



September 18, 2011

*An Open Letter to the College of Education Faculty*

Dear Members of the Faculty in the College of Education:

As we continue to respond to the recommendations of the University's Core Council, I am writing to let you know about some changes we will be making in how we provide oversight for instructional programs within the College. We can be deservedly proud of our undergraduate as well as our graduate programs of study. Students and their families throughout the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and beyond seek our offerings and make significant financial sacrifices to study with us and realize their professional dreams. We have more nationally ranked graduate programs than can be found in any other college of education in the nation, and we seek and achieve national accreditation from all of the relevant accrediting entities. There is a significant national Penn State presence at professional meetings for every specialization we offer, and we pride ourselves on the national and international scholarship and leadership we offer to the entire field.

As successful as we are, we cannot be complacent, and we need to recognize that the already intense competition for our programs is increasing. As Penn State's tuition rises, we need to be able to make a highly credible case that a Penn State degree is worth the additional cost. The days of sitting back passively and waiting for the top students to seek us out are long gone.

Technology is advancing and is opening the door on new opportunities and new challenges. We have enjoyed early success with our World Campus offerings, and we are recognizing that the traditional sharp distinction between residential and distance education programs is breaking down in new and interesting ways. We need to be positioned to build on these early successes.

The University's Core Council is also pushing all colleges hard to find ways to gain efficiencies in operation while maintaining commitments to excellence in areas of high priority. We have made significant progress toward achieving these goals, but more needs to be done.

For many years, we have pursued a highly decentralized approach to the organization of our instructional programs, particularly our graduate programs.

While this approach has advantages and allows us to tailor the design and operation of programs to whatever the unique features of the specialization might be, there are drawbacks, particularly during a time when budgets are increasingly tight. As I review our programs and their operations, I see variation in how programs operate, and in some cases we are missing opportunities, particularly in the areas of student recruitment, student retention, and curricular design and cohesiveness. At the same time, the answer is not to impose a rigid, highly centralized administrative structure on our programs. The goal is to achieve the best of both worlds: the flexibility and nimbleness associated with a decentralized approach where individual programs enjoy considerable autonomy coupled with greater cohesion and the consistent uses of best practices with respect to recruiting, retention, and curricular design efforts that come with a more centralized approach.

Our current approach is also resource intensive. To support this administrative structure, we are currently committed to investing upwards of 15 course releases and a dollar amount approaching \$30,000 in summer stipend support. If we think in terms of tenure-line faculty appointments with a 2-2 teaching load, the course releases alone constitute the teaching responsibilities of 3.75 faculty members. We need to recover some portion of these resources so that we can invest more directly in faculty and programs.

We will be taking two concrete steps to achieve these improvements: (a) engage in a College-wide discussion about what needs to be done to ensure the delivery of high-quality undergraduate and graduate programs; and (b) develop a new governance mechanism that retains the autonomy of our individual majors and graduate programs but which adds a new level of oversight at the department level. Accordingly, we will move toward a new structure where there will be a **director of undergraduate and graduate studies** for each department who will work closely with the individual majors and graduate programs within the department. These directors will also work closely with the relevant department head, and the associate and assistant deans and will sit on the College's Curricular Affairs Committee.

The directors will be responsible for providing the relevant oversight within their respective departments and will serve a multiple-year term. The directors will receive a course release in recognition of their responsibilities along with summer stipend support and dedicated staff support. With four departments, we will have four knowledgeable representatives on the College Curricular Affairs Committee who will provide the kind of oversight we need for things like reducing curricular duplication, making proper use of special topics courses, and so forth.

The individual majors and graduate programs will continue to exist and will be led by what we will be calling **program coordinators**. Each program coordinator will be a faculty member who will focus on the degrees being offered within an individual major or graduate program. They will function in ways that are similar to our current professors-in-charge, but we will view the work of the program coordinators as part

of the service that we expect from all faculty members. It will not be possible to provide course releases or summer stipend support for program coordinators.

I will be looking to each department to figure out the best division of labor between the director and the several program coordinators, and it is likely that variation will exist across the departments in how responsibilities are distributed. One department, for example, may decide to centralize student recruitment efforts; another department may decide to ask the individual programs to take responsibility for recruitment. This kind of variation is fine; the important thing is for the work to be completed in a timely and thorough fashion.

The College's Faculty Council has a key role to play as we think through the implications of the new approach. In particular, I will be looking to the Council to help us conduct a College-wide discussion about what needs to be done to ensure the delivery of high-quality programs. The Council can also be very helpful to each department as decisions are made about how best to divide responsibilities between the director and the program coordinators.

There remain several unresolved questions, and one of the major ones involves figuring out how to handle the vast differences in the sizes of our programs. At the undergraduate level, for example, we have some departments with no undergraduate majors and some departments with huge undergraduate majors. At the graduate level, most of our graduate programs are similar in size, but there are a few significant large outliers, and several must deal with demanding external accreditation requirements and periodic reviews. We need to make sure the oversight model we are developing is properly calibrated for these differences in size and accreditation requirements. In some cases, it may be possible for a single program coordinator to provide leadership for more than one major or graduate program. In other cases where a program is large or is facing an external accreditation review, we may need to provide additional resources to handle the large scale and preparation of the needed reports.

What follows is a first try at an annotated list of expectations we have for all of our programs. This initial list is based on the many successes I see within our existing programs. I offer it as what I hope will be a useful starting point for a College-wide discussion we need to conduct to better articulate and realize our common aspirations.

## 1. Student Recruitment

Every program needs to be actively involved in student recruitment. We cannot act as if the students we seek will arrive without active recruiting efforts. This is particularly true of students who will enhance the diversity of our student body.

Scholarship and assistantship support is obviously important, but it is folly to think that this is the only way to recruit strong students. There are many cases where strong students report that the reason they came to Penn State is because of the direct interest that was taken in their individual circumstances.

## 2. Student Retention

Our programs of study are demanding, and students sometimes struggle to meet expectations. These struggles are often compounded by financial problems. We need to be as helpful as possible to our students who face these challenges while maintaining our standards of excellence. We need to recognize our part of the shared responsibility for helping students make good and steady progress toward the timely completion of their programs.

## 3. Curricular Design and Cohesion

We need to take an active role in the design and delivery of our curriculum. The curriculum needs to be more than an amalgamation of what individual faculty members would like to teach. It has never been more important for programs to cooperate to stay relevant and viable. We also need to be attentive to where and when courses are offered so that access is maximized for our students.

Special topics courses are to be offered only two times and under-enrolled sections should not be offered. Attention also needs to be paid to curricular offerings in other areas of the College and University, and we need to be careful not to build parallel programs that essentially duplicate offerings.

## 4. Coordination

The day-to-day life within our programs is important. Program meetings need to be scheduled and progress toward goals must to be monitored. Culture and social events are important, and we have a responsibility to find ways to socialize our students to the life in their chosen area of specialization.

Principled and collective decisions need to be made about admission. There is a need for clear and consistently applied standards for check points like admission to candidacy and the approval of theses.

There are various University events where it is important to have our programs represented. Examples include the Summer Research Opportunity Program (SROP) and the Graduate School Poster Session.

## 5. Alumni Support

We have a duty to stay connected with our graduates after they have completed their programs. There are opportunities to nominate graduates for College as well as University awards, and it is good stewardship and professional courtesy to stay connected. It is important for departments and programs to realize that they have a responsibility for thinking of ways to strengthen these connections.

Obviously, there are many details to consider as we work to implement these improvements, and I will be listening carefully to the Faculty Council as well as individual members of the faculty and staff and students for feedback. Thank you in advance for your insights, and please be in touch with either me, Dr. Edmondson, our associate dean for undergraduate and graduate studies, or Dr. Vandiver, the chair of the Faculty Council, with comments or questions.

Sincerely,



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