

Brown University Faculty Forum
Subject: Report of the Task Force on Undergraduate Education
February 26, 2008

The Chair of the Faculty Forum, Professor Tom Banchoff, called the meeting to order at 4:05pm in Macmillan Hall 115. After explaining the procedure to be followed at the forum, he introduced Dean Bergeron who gave introductory remarks about the draft report of the Task Force on Undergraduate Education. Dean Bergeron stated that there were two motivations for this report: (1) as part of the current review of the plan for academic enrichment, and (2) preparation for reaccreditation which is coming up in 2009. The University asked the reaccreditation agency, NEASC, to focus its review on the College. Dean Bergeron acknowledged the hard work of the undergraduate and faculty Task Force committee members, many of whom were in attendance. She said that the Task Force's charge was to review Brown's liberal education, concentrations, advising, and its mission as a teaching institution. She reviewed the work the Task Force has done thus far, and then relayed the substance of her report to the Brown Corporation last week, in which she targeted a few of the 25 recommendations in the report for immediate action: review the Brown concentrations with the CCC, review and enhance advising, provide additional money for teaching initiatives from the faculty, and support the formation of the science resource center. Dean Bergeron emphasized that the report is a work in progress and that all feedback will influence the final draft. Feedback is, and will be, coming from the Dean of the College website, the department chairs and DUG leaders, and from some members of the task force who will be meeting with the residential life committee. The Dean said that this feedback will help to prioritize all of the recommendations, may add some recommendations, and will help make a plan for how to implement the recommendations. NEASC needs to know how the planned changes will be implemented. The next draft of the report will clarify aspects of: the writing requirement, language study and international education, the broader question of liberal education. Dean Bergeron closed by saying that the next draft report will be complete at the beginning of the summer.

Next, Professor Banchoff solicited all topics of concern from the audience of approximately 30 faculty. Under the topic of "Liberal Education", issues raised were: multidisciplinary introductory courses, intellectual authority of the accreditation agency, junior-level modes of thought courses, and capstones. Under the topic of "Advising", issues raised were: is the contribution of faculty being understated, mandated advising. Under the topic of "Teaching & Learning" were: online course evaluations, the purpose of e-portfolios, assessment, compensation to faculty for increased advising loads, the perceived problem of lack of retention in the sciences.

Professor Banchoff then opened the floor to discussion, beginning with the topic of Teaching and Learning. The concern was raised that online course evaluations could be taken less seriously than they are taken when the teacher has just told the class how important the evaluations are for promotions etc. Another faculty member pointed out that someone should be in the room to make sure that other students do not influence

each other's responses. It was pointed out that unsigned reviews cannot be rebutted and can damage reputations, and electronic versions may be more permanent than paper. One faculty member raised some questions about the purpose of the mid-course evaluation: Will this be online or will it take up class time? Will faculty see them? Faculty are not allowed to see end of term evaluations until after they've submitted their grades. Has anyone thought through what impact a mid-semester evaluation will have, e.g. if the faculty member finds out that students hate the class? A faculty member can be devastated by bad evaluations. What has been done even with the existing evaluation system when evaluations have not been good? How seriously is it taken now? The critical review shows some courses continue to be disliked. Maybe feedback should be taken more seriously instead of adding more evaluations, and maybe it has not been thought through. Usually evaluations are given at a time when it can not be used to serve self interest but in mid-term it is possible to imagine students trying to use it to impact the class, e.g. saying the course is too hard.

Another faculty member suggested that it might be possible to design the questions so as to phrase them for helpful feedback instead, and the university might help to educate us about how to use the assessment in a constructive way. Someone pointed out that it could be an opportunity to find out how students would like to be taught. One faculty member felt that if the purpose is feedback to the faculty member so that current problems can be addressed before the end of the term, then no one else should see the evaluation, and if it is online it would be misused later.

Dean Bergeron replied that she had presumed each faculty member would generate their own mid-course evaluation and had not assumed that it would be online. Another faculty member suggested that there should be higher levels of specificity in the report, and perhaps the evaluation should ask for 3 things that are working and 3 things that could be done better. She felt that online evaluations are ok but that they should only be used in the context of the syllabus and course goals – that it can't be reduced to student statistics. Another faculty member felt that online evaluations are not ok because people say wounding things online that they would not say in person. It was pointed out that currently each department has their own way to evaluate classes, and online evaluations would homogenize rather than keep our diversity. One individual relayed an attempt to disseminate core principles for evaluations that were not met with interest at Brown. It was pointed out that evaluations being online can change the time at which the evaluation takes place, and that our current method of asking for evaluations before the final exam is timed terribly because students are stressed. For example, online evaluations could be handed in after the final exam in order to release the grade, or even after getting the grade, and all of these different evaluation times would probably produce different results. Someone commented that the Education dept. does online evaluations now and it would be useful to draw from the experiences of others who have used it. Research has shown that students' projected grades and the positivity of their course evaluation are correlated.

Turning to the topic of Liberal Education, it was suggested that reintroducing the Modes of Thought courses is not necessarily the best approach for all disciplines. First-year seminars can be difficult to get faculty to teach because they have other classes they have to teach. Someone pointed out that originally, Modes of Thought classes were supposed

to be on topics of interest to the faculty that taught new ways of thinking, and one idea was for there to be four of these in the freshman year. It was stated that the more freshman seminars there are, the fewer advanced undergraduate courses there will be. It was argued that junior-level courses require the mindset of an anthropologist and that most of us are specialists and don't have the capacity to teach them. In some fields that are hierarchical, you have to build up an understanding. Prof. Weinstein from the Task Force said that nobody wants to force interdisciplinary classes on the faculty, and that these speculative courses might be best for seasoned senior faculty to teach who can widen their angle of vision. It was pointed out that the current freshman seminars have no underlying theme or definition. It was suggested that the courses should relate to where the students are, e.g. a course on the nature of a community and the transition from one's previous community to the Brown community and the tradeoffs of each community; there are unexplored opportunities such as the fact that there is currently no course on leadership.

Prof. Banchoff quoted the first recommendation of the Task Force's report and commented that departments should be mandated to encourage DUGS to show the spillover from classroom into the social community. Prof. Savage agreed that education at Brown is not limited to the classroom but said that it is hard to apply these concepts to the Computer Science concentration, although they have undergraduate TAs who learn about leadership, and students who work on MOCA, etc. A faculty member failed to understand the rationale of imposing a constitution and elected officer and mission statement for a DUG rather than leaving it an informal organization. Others agreed, but this requirement did not stem from the report under discussion.

Turning to the subject of Advising, it was stated that a faculty member who is forced to advise will not create an enriching experience. Instead, the administration should ask people what makes it worth their while and make it significantly appreciated. Another faculty member agreed and asked if advising will be valued in tenure and promotion, and said that there should be programs for new faculty advisors.

One faculty member would like to see good advisors be rewarded with course relief. When she was asked why this should reduce teaching rather than research, her rationale was that in order to be a first-rate research university, we can't have everyone spend all their time teaching and advising and not doing research; just as we give department chairs course relief, research is what is important for promotion, but advising is very important too.

It was pointed out that although the Report recognizes that faculty are overworked, it still tries to throw faculty at the problem; why not allow the sophomores to organize and tell us what they want and give them resources? We need more of a culture of student responsibility rather than more of us doing the same, and juniors should not advise sophomores because sophomores know what they want. The report seemed to suggest that freshman advising is better than sophomore advising but did not have a model of what should be done better. Someone suggested advisors should get a reward such as an undergraduate research assistant; a member of Task Force replied that there are already faculty advising fellows and that the report was intended to convey a spirit of reward.

Back to the topic of Liberal Education, it was asked what intellectual authority the accreditors have. A member of the Task Force responded that we have to stay true to our principles as educators but we need to communicate those principles to the agency because not getting reaccredited would have many ramifications. One faculty member stated that the NEASC is not requiring the online course evaluation tool as the report seems to suggest. The opinion was offered that we must be opposed to assessment from politicians; this is not a business and you can't assess it that way or we are selling our souls.

It was requested that the wording in the report be looked at with regard to its depiction of the perceived lack of retention in the sciences as a particular problem; it was felt that it is natural that there will be some lack of retention in the sciences and mathematics at Brown. One Task Force member said that one issue was whether filter courses are the best way to interest women.

It was stated that some students who have two concentrations choose their thesis or UTRA based on the stringency of requirements in different programs; it would help to compare programs and agree upon a set of reasonable requirements.

Regarding the Capstone requirement, it was commented that seniors at Brown are supposed to have a special relationship with a faculty member, but if 20% are on leave at any one time, then each individual faculty member should be working closely with two to three seniors; how big would the Brown faculty have to get to give this trademark Brown experience of undergraduate research with faculty?

It was felt that requiring a Capstone course of everyone is a waste if there is no enthusiasm. It should be done out of interest like an honors thesis. Interest should be monitored and the resources should be given back if it is not working.

Questions were raised about the e-portfolio: what are we going to do with them? Read them? Do all students have to do them? Is this a creeping expectation? One faculty member thought that the students who come to Brown wanting to grow and change and be challenged would benefit, but for those who just want a ticket punched to get out to the real world, it will just be a website for bragging, a glorified vocational school. It was pointed out that some concentration advisors were told that the students' essays about why they chose their concentration were criticized for not being deep enough, so perhaps they should be eliminated because face-to-face conversations are more important. Prof. Blumstein from the Task Force asked people to step back and ask if it is a good idea to build a reflective document; the report was agnostic about whether it should be a requirement for graduation, and the Task Force wants feedback now on this issue.

The Forum was adjourned at 5:30 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

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Secretary of the Faculty Forum
(Cognitive and Linguistic Sciences)