans.

Questions/Concerns:

- How much collaboration and interdisciplinarity could happen if department-level structures remain in place?
- Instead of deans, this plan would require additional administrative structures above the level of the department that would offset the cost-saving happening through the elimination of three deans.
- Eliminating deans could weaken Academic Affairs in terms of the overall administrative structure of the college (such as in terms of representation at President's Council).
- Depending on the nature of the clustering, there may be disruption (in terms of space, administration) caused by the creation of clusters of academic departments.
- Can Crane be incorporated within a larger structure?

Scenario 2B: Eliminate the three schools and have all department chairs report directly to the provost's office.

Benefits:

- This plan would allow direct contact between department chairs and the provost's office.
- This plan would preserve the department structure and thus avoid a major reorganization of Academic Affairs.
- This plan would eliminate the salaries of three deans.

Questions/Concerns:

- Without a change at the department level, there are no increased opportunities for collaboration and interdisciplinarity.
- Eliminating deans could weaken Academic Affairs in terms of the overall administrative structure of the college (such as in terms of representation at President's Council).
- Department chairs, faculty, staff, and students may find it more difficult to get attention from a provost who directly manages many more administrative units.
- This change would most certainly require an administrative expansion in the provost's office, thereby lessening the savings from the elimination of the deans' salaries.
- Can Crane be altered in this way?

Scenario 2C: Eliminate the three schools and departments and create interdisciplinary clusters or divisions.

Benefits:

- This plan would showcase campus values relating to interdisciplinarity and create an academic structure that facilitates collaboration, advising, and mentoring across traditional academic borders.
- Reorganization along these lines may positively affect recruitment and retention efforts.
- This plan would eliminate the salaries of three deans.

Questions/Concerns:

- Eliminating departments would involve a radical disruption in terms of everyday operations on campus.
- Is there evidence that these types of radical reorganization efforts do enhance the student experience? And thus do enhance recruitment and retention efforts?
- Eliminating deans could weaken Academic Affairs in terms of the overall administrative structure of the college (such as in terms of representation at President's Council).
- Instead of deans, this plan would require additional administrative structures at the level of the cluster/division that would offset the cost-saving happening through the elimination of three deans.
- Can Crane be altered in this way?