

Brown University Faculty Forum
Subject: Self-Study for NEASC Accreditation
October 14th 2008

At 4:05 p.m. the chair of the Faculty Forum, Professor Thomas Banchoff, called the meeting to order in Salomon 001 and solicited topics of interest from the approximately twenty attendees. The comments were organized into the following topics for discussion: priorities, First-Year seminars, advising and general studies, curriculum, senior capstone, internationalization, retirement, and grad/undergraduate experiences. At that point, Prof. Banchoff invited Associate Provost Brenda Allen to make introductory remarks about the steering committee's self-study report.

Associate Provost Allen thanked the audience and the members of the steering committee. She stated that they started with this task one year ago and have now given it to the FEC, URC, APC and APS for comments and it is now ready for comments from student and faculty forums, the Corporation next weekend, and a forum with the outside community next month. She agreed that the topic of internationalization needs to be addressed more extensively in the report. She reviewed the four key messages of the report: (1) we meet and exceed most NEASC standards with one exception, the ability to document an assessment of our student learning outcomes, (2) we have historical excellence in our undergraduate program, (3) we have made huge investments in the past eight years in faculty, classes, student-faculty ratios, new student research opportunities, and (4) we can document how we are using our planning process to allow us to evaluate, assess and establish priorities. She closed by inviting comments and questions.

Prof. Banchoff opened the discussion with the topic of the curriculum. One faculty member felt that double concentrations are positive and asked whether or not we need to be more rigorous about them. It was commented that interdisciplinary double concentrations can be healthy or they can be just another bullet on the vita. It was asked whether there are too many joint concentrators and mentioned that there are even some triple concentrators. Another faculty member commented that as advisors we are told to encourage a focus while sampling widely and taking risks, and we are also told that it doesn't matter what they concentrate in, yet at the same time, the Committee on Academic Standing sees petitions from students who are so focused that they want two concentrations and a master's degree; do we praise that focus or not? One response was that Brown is unique in allowing some students to be narrow and allowing others to figure things out individually. It was pointed out that the only breadth requirement is for a combined BA/MA degree. Kathleen McSharry from the Dean of the College's office commented that Brown's literature lays out goals for liberal learning but individual students have the right to be narrow. Sheila Bonde, Dean of the Graduate School, said that the graduate schools often get delivered a master's degree candidate at the Nth hour, so we need to better advise these students on the spirit of the requirement for breadth and depth for an MA. Some extraordinary students clearly deserve it but some others just took a lot of courses, so we need to tighten up the requirements. It was commented that these Master's students do not have a cohort or graduate school experience.

Professor Kathryn Spoehr, who sits on the board of NEASC, commented that NEASC has hundreds of standards, and that Brown does not come close on some of them. We slip through a loophole in the preamble that says we must meet the “spirit” of the law if not the letter of the law. So, Brown needs to demonstrate this.

Assoc. Provost Allen stated that we have a core, a definition of liberal education, and we need to connect that to our advising. The data show that very few students avoid any area, but some do avoid science and math. We want to give opportunities and access.

Professor Banchoff, a freshman math placement advisor, commented that some students coming from international locations, many of whom are on scholarships, are very focused and chose Brown for the lack of distribution requirements. Professor Russom commented that the intellectual problem of defining an “educated person” will vary with other cultures and value systems, and said that the direct way to intervene is through advising. A faculty member mentioned that in his home country of Argentina, being a math major meant studying just math. It was claimed that undergraduates choose Brown for the freedom to choose classes, that good advising will help, and that we have been successful this way.

Associate Provost Allen pointed out that we need to define and assess our goals and be careful about the definitions, and provide documentation. The Task force thought about this a lot. Prof. Dreier asked what type of student assessment is foreseen, such as percentages of students who take math, or new measures on individual students. Assoc. Provost Allen replied that we are trying to avoid dictation of this from the outside so we want to suggest our own. Assoc. Dean McSharry said we are trying to develop measures based on things we are already doing. She claimed that students pressed for e-portfolios, and those could be used to assess writing that they have already done. That is not to allow the administration to mess with individual assessments, but more for faculty to use.

Professor Banchoff pointed out that the description of the goal of the First Year Seminar, e.g. that it provides close interaction with faculty, has no specific criteria for them. Prof. McSharry responded that the Dean of the College’s office is trying to work with faculty to come up with a definition and incorporate more writing. Concentrations need to define and publish their learning outcomes. The DOC will ask departments to identify independent learning experiences like capstones that may not be theses. Eight departments that are up for review this year may do this.

A faculty member pointed out that in addition to standard ways of assessing success such as prestigious fellowships, we should also think about non-traditional ways that would encompass initiative, creativity, and entrepreneurship, such as education graduates creating their own schools. Associate Provost Allen replied that they are trying to do senior surveys and bring that into it, but it is just anecdotal now. The English department canvassed its graduates and put the results on a website, and this is being used as a model.

Turning to the topic of retirement, Professor Lipsitt said that the Committee on Faculty Retirement has been talking about ways that emeritus faculty members can fit into current events such as internationalization and diversity, and even mentoring and advising to get students to broaden their interests. He urged people to consider the resources and elder wisdom available from emeriti and emeritae faculty. Dean Bonde replied that emeriti and emeritae are active on many graduate thesis committees, and Professor Banchoff replied that certain administrative committees depend on them.

Professor Russom pointed out that 100-level courses are a great way for undergraduates to interact with graduate students and to use graduate students as mentors, which is an advantage of Brown that should be mentioned. It was commented that the top heap of undergraduates can outshine the graduate students in the same class.

The hope was expressed that welcoming foreigners can reduce the insularity of America. One faculty member asked for a plan to address the fact that the cultural definition of liberal arts may not be shared by international students, many of whom may have a rote way of learning which defers to authority but lack the ability to prepare an original argument. It was suggested that retired faculty could help. Dean Bonde said that the graduate school is trying to form a pre-orientation program for international students to provide a cultural context such as allowing openness to dialogue when teaching.

Associate Provost Brenda Allen thanked the audience for comments. She stated that feedback on the web will be gathered for another 10 days, and after incorporating all feedback this semester, the report will be sent off in January. The assessment team will be here April 5th through 8th. The forum was adjourned at 5:15 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Laurie M. Heller
Secretary of the Faculty Forum
(Cognitive and Linguistic Sciences)