December 8, 2016

To: The Wellesley Faculty  
From: Andy, Cappy and Ann  
Re: Strategic Priorities in the Academic Program

In the years ahead the provost’s office and the Wellesley faculty face a challenge the likes of which we have not confronted for many years: how to sustain the excellence of a Wellesley education and the distinction, rigor and ambition of our academic program with a smaller faculty and a smaller curriculum. The context for this challenge, as we all know, is the fundamental reassessment of the College’s financial situation that has occurred in stages since 2010. As an entire community, we have gradually come to terms with the reality of a chronic underinvestment in our campus facilities and with the unsustainability of our budget model. One of the chief consequences is the realization that the academic program we have developed over the past fifteen-twenty years (and perhaps even one on the scale that existed in the 1990s) is too costly to be maintained in its current form. The Budget Advisory Committee’s May 2016 report recommended a 10% curricular contraction and a reduction in faculty FTE of 20-25. This may be viewed as an immediate target, but we cannot assume it will be the ultimate extent of the change that is now underway.

In these challenging circumstances, the choices we make about how to reallocate faculty lines in the wake of retirements and departures and how to rebuild a smaller faculty will be critical to the future of the College. The creation of the Advisory Committee on Academic Staffing (ACAS) gives us a mechanism to ensure, on a continuing basis, that faculty perspectives and preferences inform the decision-making of the provost’s office and the College’s senior leadership. In the longer term, it will be important for the institution as a whole to develop a strategic plan that will provide some broader context and direction for these choices about the structure of our faculty and the scope of our academic program. But in the interim, as the College prepares for the reaccreditation self-study that will constitute the first stage in the development of a new strategic plan, we view it as the responsibility of our office to communicate the strategic principles that will guide our decisions about the allocation of faculty resources in the immediate future. These principles are grounded not just in our analysis of the current situation but in an understanding of the strategic priorities we have pursued in the academic program over the past generation.

Retrospect: 2000-2015

Over the first fifteen years of this century, Wellesley’s instructional faculty grew in number, in diversity, and in intellectual range.

Between 2000-01 and 2014-15, the total instructional faculty (excluding ISLs, postdocs, performing music instructors, PERA coaches) increased by 7%, from 327 to 349.[1] The overall increase masked a significant shift in the balance within the faculty – the number of tenure-eligible faculty increased from 220 to 259 (18%), while the number of adjunct and non-tenure-eligible faculty fell.
In comparison to the faculty in 2000, the faculty became somewhat more diverse: the proportion of faculty classified as white fell from 83% to 72%; the number of tenured faculty of color increased from 29 to 39 (although the number of African American faculty with tenure actually decreased). The overall gender balance shifted slightly, with the proportion of women faculty decreasing from 59% to 56%, although the balance among tenure-eligible faculty was essentially unchanged.

One measure of the faculty’s intellectual range is the number of departments or programs in which tenure-eligible members of the faculty hold an appointment. That number increased from 31 in 2000 to 36 in 2015, primarily as a result of new appointments into interdisciplinary fields. Throughout the past decade, assistant professor cohorts have consistently been larger than in the preceding decade, and the hiring of so many recently trained scholar-teachers has brought an infusion of new fields and approaches into our curriculum. This infusion was fed, in part, by the priorities of the Campaign for Wellesley, 2000-05, which yielded chairs in emerging interdisciplinary fields (Environmental Studies, Neuroscience), junior chairs for recently appointed faculty, and support for academic initiatives in global education, humanities, and computer science and quantitative reasoning.

This process of growth and revitalization in our academic program was guided by a set of consistent priorities.

1. **Invest in tenure-eligible faculty.** The college’s reaccreditation report in 1999 expressed concern about the relatively high proportion of our courses taught by non-tenure-track faculty on visiting or part-time appointments. In the early years of the millennium, that proportion actually increased – to as high as 37% of course sections in 2005. Thereafter, the College followed the strategy recommended by the accreditors in 1999 and systematically converted a number of nontenure-track positions to tenure-eligible appointments. The purpose of this shift was to improve the overall quality of instruction, to increase opportunities for students to partner with faculty in research, and to enable academic departments to “cover” sabbatical leaves from within their existing staff rather than by adjunct appointments.

2. **Invest in interdisciplinarity.** Well before the year 2000, the interest of Wellesley faculty and students in exploring interdisciplinary fields had become abundantly clear. The College’s response to this fundamental change in the intellectual landscape of the late 20th century was to create a set of interdepartmental programs, constituted, for the most part, from courses offered in the various departments and directed by faculty members on a volunteer basis. These interdepartmental programs became increasingly popular with students. 20% of the Class of 2000 majored in one of them, and by the Class of 2005 this proportion had increased to 31%. Exciting as this trend was in terms of innovation and intellectual energy, it was quite problematic in terms of the overall quality of our educational program. Almost none of the interdepartmental programs in which these hundreds of students were majoring had faculty members appointed within them. Thus, for example, 46 students in the Class of 2000 majored in International Relations (IR), a program in which no faculty member held an appointment and to which no faculty member was required to contribute a course. The unsustainability of this situation was underscored vividly in a series of external visiting committee reports. The College’s response was two-fold. Where academic departments were willing and able to assume direction of interdepartmental programs (IR, Biochemistry, some of the area studies programs), we regularized curriculum and strengthened advising without appointing faculty directly into the programs. But in other cases, especially in fields that were evolving a distinct identity within the
broader scholarly community (for example, Neuroscience, Environmental Studies, and Cinema and Media Studies) or had no existing departmental sponsor (for example, South Asian Studies, Middle Eastern Studies, and American Studies), the College chose to make the commitment to appoint at least one or two tenure-track faculty. These decisions improved the quality and consistency of major programs in which more than a third of our students chose (and still choose) to concentrate.

3. Invest in globalization. A major priority of the College throughout the presidency of Diana Chapman Walsh (1993-2007) was global education. This priority had a substantial impact on the academic program. It was reflected in a renewed commitment to broadening the College’s curriculum beyond the study of Western Europe and the United States, where significant resources had historically been invested. In 2000, the College made a far-sighted decision to introduce Arabic language – thereby becoming one of the few liberal arts colleges to do so before 9/11. In subsequent years, we built on our traditional strength in Asian languages and cultures by introducing programs in Korean and Hindi-Urdu. We also challenged departments across the humanities and social sciences to rethink their fields for a more globalized era and a more global student body. Curricula in large departments such as Art History, English, French, History, and Political Science were rebalanced to increase offerings in “non-Western” fields. Global education was also advanced through changes in the College’s study abroad policy (the adoption of a “home tuition” policy enabling students to apply their financial aid to international study) and through the development of short-term study programs led by Wellesley faculty during wintersession or summer. Under President Kim Bottomly (2007-2016), the College continued this trend towards a more cosmopolitan and globally connected institution – creating the Albright Institute for Global Affairs, experimenting with new kinds of institutional partnership (Peking University, Ashoka), and pushing a new wave of curricular globalization (Swahili, Portuguese, migration and ethnic studies.)

4. Invest in excellence. While the College was focused on the frontiers of interdisciplinarity and globalization, we were also attentive to the challenges of discipline-based departments with rising enrollments. Over the period after 2000 we saw a steady increase in enrollments in STEM fields and Economics, and added new faculty lines to meet this demand. In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash, we took advantage of academic market conditions to recruit more diverse cohorts of faculty with the capacity to raise the research profile of our institution and to help the College address long-standing disparities in the academic experience of our students.

5. Invest in high impact pedagogies. With significant support from foundations (Mellon and Calderwood) and from individual donors, the College built on our long-standing tradition of nurturing close relationships between faculty and students and introduced pedagogical innovations that have been demonstrated to foster student engagement. These innovations included the development of cutting-edge programs in public writing and public speaking, the introduction of a First Year Seminar program, and the expansion of active learning initiatives and faculty-student research programs in the sciences and social sciences.

The Future

In order to come to grips with the prospect of a smaller academic program, we need to determine how far and in what form we can continue to pursue these priorities and whether there are
different priorities that we should pursue. Below is a summary of our initial thinking on those issues.

1. One of the dangers of a period like this is that a smaller curriculum will become a more homogeneous one and that individual departments or programs will adjust to constraints in ways that meet their “local” interests but that cumulatively have the effect of reducing the variety and diversity of the curriculum available to our students. This is a moment for the provost’s office and for members of ACAS to be particularly attentive to preserving diversity in all its aspects – cultural, geographic, temporal, intellectual, ideological.

2. Given the diversity and cosmopolitanism of our student and faculty bodies, we see no advantage to pulling back from our commitment to global education and returning to a more Eurocentric curriculum. Retrenchment in that sense seems exactly the wrong course for this moment in the nation’s and the world’s history. This does not mean that the specific investments we have made to globalize our curriculum are, in all cases, the optimal ones. We should recalibrate our strategies for promoting global education.

3. We must continue to build our capacity for interdisciplinarity, but in a fundamentally different way than before. As we described above, our interdepartmental programs have essentially been “add-ons”: we have added faculty appointments to programs without removing appointments from departments. In the future, that will not be feasible. We will need departments and programs to collaborate in a more integrated way – sharing faculty and curricula, anticipating and accommodating one another’s needs. In some cases, especially where there are only one or two people appointed within a program, this may point towards adding an appropriate departmental appointment for those individuals or towards developing cross-program synergies. In general, our expectation of collaboration between units will be higher, and resources will flow to areas where this collaboration is most sustained and productive.

4. Even though student enrollments have shifted, and may continue to shift, away from some of the humanistic disciplines, these disciplines are at the core of the liberal arts tradition that has defined the College. If we are not to evolve into a different kind of institution, we must ensure our continued excellence in humanities disciplines and, in the face of falling enrollments in early fields, our commitment to broad historical coverage. Excellence, however, does not require that these departments maintain the same level of staffing that they have had over the past decade. Departments with lower enrollments and smaller numbers of majors on a per faculty FTE basis will inevitably shrink.

5. Across all fields, we should develop benchmarks that compare our staffing levels with those of peer institutions, taking differences of student body size into account. In aggregate terms, we know that our 7-1 student-faculty ratio is one of the lowest among all liberal arts colleges. But we have never considered benchmarking on a department-by-department basis. Those data would help us see where our programs are, in relative terms, generously or parsimoniously staffed.

6. Building our academic program around tenure-eligible faculty has served our students well. We should, therefore, maintain this priority except in circumstances where extreme volatility in enrollments makes it risky or prohibitively expensive to reduce reliance on short-
term hiring. Where possible, our preference should be to rely on our own faculty to meet unanticipated curricular needs (i.e. more use of overload teaching) rather than to hire adjuncts.

7. The option of consolidating academic units (departments and/or programs) into larger units should be on the table. We cannot rule out the possibility that in some cases consolidation might lead to a reduction in staffing. Even if it doesn’t, it should reduce the cost of chairing and administering our academic departments (which, in the aggregate, is a considerable cost for the College).

8. This would be an appropriate time for us to review a range of College policies that may be exerting a distorting effect on enrollments or discouraging the sharing of resources across departments and programs. These should include the College’s grading policies, our distribution requirements, and our rules about the participation of outside members on search committees and R&P committees.

We welcome your reflections on these important issues, and look forward to an open discussion of them in Academic Council next semester.