January 6, 2010

Dear Colleagues in the Colleges of Arts and Sciences:

As you all know, there has been discussion for a number of years of the Colleges of Arts and Sciences forming a ‘more perfect union’ by uniting into a single college structure. There have been several different models suggested, including a recent proposal by the deans of the respective colleges and School of Pacific and Asian Studies which would create a unitary college but also preserve divisions resembling the current colleges. On December 9th, the Arts and Sciences Senate Executive Committee (SEC) held a town hall meeting on the future of Arts and Sciences in which this proposal as well as the general issues were discussed.

When I entered this conversation on my arrival last April, I said that whatever the decision was going to be, I thought it important to make it quickly so we could go on to other issues and concerns. My stated preference was for a decision to be made by Thanksgiving, but given the complexity of scheduling, the Town Hall occurred in early December, and obviously that was an important part of the process. So the decision is being made in January, not too far off my preferred timetable.

In my judgment, no proposal to reorganize the Colleges of Arts and Sciences into a single whole has the sufficient support from the colleges themselves – particularly from the faculty – for us to proceed. I am therefore declaring that we will not be proceeding with a reorganization of the Colleges of Arts and Sciences into a single college.

This answers one question, but it doesn’t answer others. Although for most of you, your department and individual college are far more consequential administrative units than the Colleges of Arts and Sciences, there are a number of activities or entities that cut across the four colleges, including Arts and Sciences distribution/graduation requirements, the Colleges of Arts and Sciences Student Academic Services (CASSAS), the faculty governance structure outlined in the College Charter, a cross-college development and alumni structure, and finally, the tradition of a chair of the four deans which rotates on an annual basis. It’s been quite a while since any of these cross-cutting aspects of the Colleges has been examined.

The discussion in the Town Hall focused more on curricular issues than organizational ones: if there is a coherence to Arts and Sciences of the kind assumed by advocates of the reorganization, does the current curriculum reflect that? Is it representative of a liberal education of the kind we would like our students to obtain? The answer was a fairly clear no, and so the Arts and Sciences SEC and the Deans agree that an examination of the structure of the graduation requirements in Arts and Sciences – which is the college-wide curriculum – is something we need to engage in now. As changes in the curriculum are envisioned, so too the structure of Arts and Sciences advising through CASSAS needs to be examined, since advising serves to support the curriculum. I have
suggested – and this of course is just a suggestion – that the Arts and Sciences SEC examine the structure of faculty governance in the colleges, to see how it could be improved. And finally, I have asked the deans to look at the administrative structures they jointly take responsibility for to see how they can be improved as well.

The analogy that comes to mind is that we haven’t been worrying too much about the state of our kitchen appliances because we thought we might be moving. We aren’t moving, so now we need to take stock of where we are and how to make sure our house is a livable one. So the consequence of the decision not to proceed with any reorganization is to look carefully at every component of the Colleges of Arts and Sciences structure, with an eye to how that component can be strengthened if needed, replaced if not, or otherwise – dare I use the word? – reorganized. I stand ready to help with this process as needed, and expect to work closely with the Arts and Sciences SEC as well as with the deans on the matters of joint concern and responsibility, including the curriculum and advising.

One consequence of the ‘waiting for reorganization’ mode the colleges have been in for some time is that most of the leadership in the colleges are in interim positions. Everyone agrees that this widespread condition of interimity has not helped us move forward, so this is something we need to address, as quickly as we can in the present budget situation. The conversations over the past several years have also included the School of Pacific and Asian Studies (SPAS) as a potential part of a unified college, and the degree to which SPAS is a player in the conversations outlined here is something that the faculty of the five colleges will collectively have to determine.

So there’s lots to do, and I look forward to working on all these issues with you,

Yours sincerely,

Reed Dasenbrock
Vice Chancellor
for Academic Affairs