

VPAA Report to the Board of Trustees

June 4, 2005

Good morning, everyone. As you know, it is the responsibility of the VPAA to report annually to the Board on “the state of the college.” In fulfilling this charge, my report, like last year’s, comes in two parts: first, your agenda papers include a detailed account of the activities and achievements of individual members of the faculty and the academic departments and units. This account is intended to provide you with a rich overview of what has been happening at the College in the past year, and I will be happy to answer any questions you may have about these activities. The second part of my report is this presentation to you. Again, as I did last year, I would like to use this opportunity to focus on what I believe is the most important issue we have faced during the year, why it is significant, what we have done to address it, and what will be the implications of our efforts for the College.

You may recollect that, when I spoke to you last June, I discussed at length the general nature of faculty work at Wooster and, in particular, the question of faculty workload. I also referred to the strategic plan you approved later that morning and spoke to the ways the plan addressed faculty workload. Specifically, the plan anticipated the president’s appointing a task force to work on the issue, and I promised that I would report back to you on the achievements of the task force. Making that report, then, will be my focus today. Before I move to discussing to the work of the task force itself, however, it may be helpful for you if I provide some context for understanding the way the academy defines and perceives faculty workloads.

The great majority of American institutions of higher education now use the semester system, and faculty workload is universally defined in the number of courses taught per semester. Whether each course carries three hours of student credit, four hours, or, as at Wooster, is described as a single credit is less important; the key question is always that of the course load: for example, is the institution a 2-2 school (two courses a semester, which these days is typical of doctoral universities) or a 4-4 school (typical of regional institutions, such as Ashland University) or even a 5-5 school (a load seen in many community colleges)? There are, of course, components of work beyond course load: expectations of scholarship, research, and service are the standard other elements. Nevertheless, when graduate students or young faculty looking for their first tenure-track job talk about the positions they aspire to, what they usually focus on as they look at an institution is its teaching load: They'll say things like "It's a 3-3 school," to their friends as they go through the hiring process and, if they're savvy and able to negotiate the market place from a position of strength, they'll aspire to those positions which offer lighter teaching loads. Why?

The simplest answer to this question is also powerfully true: a lighter load does allow faculty members to do better quality work. That 3-3 load, for example, does not simply imply twenty-five percent fewer courses than a 4-4 requirement; it also carries the implicit promise of more time for student advising, engagement with the campus community, and professional development. In my own case, I have worked at institutions with very different teaching obligations: 2-2, 3-3, 4-3, and 4-4, and I am acutely aware of how differently faculty members live and work with these different loads. For example, my first tenure-track position was at a very good regional liberal arts college which was

still on the quarter system and where the teaching load was nine courses a year. It would be difficult to convey to you how much it felt like being released from a treadmill when we converted to semesters and moved, first, to a 4-4 load and then eventually to a 4-3 load as the college endeavored to improve its profile and the scholarly productivity of its faculty. Likewise, as a peer reviewer for North Central, I have visited colleges with varying loads and seen the impact these have on their faculty – just this spring, for instance, I was in western Nebraska reviewing a residential, Presbyterian national liberal arts college where faculty teach up to nine courses a year and have sabbatical leaves every nine to ten years. Perhaps not surprisingly, that institution is not in the same level of national rankings as Wooster – nor does its faculty enjoy the national reputation ours does. There is no question in my mind that extreme loads such as that college requires do undermine the faculty's ability to perform: to give their courses appropriate levels of preparation; to find time for the needs of individual students (and, of course, the more the courses, the greater the number of students for each faculty member); and even to remain current in their fields, let alone contribute to advancing knowledge in the disciplines.

There are, however, also other, less simple answers to the question of why lower loads are attractive, to institutions as well as their faculty. These are answers that have to do with competitive pressure and standing relative to institutional peers and rivals. As my earlier description implied, there is a powerful correlation between teaching load and institutional ranking, whether that latter be defined in terms of Carnegie classification or *US News and World Report* ranking. The leading doctoral universities, for example, use a 2-2 or even lower load as their standard benchmark; slightly lesser prominent research institutions require 3-2 loads. In the national liberal arts colleges, a parallel dynamic has

also emerged: very select colleges, especially on the east and west coasts, have been moving towards 2-2 loads. For their competitors, fine and distinguished colleges but not quite so renowned and certainly not as wealthy, this has created unwelcome pressures: the dean at Pitzer College, for example, lamented to me last summer how Pomona's move to a 2-2 load has led to faculty calls for the same on his campus. Closer to home and earlier this year, one of our chairs described to me how a top-notch minority female candidate for a position in his department withdrew her application because, as he put it, she said she simply couldn't consider a 3-3 school, which is what we are.

And that takes me from these more general comments to the issue of faculty workload at Wooster. According to the *Statute of Instruction*, the faculty teaching load at the College may range between five and seven courses per year. In reality, however, we are a 3-3 school, and the working assumption has been that faculty will teach six courses annually. What complicates the issue for us, of course, is Independent Study.

Complicates, first, because, as you know from your own experience, I.S. is what makes the Wooster curriculum so extraordinary. This spring, one of my faculty colleagues defined this nicely when she said to me that understanding I.S. advising was the surest way to get to the heart of Wooster. For a tangible demonstration of the truth of her comment, I can think of no better example than the Senior Recognition Dinner held during the last week of the spring semester: the program for that occasion is very simple, consisting of three faculty members each introducing one of their senior advisees and those three students then describing their experience of I.S. If ever you want to be reminded of the power of that experience and the extraordinary intensity of the teaching relationship that develops during those two semesters of 451 and 452, come by and watch

these students bear witness – I can think of nothing more powerful than this occasion as evidence for the richness of a teaching and learning experience that can have few parallels in American higher education.

I.S. not only defines Wooster as an institution, however. It also makes teaching at Wooster significantly different from faculty work at other colleges and universities and creates some challenges for actually calculating individual faculty workloads. By contrast with many of our peer institutions, where senior projects are less common and generally far less intense than I.S. and where faculty advise them on top of their regular course load, we rightfully include the advising as part of the teaching load. Theoretically, then, our faculty might teach five courses, advise five I.S. projects, and arrive at a tidy six credits for the year. In reality, things do not usually work out so tidily and we thus find many individual faculty and even departments working above the six course load that is ostensibly our standard expectation.

And I.S. complicates matters in yet a third way because that very intensity of the experience I referred to also affects the nature of faculty work and is perhaps the underlying reason why there has been so much desire to revisit the standard expectation of the faculty workload. As one of my faculty colleagues has said, it would be far less demanding to teach six courses a year than to teach five courses **and** supervise the five seniors for I.S. who count in our scheme as that sixth course.

This sense of the extraordinary demands of I.S. has, I believe, been the key element over the past several years in a sustained faculty interest in addressing the issue of workload. You, I know, are aware of the longevity of this issue and may well remember an earlier report on it from a group chaired by Peter Havholm of the English

department. I became aware of the importance of the concern even before I came to Wooster. It was a theme of the search process that brought me here, and I distinctly recollect being asked about faculty workload at one of the very first meetings during the campus interview. Evidently, the question posed to me was asked of all the finalists, since I heard later that one of my rivals had replied something to the effect that his current institution had reduced the faculty workload some years previously and, as he apparently put it, “it hadn’t made a darned bit of difference.” I suspect it probably did make quite a difference to his faculty, however, and you’ll note that it is I, not he, who is here reporting to you today. . . . During my first year, as I learned more about the College, it became increasingly apparent that faculty workload had become a preoccupying issue. Perhaps just as important as the very real substance of the concern was the perception of its importance – it was clearly **the** sine qua non, the thing that had to be addressed before anything else could be done. That combination of reality and perception influenced the hiring process that brought me here, affected the shaping of the Strategic Plan that we created last year, and has, to my mind, been what has made the work of the task force on faculty workload the central issue for the College over the past twelve months.

A foundation for the task force’s work was being put in place even as I spoke to you last June. Professor Anne Nurse of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology researched and developed a report for me last summer on other institutions which had gone through the process of restructuring faculty workload. This report was an invaluable resource to the task force, and I would like to take this opportunity to recognize and thank Anne for her work. Her most important finding was one that became instrumental to our endeavors: although the Strategic Plan you approved had spoken of restructuring

workload through adjusting the teaching credit for First-Year Seminar and Independent Study, she argued that a more practicable and judicious approach would be to work towards a common workload for all faculty. In this way, she suggested, smaller departments, and especially those with fewer majors, would not be disadvantaged in comparison to those with large numbers of majors and faculty contributing to the FYS program. Very early on in our discussions, we were convinced of the truth of this logic, took the opportunity given us by the breadth of our charge from the president, and so focused upon working to achieve a standard teaching load for all faculty of 5.5-5.6 courses per year.

Thanks should also go to all the members of the task force, who met early every Tuesday morning throughout the year and did, I believe, exemplary work in the way they focused upon the needs of the entire academic program. Carolyn Durham, who is with us today in her capacity as a representation of the Conference committee, Paul Edmiston, Henry Herring, Don Jacobs, John Neuhoff, and John Sell all served their colleagues well and made the task of the co-chairs, Dean Shila Garg and I, a real pleasure. While it is hard to single out individual contributions to what was a terrific team effort, I do want to thank particularly the two members who gave us the numbers and the words we needed: Shila Garg for tirelessly working to analyze data on the workloads of departments and individual faculty, and Henry Herring for crafting our ideas into the final report.

The work of the task force fell into three broad stages: we began by discussing the philosophy and goals of a workload restructuring and how any changes that we might recommend would affect the College as a whole. We then moved to a second phase of considering how we could achieve the restructuring. Here we were helped enormously by

colleagues at Bates College, an institution with, of course, a Wooster connection in the form of Don Harwood, its recently retired president. Back in January 2004, President Hales, Dean Garg, and I had heard a group from Bates make a presentation on faculty workload restructuring at the annual meeting of the AAC&U. Last fall, Bates's Provost Jill Reich agreed to speak with the task force, and we had a long and very fruitful conference call with her on the work Bates had done: we learned that workload had been as critical an institutional issue for Bates as it was for us; we heard a great deal about the methodology Bates had developed; and we got a sense from their experience of what continuing issues we would face after a change in workload went into effect. This conversation helped us move towards the third phase in our work, which consisted of calling upon the academic departments to develop plans for moving to the new workload beginning in 2006-2007. Departments were asked to work within a number of parameters, the most important of which were that they should assume no additional faculty but could anticipate replacements of all leaves, should maintain their current levels of contribution to general education and to interdisciplinary programs, and should sustain the integrity of their major programs. Late in the winter, the departmental proposals came in and were discussed by the task force and then EPC, and in April the task force reported its findings and recommendations to the president, who shared them with the faculty at the May meeting. We met yesterday with the Academic Affairs committee, and we hope that the full Board will support the initiatives the task force has recommended.

What are these recommendations and what are their implications? First, let me briefly outline the recommendations themselves. They are:

- that from 2006-2007 the College move to a teaching load of 5.5-5.6 courses for each faculty member (visiting faculty will continue to teach 6 courses)
- that departments adopt appropriate strategies to implement this restructuring of the workload, including changing course rotations, eliminating persistently low enrolled courses, and “banking” I.S. teaching credits
- that all faculty members on leave be replaced
- that a small number of additional faculty be hired to meet the demand in those departments under the greatest enrollment pressures
- that the VPAA and DOF monitor the results of the restructuring
- that greater attention be given to student advising
- that the PIDS program be phased out; and,
- that a presidential task force be established in the fall of 2005 to study the structures of faculty governance and committee work.

What are some of the broader implications of our work and these recommendations?

First, and like our colleagues at Bates, we found that one of the most useful discoveries we made was to learn just how faculty workload was being counted. We learned – and this was perhaps not surprising given the lack of any centralized mechanism – that departments went about things differently and with inevitable inconsistency. Now that we have created a single mechanism for assessing workload, we will be able to ensure greater equity across the College and a better use of our faculty resources. Second, we established that, with a very small number of additional faculty, we can move to the 5.5-5.6 load and maintain the integrity of the curriculum and the current level of availability of seats in courses. Third, we discovered that departments vary widely in how they

conceive of and teach Junior I.S. and how they connect it to the senior project – as a result, we have recommended that those departments which still teach Junior I.S. through the tutorial model consider moving towards the more efficient, and often more pedagogically effective, class-based format. Fourth, we recognize, and are concerned, that interdisciplinary programs may lose support as departments concentrate their resources on their majors. While there are some interdisciplinary programs that have a limited impact on the College's curriculum as a whole, others – and I think in particular of Women's Studies – are far more significant and will need to be protected. Fifth, and finally, we believe that our structure of faculty governance, and in particular our committee structure, may contribute to the inefficient use of faculty time and should be further examined.

But beyond these specific implications there are, I think, even larger issues. To be sure, we have yet to finalize all the departmental plans for moving to the new workload and much work lies ahead of us to implement and maintain that new regime. Moreover, the hope remains that, down the road and when resources become available, Wooster will move to the 5.0 course load that has already been achieved by more select colleges and towards which our Ohio peers and competitors are currently moving. Nevertheless, we have now taken a fundamental step towards addressing the issue which, as I said earlier, was the *sine qua non* for us as an academic community. And that, then, implies a question: what are the issues that lie beyond this one? What are the challenges we need to take on if we are to become a stronger, richer academic community that will do an even better job of offering our students the educational experiences they need to be prepared for life in the twenty-first century?

I could offer many responses to this question, but let me focus on just a single issue. The College's Strategic Plan places as its top priorities several initiatives that are already under way: faculty workload, as I have just described; technology and the Datatel implementation; equity in housing, as was discussed at the March meeting of Building and Grounds; and a review of our entire human resources operation. However, the Plan also includes an area where we have not yet begun to work and in which we have had serious challenges this past year: that of diversity. To be precise, the Plan refers to numbers of minority and international students at the College. As was the case with faculty workload, however, I believe that we have to think beyond simple numbers and look at the broader picture: we need, for example, to address minority student recruiting and retention; the campus climate for minority students; and the absolutely connected issue of minority faculty. Only by doing all of this will we both honor the College's historic commitment to those groups which have been disadvantaged by our social structures and create a community whose diversity educates all our students. This year, as I said, we have taken a major step towards addressing the faculty's most strongly felt need; I would argue that we must now turn to improving other fundamental characteristics of our entire campus community – to borrow the words of my hapless rival candidate, we simply cannot afford to be a college where restructuring the faculty workload doesn't make a difference. . . . So, while there are many issues that we need to move to address as an academic community, that of diversity seems to me the most urgent challenge that we face. This will not be an easy task for us, funding initiatives to increase our diversity will be a major challenge, and we may not see the results we hope for quickly, but I look forward to the president's appointing a task force to take on this

challenge in the fall and to my own responsibility to report back to you one year from now what we have achieved. Thank you.