IV. Strengthening the Bates Community

The challenge for Working Group Four, given the breadth and complexity of our theme, is to identify a limited number of key concerns, to gather information and input, and to find ways to engage these issues creatively. Two key considerations quickly emerged in our discussions. First, Bates is a "community of communities," that is, the College is an internally diverse and complex network of sub-communities. Second, community should be understood as an ongoing activity of "community-making" that fosters contact and connection at multiple levels and in many directions.

In light of these guiding ideas, we are grappling with several central questions:

- What values and shared commitments help to define Bates as a community?
- How, and among whom, does community form or fail to form at Bates? Can we identify an agenda of problems and challenges that must be addressed in building community?
- What can be done to foster a campus climate in which community building (within and across our diverse sub-communities) is a broad-based and intentional part of our life together?
- How does our community building engage Lewiston-Auburn and the wider social contexts to which we belong?

It is essential to hear from a broad cross section of the Bates community on each of these matters, and we invite and welcome your comments.

Questions about Bates values, identity, and community cut across the Working Group themes, and we anticipate seeking ways to integrate the ideas that emerge from all four strands of discussion.

SELECTIONS

PLANNING AT BATES

An Occasional Bulletin from the Office of the President

February 25, 2008

Dear Colleagues,

Recently I attended a seminar at Harvard for presidents of colleges and universities. One of the instructors was Jim Honan, who related a new book by Atul Gawande to his own ideas about how to improve institutions of higher education. In Better: A Surgeon’s Notes on Performance, Gawande identifies three components of improved performance—"diligence," "doing right," and "ingenuity." As Honan spoke, I found myself thinking of the essential aims and methods of our planning work.

As you may know, our planning is going forward now through the intense efforts of four working groups, and this issue contains reports by Helen Regan, Matt Cote, Pam Baker, and Tom Tracy, who chair the groups. In addition to those reports, you will find an essay by Margaret Imbler, member of the Campus Facilities Master Planning Steering Committee, reflecting on the connection she too sees between diligence—as illuminated for Margaret by reading Cicero—and making the right choices for Bates' future.

I am pleased to see that not only diligence but also the commitment to doing right and ingenuity are alive and well in the planning process at Bates, as you will note throughout the working groups' reports. All four groups are working attentively and assiduously to explore "a sea of possibilities." They are committed to doing the right things—building a better community,

promoting high standards of personal conduct and civic engagement, developing pedagogies of inclusion, and approaching familiar issues with ingenious questions.

I encourage you to read the reports carefully, talk with colleagues about their ideas, and then respond to the invitation to offer feedback. Now is a good time for you to contribute to the planning effort by sharing your comments, questions and suggestions. To do so, please email your thoughts (preferably in 250 words or less) to president@bates.edu in the next week. Responses received by Monday, March 3 will be printed in a special issue of Planning at Bates to be circulated the first week in March.

I also want to take this opportunity to thank Margaret for contributing to this issue and express our gratitude to all the members of our community who are working on the groups. We could not engage in this process without their commitment and hard work. It is truly wonderful to have so many talented people involved.

With best regards and warm wishes,

The four working groups have been meeting weekly since the middle of January. The paragraphs that follow report on their work to date. Upon reading these reports, now is the perfect time to send your comments, questions and suggestions.

In addition, the working group chairs have also been meeting weekly to keep abreast of the related work of the other groups. The chairs plan to hold a four-group meeting in March for the purpose of enhancing the work of each group with ideas and comments from the others, and to discuss topics of common interest. An all-campus, open meeting will be held in the spring.

Best,

Helen Regan, Chair of Working Group 1
Matt Cote, Chair of Working Group 2
Pam Baker ’70, Chair of Working Group 3
Tom Tracy, Chair of Working Group 4
I. Clarifying and Explaining the Bates Experience

Working Group One regards the two aspects of its theme “Clarifying and Explaining the Bates Experience” to be distinct issues. In other words, the group has taken the stance that the Bates experience cannot be explained until it is clarified. Group members began this task by answering the following questions with key words or phrases:

- What is the mission of Bates?
- What are the values of Bates?
- What are the distinctive program elements of the Bates experience?
- Wild card – What else is important for capturing the essence of Bates?

The group assembled all responses and then began a lively discussion that has extended over several meetings. Some interesting general points have emerged:

- There is a distinction between Bates’ eternal purpose of providing a liberal arts education to undergraduate students in a residential setting, and a contemporary statement of its mission at this historical moment?
- Why is it that the group generated a much longer and more expansive list of Bates values than expressions of its mission or enumerations of its distinctive program elements?
- We recognize that although Bates shares many program elements with other liberal arts colleges (study abroad, for example), those elements interact at Bates in a way that distinguishes the college from others. How can we express this?

The group is also examining documents relating to the communications/media function at the College. Although this discussion is not complete, thus far the group has found support for its focus on clarifying the Bates experience. The function, structure and staffing for communications at Bates seem to have received ample analysis, but a new communications initiative awaits a restart of a main message in order to get underway.

Next the group will write, making our initial attempts to clarify the Bates experience as an outcome of our discussions to date. We WELCOME input from interested community members to help us express the essence of Bates clearly and persuasively. We suggest that you write your own answers to the four questions that we started with, or send along any other comments or suggestions that you believe will help clarify the Bates experience to others who do not live it each day. We will be sharing drafts of our work with the campus community later in the spring at which point we will welcome further comments and suggestions.

II. Learning at Bates

Working Group Two, whose task it is to focus on learning at Bates, has adopted the working title “Advancing a Culture of Learning: Promoting and Sustaining the Community of Scholars.” We have grouped the related topics in a variety of ways, settling on three categories, which can also be thought of as aspirational goals:

- Maintain a distinctive, rigorous, and nurturing academic environment
- Connect classroom experiences to life outside the classroom
- Develop structures that promote learning

The first category includes defining and communicating standards of academic performance, personal conduct, and civic engagement. It also includes the creation and promotion of academic credit and evaluation schemes are optimized, and looking for ways to encourage campus-wide discussions of faculty expectations for students and vice versa.

The second category includes, for example, fostering academic and intellectual diversity of the classroom, expanding the realm of service learning, teaching students “life skills,” encouraging a diversity of ideas and welcoming a diverse population on campus, and finding ways to engage the academic and extra-curricular activities of support student learning.

The third category encompasses developing physical, organizational, and scheduling structures that promote learning. Physical structures might include new student housing configurations, space for a Learning Commons, a culture center, enhanced athletic facilities, and new spaces within existing structures that encourage informal intellectual conversations. Thematic conferences and symposia have helped taking topics ranging from the Learning Commons to the question of whether the Bates governance structure helps or hinders efforts to promote and sustain a community of scholars. There has also been considerable interest in considering whether the College’s scheduling structures could be modified to better suit our goals. We have talked about the possibility of extending the grid within which courses are scheduled so that it encompasses more of the day and accommodates extracurricular activities. Alternatives to our annual schedule—two-week/two-week schedule—have also been explored.

During the next phase of our work, the Learning Working Group will break into three subgroups, to concentrate on one of the listed categories and prioritize the topics within it. As we move forward toward the goal of suggesting concrete projects designed to advance a culture of learning at Bates, feel free to direct comments and suggestions to pres@bates.edu by March 3 or to any member of the working group.