Council of the Princeton University Community
Minutes, March 26, 2012

Minutes of a meeting of the Council of the Princeton University Community held March 26, 2012 in 101 Friend Center. Present were Council members Ms. Alberts, Ms. Alvisatos, Ms. Alversa, Professors Bhatt, Bocarsly, Ms. Capewell, Ms. Cherrey, Professor Dolven, Ms. Doyle, Mr. Easop, Provost Eisgruber, Professor Harman, Mr. Henneberg, Mr. Immordino, Professor Kang, Mr. Kao, Mr. Keller, Ms. Kim, Professor Kruse, Mr. Kusserow Mr. McDonough, Ms. Mellby, Mr. Mulcahy, Professor Oppenheimer, Ms. Poladian, Mr. Pretko, Ms. Ridgeway, Mr. Smith, Dean Smith, Mr. Stolzenberg, President Tilghman (chair), Mr. Tully; Ms. Halliday was secretary.

The President called the meeting to order at 4:30 p.m. Minutes of the February 13 meeting were approved as circulated in advance of the meeting. There were no questions for the Question and Answer Period.

Academic Life Total Assessment

The President invited Michael Yaroshevsky ’12 report on a joint initiative between the USG and the Office of the Dean of the College to assess the academic experience of undergraduates. He explained that the initiative developed from conversations with students about high priority academic issues. The findings and recommendations emerged from a small number of in-depth profiles of students and a survey last fall of all undergraduates which resulted in a high participation rate – 2,567 students. The findings were organized around the beginning, middle, and end of the semester and were presented by students who worked on the project: John McNamara ’14, Emily Levy ’13, Catherine Ettman ’13, Steven Rosen ’13, Rafael Grinberg ’12; Rebecca Scharfstein ’12. Recommendations included proposals for new approaches to P/F options, to evaluations of instructors, to grading. For example, students indicated that they want better tools and opportunities to make good choices about the courses they take including a more robust and easily accessible course guide and ways to preview courses electronically or in person before making selections. Students are in favor of more feedback on performance – their own and that of instructors. Mid-term evaluations of a course would provide opportunities for instructors to make changes; more emphasis on concrete examples showing ways a student can improve his or her work for a better grade was suggested. They explored ways to use collaboration to advantage recommending that courses include clear policies about when and how collaboration is acceptable. The survey addressed scheduling of examinations and improving preparation for doing independent research and junior papers and senior theses.

Mr. Yaroshevsky explained that the committee hoped that ALTA would open a dialogue with faculty to explore ways to improve the academic experience, and he invited comments (varo@princeton.edu). Discussion included comments about ways to facilitate collaboration, the positive and negative impact of mid-term evaluations or the USG’s administering instructor evaluations, and the importance of the Writing Center and other academic resources for students embarking on independent work. The report and information about ALTA are available online at http://projectalta.wordpress.com/.

Update on Major Choices
Dean Smith gave an update on an initiative begun about 8 years ago to assist undergraduates in making choices about areas of concentration. She emphasized that the “major choices” initiative, as it became known, was not designed to redistribute students among departments to even out numbers but to encourage students to make thoughtful, deliberate choices and to study what they love. The initiative has also helped integrate advising. The data the dean presented reflect changes over the years among choices of majors that are driven by the composition of the entering class, pre-requisite changes, and shifts in students’ interests once they arrive at Princeton. Student surveys suggest that a majority – 80% – of students are satisfied with their major.

During the discussion that followed efforts on the part of the Departments of Mathematics and Physics to attract and retain majors were described. Faculty members in these departments have deliberately reviewed course offerings and requirements for department concentrators in order to attract students. Introductory survey courses were described both as a means to attract students to disciplines they may not have considered before Princeton and as a means to make them aware of areas of concentration that were related to other departments. The Office of the Dean of the College is assessing why some departments have experienced a drop in majors recently or why students who declare an interest in a major before they matriculate change their minds when they begin their studies.

Deputy Dean of the College Clayton Marsh then described two other recent initiatives regarding teaching and learning. A pilot program with the Departments of Computer Science and Physics is engaging undergraduates as assistants in large lecture courses. The benefits for the undergraduate assistants including opportunities to learn from working closely with faculty on course content and helping other students.

The University is also exploring how to use online technology to enhance teaching and learning. A small group of faculty has agreed to experiment with a model developed at Stanford University that “flips” the classroom. The model uses pre-recorded lectures that are divided into sections and interspersed with interactive components to test a student’s understanding of the material. This material is made available in advance in an online format, so students can review the lecture material at a time of their own choosing. The feedback from the online component of these courses helps identify for faculty what students are having difficulty understanding or parts of presentations that are problematic. This model frees up class time for discussion, addressing topics of particular difficulty, or going into more detail about the material. Because the course material is available online and intended to be viewed by the general public, this model expands the University’s reach. Courses at Stanford that have experimented with the model were viewed by thousands worldwide. The goal is to be able to have some course content available online by next fall. In the meantime, the Dean of the College office is hosting an external review of how Princeton supports use of academic technology. Dean Marsh reiterated that the goal is not to replace student-faculty interaction but to enhance it. He suggested that the online modules could address one of the concerns raised by the ALTA survey by providing a way for students to preview courses before registering for them. [Subsequent to the meeting, the University’s participation in the online educational platform Coursera was announced: http://www.princeton.edu/main/news/archive/S33/47/05O67/index.xml?section=topstories.]

The meeting was adjourned at 6:10 p.m.
Respectfully submitted,

Ann Halliday
Secretary