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REPORT OF THE W&M FACULTY REPRESENTATIVE FEBRUARY 2024

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The new semester is well underway across all of campus. One thing that the new year brings to many faculty are requests from their students to provide letters of reference – for graduate school, for professional school, for summer research positions and internships, for study abroad programs, for their first jobs. Providing these letters is one of the many “invisible” service responsibilities that faculty have. While time-consuming, we are aware that these individual letters are often key factors that enable the next steps in a student’s career, and so the effort is worthwhile. In some cases, we find ourselves providing updated letters for students who have graduated years ago, as their careers develop. Sometimes, we even hear back from former students with more than just a request for another reference letter. Early last month, out of the blue, I received an email from a student whom I had taught 29 years ago, and who is now a successful M.D. practicing family medicine. He recalled a particular incident from when he was in my introductory physics course, how it had helped him to a top grade, and he thanked me for what he thought was a small but important step in his career. This is just one example of how the connections faculty make with students here at W&M can have a long-lasting effect, and how these connections help make being a faculty member here such a joy and a privilege.

Writing reference letter for students is just one example of the myriad service duties of a faculty member, many of which are “hidden” or even are required to be anonymous – a few other examples include career mentoring and academic advising for students, writing peer-review of papers for publication, reviewing of grant proposals, providing assessments for tenure or promotion for faculty from other universities, and serving on the many committees that do much of the work of furthering the academic mission of the university. Capturing, recognizing, and appropriately rewarding this work is a perennial challenge. The Provost’s office has been working towards improving mechanisms to do so, starting with a recent survey of the faculty to determine the range and variety of these activities that we are engaged in.

Many faculty were happy to learn that W&M is now on track to be classified in 2025 as an “R1” university by the Carnegie Foundation. The R1 classification (“Doctoral Universities – Very high research activity”) represents the top level of research activity for a university which produces Ph.D. students. This is formal recognition of something many of us already knew, that W&M contributes at the highest levels to the creation of new knowledge – one of the core missions of a modern university. This change in our classification (at present we are classified as “R2: “Doctoral Universities – high research activity”) will improve our visibility nationally and internationally, help us to continue to attract promising undergraduate and graduate students, and improve our ability to hire and retain the most productive faculty members. One should note, however, that this new classification scheme is based on only two metrics: the total dollar amount of external-funded research grants and the total number of doctoral degrees awarded.

While these are certainly very important metrics to track, they do not capture the breadth of research and scholarship at a university, and they weight research in “expensive” fields more than research in fields where the costs are not as high. Some of the scholarship generated at W&M which has had the most impact did not require large research grants (or in some cases required no external funding). There is important scholarship, research and creative work that is done in units that don’t train doctoral students. Capturing the quality and quantity of all this work is a daunting task. As you know, in our previous meeting, the Board considered a number of proposed Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) which were aimed at monitoring research and scholarly activity. The Provost’s office has taken the Board’s feedback on these KPIs, and assembled six teams of faculty and staff to further develop them and populate them with data.

The Faculty Assembly has taken on numerous projects this academic year. In addition to helping with the KPIs, considering the various implications of R1 status, working with the Provost’s team on Phase 2 of the Faculty productivity study, and providing input for the upcoming SACS/COC re-accreditation process, other initiatives of the Assembly include campus safety, an examination of intellectual diversity across campus, a possible retirement incentive program for faculty, and launching a new version of our tri-annual survey of the priorities and concerns of the faculty, amongst other plans. The spring semester will be a busy one for the Faculty Assembly.