Intellectual Life at Williams:

Proposals from the Gaudino Committee
April, 1985
Introduction

The Gaudino Committee was created last September with the object of formulating ideas designed to enlarge and enrich the intellectual life on the Williams campus. This report summarizes the Committee's findings and sets forth our proposals.

Since its inception, the Committee has met on a weekly basis. It consists of Professors Meredith Hoppin, David L. Smith, Brian Levy, and Kurt P. Tauber (chair), as well as Chris Fleming '85, Sara Gross '85, Devonya Havis '87, Larry Krasnoff '85, Brett McDonnell '85, Betsy Paine '85, Edward Stein '87, Michael Weber '87, and, during the fall semester, Cathryn Phipps '86. Frequently, the Committee has consulted other members of the Williams community, as well as faculty and administrators from other schools.

We begin this report by defining more precisely what is meant by "enlarging and enriching the intellectual life" at Williams. We do not seek merely to put a greater emphasis on academic coursework. Instead, we wish to reassert a vision of a liberal education as an active process encompassing not merely academic performance but also a student's entire person. The acquisition of knowledge and skills in the classroom is certainly a part, but only a part, of this process.

To be complete, a liberal arts education must aim to engage all aspects of personality; its product can and must be more than a student versed in facts and cognitive skills. Students should be encouraged to examine continually their fundamental ideas and values, to re-evaluate them in light of experiences from all facets of their lives, and to act on their ideals to change the world around them. The ultimate goal must be to make students the motivating force in their own education, to develop and give free rein to a passionate sense of intellectual inquiry stemming from both the heart and the mind.

Although in some ways and in some areas, the Williams education approaches this standard, it does not do so in enough areas nor to a great enough extent. We feel that perhaps the chief barrier to meeting our objective more fully is the way in which many students at Williams tend to divide their lives into various unrelated spheres. The academic, social, cultural, and extracurricular realms become separated and insulated from one another, with each sphere having its own distinct purpose.

This compartmentalization distorts the educational process. In the academic sphere, the richness and applications to everyday life of the material studied in class get lost; students become caught up in the stressful race to read a certain number of pages in order to write a certain number of pages in order to get a certain grade,
with the final prize being acceptance to a prestigious graduate school or getting a high paying job. Risk-taking, passion, and active creative thought give way to playing it safe, apathy, and passive regurgitation.

Furthermore, in this context, social life comes to be seen as a refuge from the oppressive workload. While a certain amount of the "I really need to just unwind and blow off steam" attitude is inevitable and healthy, the committee feels that Williams students have gone too far in this regard. We feel that the desire to get away from classwork often becomes so dominant that it precludes any exchange of ideas in the social arena. In addition, we perceive a strong pressure against admitting that one is having trouble handling things and against using available counselling services; these two conditions, combined with the use of social life as a refuge, may be intricately related to the rising number of alcohol-related problems on campus.

The liberal education should be an integrated whole in which students can apply the insights gathered in any one part of college life to the problems and questions posed in the others. The phenomenon of compartmentalization yields instead several distorted fragments. Education is being consumed, it is not being lived, it is taken out when needed to fulfill certain requirements and then put away again as soon as possible. Accordingly, our proposals are designed to draw together the various spheres of Williams life, thus strengthening and rendering more meaningful the Williams education. We have generally focused on proposals to introduce new structure and modify existing ones.

The freshman year serves as a crucially important introduction to Williams life; the impressions students receive during this time tell them what to expect of Williams and what Williams will expect of them. If freshmen are presented with the experience of education as self-activity and discovery and with opportunities for creative intellectual inquiry, they will relish it and demand it during their upperclass years in the residential houses. Because of this, many of our proposals focus on the freshman year; they deal with the JA system and with integrating some of the intellectual, academic and social aspects of the Freshman experience. (See page 4)

A major part of the Williams experience takes place in upperclass college housing. We agree with the majority of the CUL that the potential exists to use the residential house system to stimulate cultural and intellectual activities and to meld them with social life and academics. However, in the main we see no need to duplicate the CUL's efforts in this area. Instead, we are proposing establishing interest houses which - while working outside the residential houses - supplement and complement the present system. (See page 8)

The Committee believes that extracurricular activities can play a major role in achieving the goals we seek. Accordingly, our proposal in this area calls for the
assignment of a student each year to be the Student Activities Intern. We believe this proposal will help Williams get the most out of its extracurricular structure. (See page 10)

Changes in classroom practice also can contribute to promoting a freer flow of discussion and enabling students to experience education as a collaborative process. In this field, we suggest that the faculty regularly employ "work groups," an effective teaching tool which has heretofore been the exception. (See page 12)

In the following pages, our proposals are set forth in more depth. The Committee as a whole or any of the individual members will be glad to answer any questions concerning the issues dealt with in this report.
FRESHMAN YEAR

The system of freshman housing provides a close-knit and supportive group at a time when it is most needed. Furthermore, the freshman entry provides a natural forum for intellectual discussion and interaction - thirty people living together, becoming friends, and sharing the new experiences and challenges of college life.

Far too often, however, the full potential of the freshman entry goes unfulfilled because of the compartmentalization discussed earlier. The entry becomes a vehicle purely for socializing, and socializing comes to imply the exclusion of intellectual discourse. We have looked for ways to short circuit this compartmentalization in the freshmen year by attempting to build on the framework of the entry system so as to integrate the various arenas of freshman life.

The Committee has examined three proposals designed to accomplish this goal: the freshman college idea, the Marcus Plan, and the Fix Plan. As will become obvious to the reader, if any one of them is adopted for the whole freshman class, this would preclude use of the other two. With this proviso, we commend all three proposals to the College's consideration and experimentation.

FRESHMAN COLLEGES

The first of these ideas calls for the establishment of "freshman colleges", an idea which has worked well at other schools, notably St. Lawrence University in New York. These "colleges", flexible in size, would be constituted around housing groups; for instance, there might be a "Morgan College" or a "Sage A-C College." All freshmen in a particular freshman college would take as one of their four courses in each of their freshmen semesters a year-long interdisciplinary seminar taught by a group of faculty from different departments. These faculty members would also perform advisory duties for the students in the freshman college. Incoming freshmen could apply for their preferred seminars during the summer in a manner similar to Winter Study applications, with the difference that the seminars could be more easily expanded or contracted to accommodate interest. There would be many possible worthwhile topics for these seminars; a rough example of what a good seminar might resemble is the math/philosophy course entitled Human and Artificial Intelligence taught this semester by Professors Grabois and Karelis (importantly with the help of several intriguing guest lecturers).

Installing the freshman colleges would set the stage for the integration of the academic and the social, as well
as the injection of intellectual inquiry into both. In addition, encountering an interdisciplinary seminar in the freshman year would present students with a working model of how to integrate their learning experiences in the various academic domains. These ends would be achieved in a number of ways.

The experience of St. Lawrence emphatically suggests that students who live together feel more comfortable speaking up in front of each other in class and are more willing and even eager to go out on intellectual limbs; thus, the freshman colleges would create the potential for energetic, searching, and broad-based class discussions. These discussions would be further facilitated by the increased familiarity the students would have with their professors, since these faculty members would also be their advisors.

Furthermore, in order to take advantage of the potential offered by the freshman colleges, the advisory role could be expanded to include interaction with the whole freshman college as well as particular students. The faculty members could work with the freshman college officers and their JA's to plan discussions, lectures, films, field trips, and other events which would be coordinated with the seminar; these events would both enrich the seminar experience for students in that particular freshman college and also allow other students to learn about the seminar topic. Finally, as well as directly increasing the intellectual life at Williams, we feel that this link of the academic and the social/living spheres would be likely to spark spontaneous discussions about intellectual issues among freshmen, at first perhaps centered solely on the topics of their seminars but then gradually expanding to many other issues.

MARCUS AND FIX PLANS

Along with the freshmen colleges, we also offer two other, less comprehensive ways of integrating academic and social life and stimulating intellectual discussion in the freshman entries. One of these proposals is based on an experiment conducted in 1973 by Professors George Marcus, William Boone, and Joseph Beatty; it is hereafter referred to as the Marcus Plan. The other proposal stems directly from a submission to the Gaudino Committee by Professor Steve Fix which he made on the basis of his observations of one of his classes; it is accordingly called the Fix Plan.

Both plans aim to create a situation in which, as much as possible, entrymates who share common courses would be grouped together in the same sections; this would obviously be easiest to do when working with the large introductory courses such as those in English, Political Science, Psychology and Philosophy. The Marcus Plan would
accomplish this by directly coordinating housing assignments and section assignments from the very start. The Fix Plan takes the normal housing assignments as a given and then puts entrypees who share common courses in the same sections.

The advantages of both plans are in many ways similar to those foreseen for freshman colleges. Classmates who live together would make for better class discussions, and common classes would provide a stage for discussion in the entry. Naturally, both of these advantages would be all the more pronounced if the link between class and entry were consciously used and strengthened via lectures, discussions, and the like. It would also be desirable to have the professors be advisors for their students in the affected entries.

These two plans also have their own advantages and disadvantages. They would be much simpler to set up than the freshmen colleges; this is especially true of the Fix Plan. They also do not involve freshmen giving up two out of eight regular electives in their freshman year. On the other hand, unlike the situation with the freshmen colleges, whole entries would not have a course in common to act as a take-off point for discussion. This, however, might be turned into a positive feature if the different groups of entrypees who were in the same sections of courses were to advance ideas that got their other entrypees excited about what they had talked about in class, thus creating several different stimuli for discussions on a wide range of topics.

Another difference between the Fix and Marcus proposals and the freshmen colleges lies in the directly inter-disciplinary nature of the latter. However, the Fix and Marcus Plans could be given a somewhat interdisciplinary tint if desired. Section placements could be worked out so that the same three or four clusters of entrypees who made up a given section of, say, Political Science 101 could be assigned to a particular section of Philosophy 101, and perhaps a particular section of another course. The professors who taught these sections could then, if they so desired, discuss methods of inter-relating their courses.

The coordination of housing and scheduling would require some effort. However, the success of Professor Marcus' 1973 experiment shows that these difficulties would not be insurmountable and would not prevent either plan from providing beneficial results.

These two proposals might be combined in some way. The important consideration is the goal which motivates both proposals: the breaking down of the barriers between academic and social life and the consequent invigoration of the intellectual life at Williams.
JA SYSTEM

Crucial to the intellectual development of freshman are the Junior Advisors. Especially during the first few months of the freshmen year, the JA is social leader, counsellor, role model, and friend. We can not afford to underemphasize the paramount importance that JA's have in the development of freshmen perceptions and attitude to all aspects of the Williams experience.

While the JA's have proved very helpful to Williams freshmen in many areas, we are concerned that this has not been true in the area of sparking intellectual interaction in the entries. We have found that JA's tend to refrain from intellectual discourse for fear of isolating or intimidating freshmen. Further, we have found that the JA selection process tends to assume that a JA who is excited by particular interests somehow can not be open-minded enough to be a JA.

We therefore urge that the attitudes of prospective JAs towards ideas and their ability to encourage and develop the same sort of passion in others be considered as a major factor in the JA selection process. We further urge that the JA's who are chosen make a conscious effort to promote the intellectual development of the freshmen in their entries. We also endorse the recent modification of the JA Selection Committee to include non-JA's, as we feel this will make it easier to bring concerns such as those addressed by this report into the selection process. However, perhaps the best way to effect change in the selection process is to heighten awareness among JA's and the entire campus concerning the importance of intellectual life and of the problems of compartmentalization.

We are not suggesting that Junior Advisors be chosen on the basis of academic qualifications; we reiterate that the words "academic" and "intellectual" are not synonymous. Nor are we proposing that any of the important traditional roles of the JA mentioned above be minimized. We feel that there are many students capable of both fulfilling these roles and encouraging intellectual exchange among freshmen.

The JA's are the first and perhaps the most important aspect of Williams to which the incoming freshman is exposed. If we are serious about enriching the intellectual life on campus, the JA's must be an important part of our effort.
UPPERCLASS HOUSING

INTEREST HOUSE

One way of bringing together the different spheres of Williams life and promoting intellectual interaction is introducing "interest houses" to Williams. We have in mind setting aside two or three living areas in which groups of students who share a common intellectual or cultural interest could live together for a year and pursue that interest in a variety of ways. Students would live with, and thus become friends with, peers who would challenge and enrich them in an area of their lives about which they care deeply.

Participation in the program would be entirely voluntary. The College at the end of each academic year would invite students to submit proposals for specific interest house topics for the following year; each proposal would have to be accompanied by the names of one or more faculty sponsors. Topics might involve a particular intellectual discipline, the culture of a particular region or ethnic group, a specific social, political, or ecological concern, a particular art form, or any of countless other possibilities. The proposals would go through a preliminary screening by a faculty-student panel; those found worthy of further consideration would be made public to allow others who are interested to sign up, and then a final selection would be made on the basis of the thoughtfulness, creativity, and merit of the proposal, the amount of student interest, and the willingness of those involved to devote the needed time and energy to the interest house.

We believe that an interest house would work best in a house of its own, such as an existing co-op or other college owned building or a private house which might be bought by the College specifically for use as an interest house. If both of these alternatives prove to be impossible, another option would be to locate interest houses in sections of larger buildings, such as all or part of a floor or an entry. However, this alternative is clearly an inferior one in our minds; while an interest house might be made to work as part of another house, it would be much harder, and we strongly prefer using one of the first two options instead.

The Committee believes that interest houses would work well in concert with the residential housing system, not compete with it. The residential houses can provide a fine setting for intellectual interaction, but because of their size and diversity they are ill-equipped to delve into any given issue in depth and with great intensity; they are much better used as platforms for smaller scale discussions ranging over a wide variety of issues. The interest houses would fill this gap and thus complement and supplement the residential houses, especially since students who had spent
time in the interest houses would be continually coming back into their residential houses as more active and enthusiastic house members.

The Committee also believes that interest houses would enrich the life of the whole campus through what we have come to call the "multiplier effect." The interest houses would sponsor lectures, films, discussions, and other types of events related to their topic, thus introducing other community members to the richness and complexities of that topic. It would certainly be possible, though we are not sure it is advisable, to include specific ideas for this type of outreach as a mandatory part of the original proposal for an interest house.

Finally, the Committee believes that participating in an interest house would be an intellectually stimulating experience for students. We are not worried that interest houses would too narrowly focus their inhabitants. Even though everyone living in an interest house would obviously share the interest which brought the house together, the participants can be expected to bring with them many different viewpoints and perspectives on the topic, especially since all proposals for interest houses would be made public for additional sign-ons before final adoption. Indeed, if desired, the screening panel could explicitly look for diversity of perspective when evaluating proposals.

We feel that a serious and passionate in-depth involvement with a particular issue is an invigorating intellectual experience which makes the student a better community member and allows for fuller intellectual development.
EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

STUDENT ACTIVITIES INTERN

In order to promote intellectual engagement on campus and to facilitate coordination among the many organizations which provide opportunities for discussion and debate, the Gaudino Committee recommends that the position of Student Activities Intern (SAI) be created, to be filled by a student elected or appointed through either the College Council or Gaudino process.

This position would have a variety of functions. To begin with, the SAI would act to generate occasions for the exchange of ideas by, for instance, encouraging and facilitating the ad hoc formation of discussion groups to investigate more extensively the topics raised in public lectures. The SAI would also seek to integrate the activities of various existing extracurricular groups which were dealing with the same or similar topics; this would give students the opportunity to look at an issue in a coherent and coordinated fashion from several diverse perspectives. In addition, the SAI would consult regularly with the sponsors of intellectual/cultural events to ensure that conflicts are avoided and that the scheduled activities of one group are made known to other groups which might be interested in participating in the planning of these activities. Furthermore, the SAI would work with faculty members to stimulate outside-the-classroom discussion in their fields, perhaps by organizing topic tables at dinner similar to the language tables (a Political Science Table, an Artificial Intelligence Table, etc.). Finally, the SAI would encourage and facilitate the formation of discussion-oriented Free University courses.

Another aspect of the SAI's role would be to help integrate the residential houses with the many existing extracurricular groups. This integration would take two forms. First, the SAI would meet regularly with the house presidents (or cultural chairmen) and the JA's to inform them of upcoming events and to encourage their houses to sponsor activities related to the events, such as discussions of a lecture topic over snacks, perhaps inviting the speaker. Secondly, the SAI would encourage the house presidents and the JA's to use snacks to inform house members of upcoming events regularly and enthusiastically.

The Committee has discussed alternative methods of achieving these goals. One such option is to create a new staff position, either in the Dean's Office or in the College Calendar Office, whose incumbent would do many of the things the SAI would, but on a more official level. We have found that many schools have a Director of Student Activities, a position which is conspicuously nonexistent here at Williams. However, perhaps the ideal solution would be to have both a staff person and a student intern working
together

We believe the creation of a Student Activities Intern and the filling of it by motivated students would be a positive step in increasing intellectual dialogue on campus and in bringing together the various arenas of Williams life. Also, we believe that creating a staff position would be a significant concrete as well as symbolic step towards improving the intellectual life of Williams. We urge the College to adopt one or both of these recommendations.
ACADEMIC POLICY

WORK GROUPS

One widely noted aspect of the fragmentation or compartmentalization that impoverishes the educational experiences of too many Williams students is their reluctance to engage each other in sustained intellectual dialogue and debate on significant issues concerning their thoughts, feelings, and values. To combat this problem, the Gaudino Committee urges the much wider use by the faculty of a teaching device which has been found quite effective by the few who have hitherto employed it: the organization of classes into small work groups.

The immediate task of these groups of three or four students is to meet informally outside of class and discuss assigned readings 1) to help clarify and deepen the understanding of the material, and 2) in some cases, to prepare themselves to either act as resource persons for a given class day or actually to lead that class. In practice, however, as well as fulfilling these laudable academic goals, work group discussions tend to broaden out into considerations of wider cognitive, affective, and evaluative issues that are personally important to the group members.

We believe that these wide-ranging discussions provide a unique, low pressure opportunity for peer engagement and self-activity. We feel that work groups help make students an active force in their own, more integrated education. For these reasons, we strongly recommend their use.