February 23, 1987

Toward Educational Self-Initiative:
Some Modest Proposals

Almost two years ago, the Gaudino committee introduced its proposals for strengthening the intellectual life at Williams by "reassert[ing] a vision of a liberal education as an active process encompassing not merely academic performance but also a student's entire person....The ultimate goal must be to make students the motivating force in their own education." At that time we addressed one of the chief barriers that has kept our students from meeting these objectives more fully: the tendency to compartmentalize life at Williams into various seemingly unrelated spheres. At the present time we would like to link this problem to a closely related one that has been another barrier to the achievement of an active liberal arts education: the tendency of students to consider education as an essentially passive experience in which motivation comes mainly from faculty and academic requirements rather than from the students themselves.

We propose some modest initial steps to encourage students to play a more active role in their own education and to alert them to opportunities for pursuing, on their own, courses of inquiry that reflect their deepest intellectual interests and concerns. We think that these proposals will also help to overcome the separation of the academic, social and cultural spheres of life at Williams by encouraging students to develop their intellectual interests outside the immediate academic requirements as well as within the traditional academic program.

There seem to be two main causes of the passive attitude toward education that is too prevalent at Williams. One is the "lesson" learned from twelve years of elementary and secondary schooling -- the lesson that appropriate responses to the positive and negative inducements of a set of authoritative academic
requirements will bring rewards; namely, academic "success." Given years of such conditioning, it is hardly surprising that many students have difficulty shouldering the burden of self-motivated intellectual activity. The other factor that contributes to their general reluctance to view education as an active process of engagement, to take intellectual risks, or to pursue lines of inquiry or artistic endeavor consonant with their most deeply felt passions, is their frequent preoccupation with professional or career objectives. This leads many Williams students to equate education with the acquisition of credentials. But, of course, the garnering of requisite credentials for the job market is precisely just another instance of meeting other peoples' requirements and expectations to which students have been conditioned.

The present proposals of the Gaudino Committee -- none of which goes beyond what is already in principle available at Williams College -- are designed to increase the awareness of students, from the moment they enter the college, to the significance of actively developing and pursuing their own intellectual and artistic agenda, and thus to offer students greater options in their education. Our suggestions point in the same general direction taken by the Committee on Educational Policy in its consideration of tutorials and the contract minor and are thoroughly compatible with the C.E.P. proposals.

As a first step, we call for the expansion and active official encouragement of the following four programs: "Listings of Related Courses," "Independent Study," "Contract Major," and "Student-initiated and Student-Run Courses." The first three are discussed in the present package. The last of the four is currently the object of a year-long, nationwide, foundation-funded study" -- "The Gaudino Project for Student Initiative and Nonviolent Alternatives"--by three Gaudino interns, David Yaskulka '84, Jacqueline Lanzarone '86, and Dominic Kulik '86. Consequently, we are postponing its presentation until the end of 1987, when the
interns will have returned to the campus and submitted a report of their findings and curricular suggestions.

Listings of Related Courses

Currently, in the Williams College course catalog, there are two listings of courses in cognate disciplines in which there are no formal programs, but in which quite a number of related courses are offered. The two listings are for Medieval Studies and Political and Economic Philosophy. The practice of developing and publishing such listings is an excellent idea for a variety of educational reasons. We believe that many additional listings should be designed and publicized, particularly in areas where contract majors have been developed in the past.

The current departmental structure, while adequately serving the needs of most students at Williams, discourages students from designing a program of studies which fits their own intellectual goals. In many cases, students have interests which lie between departments or in two or more departments. Students with such interests often find it hard to decide which courses in various departments are relevant, which courses have material that overlaps, and in which order courses from different departments should be taken. By grouping together courses which focus on related topics from a variety of majors, related course listings provide students with some minimal guidance in choosing courses they wish to take. Such listings could also note course overlaps, suggest possible sequences, and list faculty members from the various departments who might be able to help students in organizing a program of related courses.
An increased number of listings of related courses would also provide rough guidelines to students who wish to do contract majors or minors. To ensure the possibility of a broad study within an area of interest and to avoid a confusing proliferation of limited course clusters, the related course listings should include at least twelve to fifteen courses. Furthermore, the listing should not be dominated by courses from one department but, rather, should contain courses from at least three or four departments with no single department providing a preponderance of the courses.

Some listings which might be appropriate include Linguistics, Cognitive Science, Medical and Biological Ethics, Neuroscience, Peace Studies, and Technology Studies. If a large number of listings is to appear in the course catalog, it might be better to put all of them at the end of the Bulletin, after the department listings, than to intersperse the departmental course listings and descriptions with the interdepartmental listings. Another possibility would be to print the interdepartmental listings of related courses in a pamphlet separate from the course catalog.

**Independent Study**

Independent study is an invaluable curricular option currently offered by all departments. Not only does independent study allow students to "pursue the study of a subject not covered by the normal course offering of the college", but it enables students to express greater autonomy and initiative in shaping their own education. All departments currently offer independent study as a possible course selection, and yet in a typical semester only around thirty students actually
take such a course. We would like to see this number increase, simply because the experience is such a valuable one.

Unfortunately, requests to do independent study are frequently denied because faculty members find themselves unable to add to their already full teaching loads. If the tutorial proposal currently before the C.E.P. is implemented, this limitation will be all the more widely felt as students seek to complement their positive tutorial experiences with future independent study projects as a normal part of the faculty's activity.

The main obstacle to making such a change is this: independent study requires more faculty time per student than regular courses do. Therefore, if the college is to accommodate more independent study projects without either increasing the average enrollment in regular lecture courses or admitting fewer students altogether, then it must increase the size of the faculty. Faculty members would receive a certain amount of "credit" for supervision of independent study projects in a way deemed consonant with the present system (FTE) of evaluating course load. The apportionment of individual faculty members' time between regular courses and independent study projects is something that could be decided within departments.

The Contract Major

To encourage students to take a more active role in their own education, we propose to promote and improve the neglected contract major. To this end, the twelve-person limit, a relic from the days when the contract major was first initiated, should be removed. A numerical limit should not be placed on an option that is designed to promote original thinking. In any case, the difficulty of
creating, getting approved, and fulfilling a contract major is enough to ensure that only those committed to academic rigor can successfully complete this program. Further, the college should take a more active role in encouraging students to pursue contract majors. With this goal in mind, we propose that the following policies be instituted.

First, the description of the contract major in the *Bulletin* should be revised to remove phrases which are designed to scare away contract majors, replacing them with more encouraging ones. Second, lists of past contract major programs should be made available to all interested students. Third, beginning in the freshman year, students should be exposed to the possibility of a contract major through their freshman advisors. Fourth, in the registration packet for sophomore year, the college should include both a letter explaining the contract major option as well as a detailed list of past, successful contract majors. Fifth, during the sophomore year, students should be invited to an information session on the contract major given by the Dean in charge of contract majors; just as Dean Spear holds information sessions for students considering study abroad. Sixth, special attention should be paid to contract majors during the time when departments hold open houses for prospective majors. Seventh, once students elect to become contract majors, they should be affiliated, for bureaucratic purposes, with the departments of their two advisors. This would include invitations to department colloquia and other events.

None of these policies involves any substantial change, nor will any of them cause the college to lower its standards for the contract major. These policies are meant only to inform students of, and encourage them to investigate, the contract major's unique opportunity for active student participation in education.
ADDENDUM TO:

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Group Focus Courses

1. Goals

This proposal aims at a number of educational goals, some of which are related and all of which are desirable in the context of a Liberal Arts College. However, assuming that there exists a consensus of their desirability, we shall not argue, at this time, for the positive merits of these goals and, instead, urge that they be used as criteria by which to assess the value of the proposal. The goals are

- to broaden the scope of student course selection
- to encourage greater student autonomy in the process of course selection
- to encourage a higher degree of intellectual imagination in that process
- to give concrete institutional expression to the conviction that genuine learning presupposes students' intellectual needs, interests, desires or passions.
- to make more institutionally visible and enhance the role of peers in the process of mutual and self-education

2. Procedure

A number of students who share a topical, thematic or interdisciplinary interest will form a "focus group" and choose as sponsor a faculty member who has some familiarity with or interest in the
group topic. The students will each choose a regularly offered course (most likely -- but not necessarily -- from the greatly expanded listings in The Bulletin of related courses) whose description suggests that it will be able to make a considerable contribution to the agreed-upon group topic or concern. (Copies of the course syllabi will be exchanged among all members.) The group will meet weekly for a two hour (approx.) discussion to which each member will contribute the insights provided by the course in which he/she has enrolled. Under exceptional circumstances, the faculty sponsor and focus-group members may approve the inclusion of a student who has taken focus-relevant courses in the past but is not currently enrolled in any.

The weekly discussion topics might be decided by the group itself on an ad hoc basis or else might be arrived at after consultation with the faculty sponsor. It would also be a matter of group decision what role -- if any -- the individually written term (and other) papers, projects or exercises should play in the discussion group "syllabus".

At the beginning of the term the faculty sponsor and the students would agree on general guidelines concerning the number of discussions, level of participation, relevant criteria of performance evaluation and eventual modes of evaluation that will enable the sponsor, at semester's end, formally to notify the Registrar which members of the group had met the agreed performance criteria. Upon receipt of that certification, the Registrar would enter on each student's transcript the title of the group inquiry as a "no credit" exercise.

At the end of the semester the focus group will be expected to turn in to the faculty sponsor a chronological list of topics covered by the
discussions along with a short description of the focus of the group inquiry, and a list of the cognate courses, taken by the participants. These will be passed on to appropriate offices as a possible model or catalyst for future curricular planning by students and faculty.