

**ADVANCEMENT SECTION**

**REPORT OF A COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION VISIT**

TO

GRINNELL COLLEGE  
Grinnell, Iowa

9/15/08-9/17/08

FOR

**The Higher Learning Commission**  
A Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools

**EVALUATION TEAM**

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## I. OVERALL OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION

- Diversity. Grinnell's college-wide approach to diversity (e.g. vesting responsibility for coordinating efforts in a Special Assistant to the President) merits comment. This structure facilitates the integration of diversity efforts among students, faculty and staff as well as connecting curricular and co-curricular diversity. As the college moves forward with this priority, it will be helpful to more fully utilize Grinnell's potent institutional research resources to generate data to drive planning and evaluation of these diversity strategies. It will also be important to give appropriate attention to socio-economic diversity, not only in terms of providing financial aid but in terms of creating a learning environment in which students of all socio-economic backgrounds can learn from each other.
- Institutional Research. Grinnell has created a valuable resource in its Institutional Research Office. A tremendous amount of useful information is being generated through that office. This rich "smorgasbord," however, could contribute even more to the planning and operation of the college if Grinnell acted to clarify the purpose and role that Institutional Research is expected to serve. How should this office relate to other college units? There are, presently, some fruitful links (e.g. to the Special Assistant to the President for Diversity and Achievement and to the Associate Dean of the College), but too often, those are personal associations rather than formal connections. Another strategic question for this office is that of what priority should be placed on the creation of an historical data infrastructure as a foundation for identifying goals and priorities as well as decision-making.
- Governance. Decision-making at Grinnell is frequently described as "de-centralized." In many ways, this is a strength of this institution. On the other hand, it can also leave many members of the Grinnell community unsure of how and why important decisions (e.g. adding new programs) were made. For example, the Admissions office is pursuing a goal of expanding the applicant pool by a thousand applicants in the next two years. What will be the implications of achieving that goal? Certainly, it will provide a greater opportunity to shape the Grinnell student population, particularly if the added applicants represent some of Grinnell's target populations. However, the processing of more applications may require additional staffing or, if not, the current staff may experience an increased workload making it more difficult to give personal attention to each applicant. Will a larger applicant pool add pressure to rely more heavily on standardized cognitive selection criteria, perhaps compromising the search for a more holistic "good match" through personalized admissions contacts with applicants? It is not for this team to answer such questions, but the issue we raise is, rather, whether or where such questions are being addressed within the Grinnell governance system.

Another example of this governance issue is that of retention of students. In what ways are the various "players" (Student Affairs, faculty, Admissions) engaging in this discussion? One might assume that the Faculty Executive Committee would be involved in this, but that raises another governance concern, namely the seeming over-extension of that key body. It's responsibilities for hiring and personnel evaluation alone are heavy. Yet, it also has roles to play in departmental reviews, budget, assessment of student outcomes and more. Even if it does make sense to

concentrate so much responsibility in one committee, a longer term would assure a greater proportion of seasoned experience on the committee..

In a positive vein, there is much wisdom in Grinnell's history of providing administrative leadership opportunities for its own faculty. This provides a significant linkage between faculty and administration. It also is generative of leadership development, launching a number of Grinnell faculty into administrative careers at other institutions.

## II. CONSULTATIONS OF THE TEAM

- Assessment. Although there is ample evidence that Grinnell College is fulfilling its educational mission (see Assurance Section), it is also obvious, perhaps because Grinnell faculty are sure that their students are learning, that they are not as engaged in an ongoing, formalized assessment program at the departmental and program levels. There is no departmental or campus-wide centralized mechanism for collecting assessment data, nor is there a regular schedule for analysis and feedback, including assessment of assessment tools.

In the months preceding this visit from the Higher Learning Commission, Grinnell focused assessment attention on the campus-wide goals embedded in the college Mission Statement. Rubrics were developed and implemented to assess students' writing and critical thinking skills, and surveys of seniors and graduates and the NSSE were used to assess other learning outcomes such as being prepared for a life serving the common good. Laudable are the facts that the MAP assessment rubric designed by a Grinnell faculty member is being considered for use at other institutions and that Grinnell participated along with 34 other institutions of higher learning in a project that studied first year students' critical thinking skills.

- Student Affairs. At a school such as Grinnell, the co-curricular environment may be as important as the academic realm in fulfilling the mission of the college with respect to students' development. Hence, the Student Affairs office assumes a position of significance. Several steps might be taken to strengthen Student Affairs at Grinnell. First, as a means of facilitating better planning, assessment and professional development, administrative staff contracts for most Student Affairs personnel should be expanded to 12-months. When students are present, life for these staff members is inevitably (and rightly) consumed with their everyday responsibilities. If it is desirable for them to engage in a longer-range look at their operation as well as to invest in their own professional growth, that must occur during the summers and it will only happen consistently if they are employed for the whole year. One aspect of Student Affairs that is currently under study is the support for students' mental health needs. There is good reason to argue for bringing that support system more directly into Student Affairs on campus.

### III. RECOGNITION OF SIGNIFICANT ACCOMPLISHMENTS, PROGRESS, AND/OR PRACTICES

- Faculty. Grinnell is, justifiably, proud of its heritage and its distinctive institutional identity. Many faculty and staff spoke to the team of their commitment to maintaining the special ethos and values that have defined that identity. One area in which that commitment will be played out is in the hiring and mentoring of faculty. Within its tradition of seeking faculty who are outstanding teachers and scholars, it will be important that the focus on recruiting and retaining faculty who share Grinnell's mission and ideals be maintained. For example, a concern for living and modeling a professional lifestyle of balance and wellness will be needed in setting institutional expectations for faculty.

