

University of Chicago
Memorandum

April 28, 2016

To: Robert J. Zimmer

From: John W. Boyer, Rocky Kolb, David Nirenberg, and Martha T. Roth

We write to urge the appointment of a faculty committee to explore the current financial, budgetary, and structural organization of the “arts and sciences”—by which for purposes of this memo we mean the College and the Divisions of the Humanities, Physical Sciences, and Social Sciences. The conversations that we held earlier this academic year with you and with the Provost’s Office on possible ways to track College instructional responsibilities and to link those efforts to budget allocations to the Divisions have made us painfully aware of several critical structural problems in the current budgetary and administrative frameworks within which the Divisions and the College function on a day to day and year to year basis. We are also convinced that the University would profit from creating more flexible organizational structures that would encourage greater curricular innovation and research collaborations across conventional disciplinary and Divisional boundaries of the arts and sciences.

The present organization of the Divisions and the College as distinct Faculties and Ruling Bodies of the University dates from 1930-31, and served the University well for many decades. The autonomy of each Division and the College made the Deans strong advocates for their respective functions, with Provost and President providing any necessary coordination. But the demographic, scholarly, pedagogical, and financial worlds in which the University functions have changed over the last 85 years. The complexity of the institution and of the research landscape has increased dramatically over the last half century. The professional schools, and particularly Booth, Law, and Harris, have emerged as major forces

within the University, which they were not in 1931. The College and the “arts and sciences” faculties have become much more inter-dependent as the College has grown in size and institutional importance. Under these conditions the current configuration has become increasingly problematic, and has begun to impose a real cost on both the pedagogical and research mission of the faculties. Moreover, as the scale of the University has increased exponentially, the segmentation of the faculties on the quad into relatively small units has left the arts and sciences without an advocate capable of representing their collective importance within the institution.

We believe that the current organization of the arts and sciences at UChicago creates two especially significant challenges, one having to do with budgetary allocation structures, the other with our institutional capacity to encourage and sustain cross-cutting innovation in both research and teaching.

The first challenge involves the current system of resource allocation. At the present time the net revenue generated by the College is the primary source of unrestricted revenue for the Divisions, but there is no formal or even functional connection between College instruction and the revenue that is allocated to the Divisions to support the work of the faculty. College tuition revenues currently flow to the central administration, which then allocates part of this revenue back to each Division as a “central allocation,” for which each Divisional Dean negotiates independently with the Provost. This situation has a number of consequences. First, there is no clear financial connection between the College tuition revenues and the Divisional faculties who teach College students, making alignment of incentives difficult. Second, the tangible and crucial contributions of the Divisional faculty to the financial stability of the entire University are obscured. Finally, the Divisional and College Deans negotiate separately with the Provost for financial resources, without a true and productive collective sense of the budget across the arts and sciences space, without knowledge of how that budget relates to the tuition revenues being produced by the arts and sciences faculty, and without proper evaluation of research and pedagogical needs across the larger space. The present fiscal system also discourages efficient mid- and long-range planning on the part of the Deans and the Collegiate Masters and often results in unforeseen and disruptive consequences in relation to faculty recruitment and retention, and in regard to responsible instructional planning and research support.

The second major challenge facing the arts and sciences involves our capacity for flexible and forward-looking innovation in teaching and research. The administrative and divisional boundaries established in 1931 no longer fully grasp or reflect the nature of collaboration and scholarly interaction that defines the educational and scholarly work of the faculty presently lodged in the various arts and sciences departments. As the nature of research in the arts and sciences space has changed, the lack of a coordinating function across that space has significantly constrained the possibilities for inquiry. Instruments and methodologies that were once relatively limited to particular disciplines are now of general importance across the arts and sciences, but remain isolated within divisional structures that limit their diffusion. Computation, for example, is a methodology of ever increasing importance across the entire space, from Physics to the Visual Arts, but is housed within one Division, with no mechanism for aligning diverse interests and needs across the broader environment. The same could be said for many methodologies and practices with wide applicability across disciplines, from the most basic and well-established (such as writing, statistics, and ethnography) to recently emerging ones (such as brain imaging and GIS). These methodologies and the core facilities necessary to sustain them are often isolated within Divisions, creating funding and administrative barriers to their deployment across the space. In a world in which research innovation is increasingly dependent on the diffusion of methods, techniques, and ideas across distinct spaces in a highly heterogeneous environment, the research consequences of this segmentation are mounting.

Our pedagogical activities confront similar challenges, further exacerbated by added degrees of compartmentalization. At the undergraduate level, the Core Curriculum is largely staffed and funded through the College. Undergraduate majors are left primarily to individual departments, with little College or Division oversight. The MA and MS programs are divisional, and the PhD programs are funded centrally and divisionally but structured almost entirely departmentally. The resulting lack of coordination and alignment has negative consequences for all of these levels. Divisions have few tools with which to encourage teaching in the Core. At the level of majors and minors, we lack the ability to coordinate in order to provide courses (such as “data science”) that might be critical across the range of arts and sciences departments and Divisions, from Computer Science (PSD) to Economics (SSD) to English (Hum). At the doctoral level, it is difficult for new programs to emerge within departments, let alone between departments

and divisions; this is particularly unfortunate at a time when the disciplines are themselves rapidly changing. A more coordinated structure would allow for undergraduate and graduate programs to emerge more fluidly across departments, Divisions, and the College.

Given these challenges, we believe that the time has come to reexamine existing budgetary and administrative structures with the objective of creating stronger, more logical, and more accountable connections between the financial resources generated by the College and the faculty whose primary appointments originate in the Divisions. It would be highly desirable in our view to encourage new modes of scholarly collaboration and new forms of educational experimentation that are no longer beholden to administrative and policy structures that date from the late nineteenth century. If the University is to embrace new opportunities for teaching and research in the coming century, and if the University hopes to sustain its strong national leadership role in defining the future of liberal education, we will need the capacity to mobilize both ideas and resources in ways that reflect the scholarly opportunities of our own time and not be limited by those of times long past.

We therefore write to request and recommend that the President and the Provost appoint a faculty committee to review these conditions and the changed landscape across the University, and to recommend a set of possible improvements. Without second-guessing the conclusions of any committee, we believe that the current status of the Divisions and the College as independent degree-granting Faculties and as educational and research Ruling Bodies is effective and should be maintained. But we are also convinced that some level of greater budgetary, administrative, and strategic coordination among the Divisions and College as a group would be desirable, enabling them to develop more rational and transparent planning vis-à-vis the revenues generated by the College and to encourage new forms of educational and scholarly collaboration. We thus believe that serious and informed thought should be given to a more integrated budgetary entity and that more focused administrative, policy, and strategic leadership will be needed to achieve that end.

We are not the first institution to confront these challenges of the contemporary university. Others have met them in a number of ways, some of which would be inappropriate here given the history and culture of UChicago. We are an institution with a particularly strong and proud

tradition of faculty governance, and our approach to the challenges of coordination across complexity should maintain that tradition.

This makes it all the more important that a faculty committee be charged with the crucial task of reviewing the organizational conditions under which we in the “arts and sciences” will be pursuing our collective and collaborative work of teaching and discovery in the twenty-first century. We suggest that the committee be formed this Spring 2016, and asked to work over some appropriate portion of the next academic year to gather data, examine structures at other institutions, and confer with colleagues across the University. We would be pleased to offer suggestions as to possible members of the committee and to work with you in developing a charge that would inform and guide the work of the committee to reach productive and thoughtful recommendations.