

# Comments from Chair of the Faculty Executive Committee

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*Question: What ever happened to that "Bridge to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" Bill Clinton used to talk about?*

*Answer: We are it.*

*When the rest of academe figures out where it wants to be, there we are. – Potential Mills motto*

## **Report : Mundane, but Vital**

A significant fraction of shared institutional governance is rather mundane. Last semester the Faculty Executive Committee negotiated Faculty Handbook language concerning deans of schools and department heads with the Provost and President. We worked with Provost Greer on the one-time early retirement option, set things in motion to work more closely with administration on budget, worked with President Holmgren in her efforts to enhance opportunities for interaction between faculty and the Board, we consulted on deans searches and faculty searches, we worked through various academic policy changes, and we are currently finishing up some tweaks in the general education requirements. Necessary work, to be sure, but not the stuff of "big questions." Indeed, it sometimes seems there is little time left to think about big questions.

But now that we are a decade in, we *should* pause to ask about higher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The questions that have come up recently can be organized around the most basic statement you can make about Mills: "Mills is a small liberal arts college for women<sup>1</sup>." Let's call into question each term in this sentence: What will small mean this century? What is 21<sup>st</sup> century liberal arts? What is a college in the new century? What will "for women" mean in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? The following thoughts on these questions are offered in the spirit of initiating conversations we should probably be having.

## **What will small mean this century?**

In between the sound bites "too big to fail" and "too small to survive" is another bit of jargon: "right sizing." I do not pretend to know what Mills' right size is, but would like to challenge us to a thought experiment; let us entertain the idea of a Mills with, say, 1200 or 1500 undergraduates (the exact figure is not important). Let's ponder the questions this raises. What would it take to get there? How would we accommodate that enrollment level? How would we deploy the extra resources that higher enrollment would provide? How would we use the opportunity to rethink how we do the liberal arts at Mills?

Why start with numbers? First of all, all by itself, number, has a big impact on our institutional life. There are potential economies of scale across the campus; the marginal cost of grounds keeping, for example, or feeding students, may be negligible. Many phenomena are subject to tipping points and critical mass: all the student life programming

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<sup>1</sup> And, yes, with graduate programs for women and men – but allow me, for the moment, rhetorical license to focus on the former..

in the world, for example, might never improve campus social life the way adding 300 students to the campus population could. What assets would reach capacity when and with what effect? And most important of all, that thing that lies at the core of the college experience, interaction – between students and between students and teachers – rises as the square of the population. A 50% increase in the student body yields a doubling the number of potential encounters.

The point here is not to quibble about numbers or build mathematical models. Rather, it is to suggest that thinking about a qualitative change in quantity can lead us to think creatively and develop the ideas and tools which we can use both at our current size and along the road to the 21<sup>st</sup> century version of “small” at which Mills can thrive and most effectively fulfill its mission.

## **The Liberal Arts as Majoring in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Why rethink liberal arts? Isn't liberal arts the legacy we must protect? When we contemplate "the liberal arts" our thoughts tend to the past. We fondly recall our own education, certain it made us who we are. (For some colleges, such nostalgia is almost a business plan.) Or we hearken back to the invention of the modern liberal arts in the late nineteenth century or to the classical liberal arts of the middle ages.

But *our* task is not to curate, it is to create and innovate.

The value of those liberal arts educations was not lodged in the course catalogs of bygone eras. The magic was in how those courses fit into their time. The liberal arts are a set of intellectual endeavors and experiences appropriate to their time, subjects, the mastery of which provides a foundation, a launching platform, for the leaders of an age.

To "update" the liberal arts, I like to think about **majoring in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**. The play on words here is deliberate. How will/should "majoring" work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? What majors will be added, what majors will be discarded? How long will it take to recognize those that are outmoded or to invent those that are needed? These are important questions, but the phrase has another meaning too. What would it mean to major in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. That is, what if the 21<sup>st</sup> century (that part of it that hasn't happened yet) were your major – what sorts of things would you study? This, I submit, is what we need to consider as we think about what liberal arts means in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A member of the Mills class of 2020 needs to be educated for the years 2020 through 2080. What should we teacher her? This is not an easy question, to be sure. But the first step is to be sure we are facing in the right direction - forward. This leads to our next question.

## **What is “a college” in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?**

This is, first and foremost, an *organizational* question. To meet the challenges of the new century we cannot depend on the 19<sup>th</sup> century organizational apparatus that got us through the last one. Youth, young adulthood, careers, and family are just a few of the things that are taking new forms around us. How can we transform the college, as an organization, into one that can adapt and remain viable in a changing educational marketplace, into the kind of institution to which students come, from which employers hire and professional schools recruit, and to which alumnae and other donors will give?

What we need, I think, is the academic equivalent of an in-house research and development (R & D) department. What is academic R&D? How does higher education figure out what it should be producing tomorrow? How does our "product" evolve? Traditionally, there are four approaches – all variations on "revise the curriculum":

1. Appoint a committee. But such blue ribbon panels rarely yield innovation.
2. Replace the boss. But top-down attempts innovation usually go nowhere.
3. Sit tight and wait. The winds of change will eventually fill our sails and set us on the right course, but ... don't hold your breath.
4. Let's see what Harvard does. Don't laugh, it happens.

Not only are these approaches unproductive, they misunderstand the product. What we "sell" is transformative experiences for (mostly) young minds. The curriculum is just the scaffolding.

The prize, will go to those educational institutions that move from seeing faculty and staff as a cost center and toward harnessing their creativity by encouraging risk-taking and experimentation, paying attention to feedback and results, supporting good ideas and dropping bad ones, rewarding what works, and establishing mechanisms by which successful experiments can be scaled up to institutional level. Most of the impetus in coming years will be in the opposite direction, but a few institutions will figure out how to organize its human capital, not for a massive one-time overhaul, but for ongoing innovative education.

## **What will "for women" mean in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?**

Mills was invented, and has thrived, as a college "for women" in a world very different from the one we are approaching. It was once a world where the very idea of educating women was radical, and though the project that began there is certainly not yet complete, the relationship of women and higher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not what it was 150 or 100 or 50 or even 25 years ago. As we move forward we will need to do more than just defend the idea of women's education – we will need to think further about what it means for the new century. My own experience here leaves me no doubt that institutions like Mills have an important role to continue to play for women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education. How will we articulate and implement that role in a world where women make up a decided majority in many institutions of higher education? How will we communicate it? This is, to be sure, a conversation we are always having, but looking forward, we need to make sure we do so in light of the new realities of the new century.

## **A Concluding Parable**

A college president I know recently said something like "there's nothing more conservative than a progressive college." Sometimes that makes me hesitant to talk about change too unguardedly. But the other day I was walking across campus.

As the GSB went up, the Mills Eucalyptus trees came down. More than a few of us found it troubling. If you asked, it was partly to accommodate the building project, but it was also a solution to a long-standing problem: these giant trees, a symbol of Mills for ages,

had a tendency to fall over when strong winds blew and heavy rains fell, and their shallow roots made walking along the paths beneath them all but impossible. Today, if you look out the windows behind you, you will see saplings in their place. I'm told they are a different variety with deeper roots more likely to withstand future meteorological cataclysms. It will take a while for these little bent twigs to grow tall like their symbolic predecessors, but already they stand for something important: they remind us that it's alright to tinker with tradition (even uproot it occasionally and replant!), that legacy wants us to look forward from it, not stare backward at it.