

Academic Administration at Fairmont College

Founded in the mid-nineteenth century, Fairmont College was one of the first all-women, liberal arts colleges in the nation. Throughout its history, it had not always prospered like some of its more upscale competition, but by the 1960s it had emerged as one of the better women's colleges in the country, just a shade below the so-called Seven Sisters. At that time, and indeed since the 1920s, the chief academic officer was known as the Dean of the College, he or she reported directly to the President, and the chairs of the respective academic departments reported to the Dean. This simple administrative structure was deemed efficient and effective for a residential college of some 800-1000 women.

While Fairmont cherished its liberal arts background, it also had historically harbored an entrepreneurial streak, one which had not always financially served it well in the past. Nonetheless, in the 1970s, it began to offer courses to non-traditional students, with an emphasis on adult women who wished to begin or finish their undergraduate degree. Since these women often worked or had family responsibilities that would not allow their attendance during the day, a new "evening college" was created for them, with its own "director," known as the Associate Dean of the College, who also had responsibility for various academic support services.

At about the same time, the changing state requirements for initial certification and advancement as an elementary or secondary school teacher, especially the premium placed on securing a master's degree, led Fairmont to explore the possibility of adding graduate training in Education. This was a field that traditionally had been very popular among its undergraduates, and, indeed, among American women in general. Initially in conjunction with a neighboring university, and then on its own, Fairmont introduced a series of master's degrees in education, leading to the creation of the position of Dean of Graduate Studies in 1973. This person reported to the chief academic officer, who, by then, had added the designation Vice President for Academic Affairs to that of Dean of the College.

The introduction of these graduate degrees, together with a decision to admit men, began to change the fundamental nature of the College and was the harbinger of the emergence of Fairmont as a small, comprehensive university. During the 1980s, and 1990s, Fairmont added additional master's degree programs, primarily in the health sciences, and two doctoral programs evolved from them: one in Special Education and the other in Physical Therapy. As a tuition-driven institution, these graduate programs were viewed as new revenue streams to supplement that produced by the undergraduate population.

By the late 1990s, Fairmont was offering 13 graduate degrees, in addition to 40 undergraduate ones, through 17 academic departments and 8 quasi-independent master's degree programs, to a combined student population of approximately 2,700, but doing so with an organizational model that differed little from that of 1973.

Finally, in 1999, the Faculty determined to reorganize the administrative structure of the academic affairs sector. The undergraduate population had more than doubled during the decade of the nineties, and the need for a separate undergraduate dean was obvious. Thus, the Associate Dean position was replaced with a Dean of Undergraduate Studies, and the continuing education dimension, which had been allowed to wither over the years as the College increasingly benefited financially from master's degree students, was subsumed under it. The Dean of Graduate Studies position remained in place, buttressed by additional programs, but neither it nor the new undergraduate dean had oversight over budget or personnel matters beyond their respective offices.

During the course of this re-organization, attempts to have the individual departments report to the respective deans failed. Partially, this failure was due to the fact that several departments oversaw both undergraduate and graduate programming. More importantly, the department chairs wanted to maintain the

direct and immediate access they had to the chief academic officer. Thus, the Vice President for Academic Affairs continued to find himself with 17 department chairs and 8 graduate program directors who had a legitimate right to a piece of his time. As a result, while he was lauded for his managerial ability and admired for his skills as a facilitator of programmatic development, he was unable to provide the academic leadership normally associated with an academic vice president at a comprehensive university of over 3,000 students.

Furthermore, while the University was financially healthy, it had become increasingly clear that moving to the "next level" would require the creation of "alternate revenue streams," with web-based, online courses and programs emerging as the area with the greatest potential. Therefore, a third dean, one for Distributed Learning, was created in 2006, with the hopes that he or she could provide leadership for programs delivered through non-traditional modes of instruction. In a sense, the University was returning to its historical roots, recreating the Evening College in a more contemporary guise. Nonetheless, this deanship, like the other two, was created with very little independent authority, and while it had funding to stimulate the development of online programming, it needed to operate within the confines of the existing departmental structure to secure its instructors.

Thus, despite these administrative changes, Fairmont was still trying to operate effectively with an organizational structure essentially similar to that which existed when the school was a small, liberal arts college of less than a thousand. While the Fairmont Faculty bemoaned this state of affairs, "access" seemed to trump "effectiveness" in their minds. However, the task of writing the institutional self-study for its decennial re-accreditation visit proved to be the spark that led in the fall of 2008 to the creation of a Task Force to Review the Academic Structure. While the status quo was generally seen as untenable by all constituencies, there was considerable disagreement regarding the best course of action to follow. Among the possibilities currently being considered are the following:

1. Provide the Academic Vice President with additional staff; e.g., an Associate Vice President for Administration, but retain the current structure
2. Strengthen the undergraduate and graduate dean positions by having the department chairs and program heads report to them; increase their discretionary budgets
3. Strengthen the undergraduate and graduate dean positions, but also add Continuing and Professional Studies to the academic structure as a separate entity, incorporating current Distributed Learning/Fairmont Online programs and adding new ones that blend the resources of the Office of Distributed Learning with those of the traditional academic units
4. Create formal, multi-departmental "schools," each with a dean or who reports to the Academic Vice President, and eliminate the undergraduate and graduate dean positions
5. Mix elements from one or more of the above options to create a different structure

Which do you think is the preferred option for Fairmont to follow, and why?

Mike Berger
Arcadia University
January 23, 2009