

February 19, 2018

Dr. Barbara Brittingham, President
Commission on Institutions of Higher Education
New England Association of Schools and Colleges
3 Burlington Woods Drive, Suite 100
Burlington, MA 01803

Dear Dr. Brittingham,

I want to begin this response by thanking the Visiting Team (the Team) and its Chair, Robert Zimmer, for their efforts to understand Williams and help us ensure our continued excellence. Their report demonstrates that they were quick to understand this college and its diverse community, based on the self-study and site visit.

While it was gratifying to read their praise of Williams—notably, the description of our faculty and staff as “deeply devoted to the institution, the education it offers, and its students”—the real reward has been the opportunity to clearly articulate our work to NEAS&C, the Team, and ourselves, and then to receive feedback from accomplished teachers and professionals.

The following are initial thoughts about Williams’ future priorities, highlighting intersections between the Team’s recommendations and our ongoing or planned work. We expect that the learning from this process will continue informing our practices after our 18th president arrives.

To help move things forward in the meantime, we will publish the report and this response on the college’s [accreditation website](#) today, February 19. Sharing the accreditation materials promptly with stakeholders will help us increase awareness of priorities and sustain the “high degree of commitment, sense of ownership, and excellence” observed by the Team.

For their help in this endeavor we are, and will remain, grateful.

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In the report’s introduction, the Team suggests three areas to which Williams could usefully direct its energies:

- 1) Clarity of mission and definition of the liberal arts at Williams;
- 2) College governance practices and culture; and
- 3) Our approach to campus planning.

While the authors clearly did not intend their list to be exhaustive, we agree that it highlights significant issues and opportunities. Consequently, our response looks especially closely (although not exclusively) at work on these three topics. Such efforts engage all Williams stakeholders, from our Board of Trustees to faculty, administration, staff, students, and alumni.

All three also relate back to a defining theme of modern higher education: how to balance the benefits of central coordination and organizational efficiency against the value of academic freedom and local initiative. We know many schools are considering the same question. Each will need to find a balance appropriate to its structure, culture, and history.

Williams, too, needs to choose the approach that is right for Williams. Much of the work we described in our self-study, and which the Team observed, either contributes to that search or depends on its outcome. And there is more such work ahead. It cannot be done slowly, given rapid changes in popular expectations for higher education. Nor should it be done hastily, in a way that erodes academic integrity and shared governance. We believe the best approach for Williams is a firm commitment to progress, matched by an equal commitment to considering the costs and benefits of choices along the way. That philosophy is evident in our attention to the three aforementioned themes.

Mission and the liberal arts at Williams

The report asks whether Williams should adopt a concise, widely-understood definition of the liberal arts, as we teach them, to guide campus planning, aid recruitment and promote a greater sense of shared purpose.

We note this idea with interest, especially in relation to an upcoming series of small working dinners where tenured and tenure-track faculty will discuss the academic program. Those meetings may be a suitable setting for discussing the Team's recommendation, and we intend to raise it there for consideration.

Even in the meantime, we see Williams' liberal arts mission expressed throughout our academic program. It takes the form of an education both deep and broad, achieved through the close relationship we cultivate between teacher and student.

With regard to depth: at Williams, outstanding teachers mentor students, including them as partners in original research and encouraging them to intensively engage with current problems and knowledge production in their fields. Tutorials are but one especially visible expression of this commitment. The number of Williams students who co-publish papers or co-present with faculty, earn awards and fellowships, thrive in rigorous graduate programs or become skilled and accomplished professionals in their areas of focus, all speak to the value of depth as preparation for further study, careers, and life.

With regard to breadth: Williams introduces students to a range of intellectual possibilities through opportunities such as Winter Study; the Difference, Power, and Equity requirement; our commitments to interdisciplinarity; and our expectation that students complete courses in all three divisions. Students engage in fundamentally different ways of thinking and problem-solving, working with passionate teachers in disciplines far from their major subjects. Our desire

to ensure a range of experiences also underlies faculty attention to increases in double majors, which can sometimes constrain students' ability to experience diverse approaches. Williams graduates' varied accomplishments, often in fields different from their undergraduate majors, and their lauded ability to apply tools and concepts learned from one discipline to problems encountered in others both speak to the benefits of such breadth.

This education happens within the intimacy of a beautiful rural setting, which offers both the chance to focus on one's studies and personal development and also connections to the wider world. We maintain those connections through our work with national higher education consortia; our international faculty of globally networked scholars and artists; our diverse student body, with their far-reaching engagements (including programs such as the Center for Learning in Action, the Williams-Exeter Programme at Oxford, Williams-Mystic Program, and innumerable study away, internship, and fellowship programs); and of course our community of more than 28,000 alumni in every corner of the world.

Sustaining this mission is resource-intensive, and Williams carefully focuses institutional commitments on our educational priorities: Support for a low student-to-faculty ratio, especially in the high-touch work of one-on-one mentoring and two-to-one tutorials. Recruiting and supporting a diverse community of students, faculty, and staff, and leveraging the educational and life potential of that diversity. Investing in faculty collaboration, professional development, and scholarship within and among disciplines. Promoting fellowships, study away, and career exploration. Caring for students' physical, psychological, and spiritual wellbeing. And more.

None of these endeavors are complete or ever will be. The report has prompted us to consider, for example, how we can more clearly emphasize the value of staff to our mission, both as a recognition of their educational contributions and as an investment in their own morale and development. Such efforts can benefit considerably from the report's insights. We have already begun discussing the findings with our Board, faculty, and staff, and intend to continue that discussion with them and a widening circle of stakeholders, including our next president.

Governance

The report also encourages Williams to consider how we can optimize governance and improve communication and collaboration between the administration and campus.

Williams' current work on faculty committees is one example. Committee work is central to shared governance. But the commitment must feel useful to those involved while delivering the greatest decision-making benefits for the college. The Steering Committee has begun discussions with the faculty on how to make the most of committee service. That conversation has also touched on the idea of whether we can do more to communicate to campus about committee work. This is not about changing structure, but about making faculty governance more effective, satisfying, and transparent. We also note that the work is happening while Williams is led by a 23-year veteran of the faculty, in partnership with a Steering Committee, Provost, Dean of the College, and Dean of Faculty who are all from within Williams' professorial ranks.

The report then inquires as to whether faculty governance could move more rapidly. In a world where everything can seem urgent, we want to judge which opportunities or challenges require swift response, and which warrant a more measured approach. That said, faculty have repeatedly shown their ability to capitalize on emerging opportunities: For example, by making a cluster of three opportunity hires in Physics, significantly increasing the department's diversity. By creating three new lines in Computer Science a year later, in response to increases in course enrollments and majors. By launching a new Public Health program and initiating multiple cross-disciplinary hiring partnerships. By moving, with Board support, to create two new faculty positions related to our climate change commitments. And by responding to demographic turnover in the faculty in ways that increased the diversity of incoming professors while also enhancing partnerships for our Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellows.

Administrative decision-making can be equally nimble, as when the college quickly cut managers' budgets by 25% in response to the 2008 financial crisis, avoiding any need for staff layoffs. In a more upbeat vein, leadership also moved in 2017 to unite the Admission and Financial Aid teams under a new Dean. Other examples abound, from our rapid increases in investments for mental health and wellbeing services, to fundraising for the new Science Center, to the quick halt—and subsequent restart—of the Sawyer Library project.

Deliberation is the other half of our formula. Careful discussion has sometimes spared Williams from moving too quickly on emerging ideas, as during the period of widespread fascination with MOOCs in the early 2000s. Similarly, the Team's interest in an interdisciplinary data science program is something the faculty may choose to consider in the context of larger discussions about our academic program and its relationship to the evolving global economy.

At its best, Williams' commitment to thoughtful progress draws on the combined expertise of faculty leaders and experienced administrators. This is why we believe in maintaining a Senior Staff that joins the two. We acknowledge the Team's observation of the importance of a "mutually trusting balanced distributed authority structure," and the Board, faculty and Senior Staff continue to work toward that objective.

But, as the report points out, such a structure works best when we have strong communication between leadership and the Williams community—communication that is not currently at its fullest. Our Senior Staff is working to improve that flow. The Board is deeply informed about college business and involved at the highest level. Senior Staff members also present to faculty about significant areas of administrative practice and challenges, and cover many of the same topics in staff forums and meetings. In a fast-moving work environment, however, we need to help staff feel in the loop about college decisions, provide them easy access to information they need to do their jobs well, and value their ideas and views on how Williams does and should run. We already host periodic staff forums and presentations on such issues as capital budgets, as well as conducting regular staff surveys. The interim president is now planning a new series of meetings with staff to further the conversation. Some of these sessions will be focused on the unique experiences and needs of distinct groups of employees: for example, in dining, facilities, or the library. Also, while most college staff already receive annual performance evaluations, we want to bring that number up to 100 percent and highlight connections between performance, institutional goals, and merit.

Even with all this ongoing, we still want to do more. We are looking at, for example, conducting a comprehensive audit of campus communications, with an eye toward a more systematic approach to campus information-sharing—a move we believe to be unusual among our peers, and which was highlighted in the report as a topic of some interest to the Team.

Planning

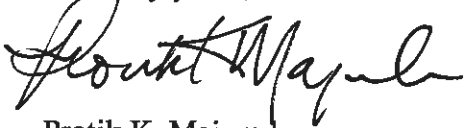
As described in our self-study, Williams has traditionally conducted most planning work via overlapping sector plans. This approach successfully blends stakeholders' project-specific requirements with the college's long-term needs and aspirations. For example, the Science Center project combines input from our science faculty and students, as the Center's eventual occupants, with contributions from our college-wide Design Review Committee, which looks at how college facilities communicate with each other and the campus as a whole.

We take a similarly agile approach in our work on the academic program. To cite one instance, Williams faculty carefully weighed both department-specific and college-wide needs when creating the aforementioned new lines in Computer Science. Our responsive methodology also enables us to slow projects down or bring them to a close if necessary, as when we recently paused the planning for a new arts facility. While the sector approach has served us well historically, there are obvious benefits to thinking strategically about how decisions at the sector level may open up or foreclose on future opportunities. The new president will likely bring their own views on campus planning, and we look forward to that discussion.

Clearly, there is much work ahead and always will be. It is good and important work, and we feel privileged to be doing it with the benefit of so many resources: a strong reputation and proud history; a dedicated and caring Board of Trustees; talented faculty, staff, and students; alumni who are our partners every step of the way; and financial support from a healthy endowment. And now, additionally, insights gained from the accreditation process. Williams owes a debt of gratitude to NEAS&C, Robert Zimmer, and all the Team members for your contributions, which will help us ensure for Williams a future as bright as its past and present.

I look forward to continuing our discussion of these efforts when I and our provost, Professor of Economics David Love, join you for our meeting this spring.

Sincerely yours,



Protik K. Majumder
Interim President
Barclay Jermain Professor of Natural Philosophy