Report to
Faculty, Administration, Trustees, and Students of
Teachers College of Columbia University
New York, NY 10027

Prepared following analysis of the institution’s
Periodic Review Report

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August 1, 2011
I. Introduction

The executive leadership, faculty, staff and students of Teachers College are to be commended for a well-crafted Periodic Review Report, substantively addressing each of the critical areas intended for inclusion in this review. More importantly, the community deserves due credit for the evident progress over the last five years, and notably under the inspired leadership of President Fuhrman, in gaining traction in both the key areas of recommendation from the 2006 decennial review and in many of the extended suggestions included therein. It is critical that the progress made to date be strengthened and sustained such that a culture of assessment becomes pervasive.

Dr. Levine invited the decennial review committee to extend their reach in the 2006 review, welcoming broad commentary and counsel throughout. This resulted in a number of formal suggestions, many of which were addressed in the succeeding years and in the PRR, while there was no requirement to do so. This reality, and the active engagement of the community reflected in the current report, underscores that President Fuhrman used this process in the expansive manner intended; not simply as a bureaucratic mandate, but as an opportunity for calibration and reflection in the broadest strategic and tactical sense. As one of the preeminent educational institutions in the country, Teachers College now has the opportunity to provide leadership in establishing educational best practices that focus on learning outcomes and institutional effectiveness.

The vision of the College—“build(ing) on and extend(ing) (its) historical legacy and extend(ing) its mission”—is well-served by the intentional strategic planning processes undertaken in recent years and hosts considerable promise for continuing and strengthened impact in education and social policy. Interdisciplinarity, linkages between research and practitioner education, an affirmed commitment to the local community, and the realized national and international relevance of the College all contribute to a clear sense that this is an institution with core values that pervade both the process and content of their collective educational and service delivery.

II. Responses to Recommendations from the Previous Decennial Evaluation

As noted, while the guidance and suggestions provided by the 2006 visiting team were expansive, invited or otherwise, the core recommendations focused on planning, assessment and learning outcomes. While each of the four core recommendations will be addressed below, it is in this domain broadly that the leadership of Dr. Fuhrman
appears to be most evident. Faced with the common discomfort that formalized assessment protocols can evoke, it is clear that she has set a tone from the top that is at once visionary, pragmatic and respectful. Visionary in declaring assessment and the use of that assessment in planning as essential to high-level success at the core of mission. Pragmatic in instituting a pattern of institutional decision making that relies increasingly on data and outcomes measures, with attendant resource allocation and programmatic change. Respectful, in allowing for local latitude and discretion as to process, while ensuring a reporting mechanism and accountability that allows for institutional integrity, transparency and, indeed, celebration of success. Not surprising, perhaps, given the longstanding community ethos for which Teachers College is renowned, but no mean feat in difficult economic times when such processes can be misperceived as more administrative burden than value add.

The specific recommendations (4) from the 2006 decennial review and consideration of institutional response, as detailed in the PRR, are as follows:

**Institutional Planning & Assessment**

*Recommendation from 2006 review: The team recommends that Teacher’s College develop and implement a written assessment plan and process that links planning to decision making, budgeting, and institutional assessment. (ref: standard #7)*

The College has responded thoughtfully to this recommendation, while validating local processes that have existed for some time. By creating what is duly termed “a cohesive framework” that “reduce(s) fragmentation,” it appears that the right balance has been struck. The AIE document is well-constructed and has an evident logic to it. What is difficult to gauge is the level at which the common templates have been embraced in driving intentional and reflective processes at the local level or have been adopted after-the-fact as something of a fill-in-the-blank declaration of more informal processes already in place. This is not cited as an indictment, though some of the ongoing and open timelines suggest that might be the case. The administrative and faculty leadership should be attuned to this potential and highlight the best practice of those units where the full planning and assessment cycle, as outlined in the AIE, is used in a sequential and ongoing fashion, for continuous improvement. This will undoubtedly be a focus area for the next decennial review.

Noteworthy in this context is the institutional engagement of external review processes in both academic affairs and finance and administration, and the organizational changes that resulted, in part, from those reviews. The creation of the Office of General Counsel, similarly, shows a progressive, problem-solving orientation in the context of a
changing external environment for compliance and enterprise risk management. Taken collectively, these and other substantive organizational changes are reflective of genuine and deserved institutional ego strength, inviting and creating positive change and risking the status quo in order to improve processes and outcomes.

Student Learning Outcomes

Recommendation from 2006 review: The team recommends that course syllabi contain explicit statements of student learning outcomes. (ref: standard #11)

While the College has evidently embraced issues of the articulation of learning outcomes at the institutional and program level, this course-level recommendation appears to require further progress in the coming five years and will need to be documented for the 2016 review. The suggestion to faculty that they include a statement within respective syllabi is an important first step, but full compliance with that suggestion must be enacted. Setting clear learning goals and expectations for student learning in classes at the start of each semester is best practice and begs a universal embrace of this practice by faculty so esteemed for their educational influence and resolve. Framing the imperative of delineating learning outcomes within syllabi in the context of the student-faculty relationship may serve as a palatable stimulus.

Program Evaluation

Recommendation from 2006 review: The team recommends the adoption of an institutional policy specifying standards and processes for periodic program evaluation. (ref: standard #11)

The College embraced this recommendation, and in the time since the decennial visit, each unit has undergone review. The reviews analyzed faculty loads, research productivity, enrollment, retention and graduation rates – all worthy metrics. More importantly the results of the reviews were used in determining course offerings, faculty recruitment and budgets. One aspect of the review that might be improved is the use of broader evaluations of teaching effectiveness. The PRR indicates an over-reliance on student evaluations of teaching quality of the faculty.

Assessment

The team recommends that Teachers College develop a plan which focuses on student learning assessment activities, including the specific methods used to validate student learning goals and objectives. (ref: standard 14)
Teachers College created and adopted the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes plan. This plan is decentralized and managed by the faculty, however the College maintains an advisory committee to oversee the process. The faculty and administration are to be commended for adoption of this plan. As presented, and as noted previously, there is the concern that universal commitment to this imperative, while supporting local strategies unique to each program, must be a focus in the coming years. Ensuring that the plan is being used across the College to document and improve student learning will certainly be a focus of the next decennial review.

III. Major Challenges and/or Opportunities

The College is to be applauded for the unvarnished declaration of challenges and for the thoughtful, forward-looking manner of addressing key concerns. The centrality of the faculty, and consequence of raids and retirements, is addressed in a heads up fashion that serves to both address the matter strategically and focus attention tactically in key disciplines where the risk may be the greatest. While most impressive because of its elemental relevance to the prestige and impact of the institution, it is worth noting that it is a fine example of data-driven managerial decision making, indeed of smart interpretation of trend analysis from which a strategy for preparedness has been drawn. Coupled with parallel efforts to recruit and build talent in key areas, it shows a “proactive” mindset in the best sense, while allowing that the specific risks unfold in unpredictable fashion and require agility in response on a foundation of good, central process and support.

It is appropriate that the College is not unduly sanguine about maintaining market share, while appreciating that the esteem with which the institution is held likely makes this something of a moderated risk in absolute terms. What is less emphasized here is the relative quality of the student body—though the enrollment data suggests a strong, sustained profile—and the capacity of the institution to build the market itself. This latter point relates to the decennial review focus on declaration of mission, as the real and potential impact of the College extends well beyond education, even broadly defined.

The renewed focus on financial aid and scholarship dollars, within need and beyond need, and on the leveraging of resources to recruit star-quality doctoral students, is wise. The reference to further integration of admission objectives and financial aid suggests that past practices have been more exclusively need based, independent of student caliber; if correct, the integrated approach is well-considered.
The disbanding, with dispersal and integration of key operations, of CEO&I/TCI is another example of smart tactical process, consistent with both an engaged and data-driven decision-making process. While it is impossible to assess the efficacy of the decision outright, it surely could not have been an easy decision to reach, and the leadership of the College is applauded for making difficult decisions reflective of the times.

The various initiatives focused on stimulating faculty research and priming the pump for external funding are especially noteworthy—and necessary investments—in these economic times. This is emblematic of both a long-term view and financial savvy that appears to be growing in a context in which it is absolutely essential. The wisdom of such investments can only be known over the very long-term, if indeed knowable at all, but it speaks well of the institutional commitment to sustaining a platform for faculty engagement, hope and ambition. Quite pragmatically, it also clearly signals to external funders that the College has skin in the game, boding well for sustained impact in chosen realms of engagement.

The deferred maintenance issues are real, as they are for so many, and again the clear declaration of need and process of engagement underway is laudable. Still, the potential need for $10m/year or more for steady state capital renewal—discounting deferred needs and new construction—makes this a vexing problem that the $100m CTC target is not apparently intended to address.

Teachers College’s Community Schools partnership is of great interest. This effort offers tremendous potential and opportunity for national leadership. Much of the country will be interested in the ability of the college to partner with the NYC Department of Education to provide excellent education and childhood development in a public school setting.

**IV. Enrollment and Finance Trends and Projections**

The primary and secondary reviewers defer to the financial reader on the core financial analysis.

With respect to enrollment, certainly from an accreditation standard perspective, there is no concern and the College duly retains a highly demanded and selective profile.

It is noteworthy that the enrollment analysis presented is exclusively focused on headcounts and base demographics—all positive—without reference to quality
measures. Especially given the changing age demographic, the increase in students entering directly from undergraduate study, and the reduction, by design, of part-time students, the net effect in quality, preparedness for the full thrust of the TC curricula and the community engagement and impact of students during and after study—as well as persistence indices—are important components of the overall enrollment management trajectory.

The other issue in this domain that is clearly important is the sustainability of the 20% increase in entering class beginning in 2009 in terms of faculty teaching load, advising and support. It may well be that the potentially negative morale issues associated with such growth are more than offset by the concomitant solid financial foundation it creates, though maintaining the right balance in this regard is essential for a sustainable future.

The College is wise to enroll intentionally smaller, but better served and funded, cohorts of doctoral students. This strategy promises to increase doctoral student success and shorten time-to-degree, while offering considerable promise in the depth of impact of these graduates. It no doubt helps to offset the strain on faculty time imposed by the growth in master’s students, noted above.

V. Assessment Processes and Plans

It is evident that President Fuhrman and Provost James are deeply invested in cultivating a culture of assessment throughout the college, consistent with both best practice and the recommendations and suggestions from the decennial review. The Institutional Plan for the Assessment of Institutional Effectiveness is well drawn, and there are a number of compelling examples of goal-driven external and internal assessment processes being utilized to drive management decision making. The evolution from periodic and evident to systematic and pervasive will require time, and the senior leadership appears to be striking the right balance between top-down expectations and appropriate levels of local discretion and control. Ensuring that local discretion, however exercised, universally meets the objective of a clear and continuous cycle of planning, implementation and assessment will be an important focus of the coming five years.

What is difficult to ascertain precisely is the level of buy-in to the leadership mandate and the year-over-year assessment and feedback loop in both the administrative and academic units. In sum, there are good examples in several units, but it is unclear whether this is reflective of the whole or whether these departments have been
specifically called out because they have been areas of needed change and so necessarily engaged in an assessment process with resulting change. If the implementation is more pervasive, the planning and assessment grids provided for the 2016 decennial review should offer some clear indication of year-over-year progress and actual measures—beyond types of measures—for critical indices of progress.

The next decennial review will certainly look for gains produced by the College’s Diversity Action Plan.

VI. Linked Institutional Planning and Budgeting Processes

The linkages between planning and budgeting processes are more implicitly than explicitly clear from the documentation provided. That is, it is evident that the planning and assessment processes engaged in over the past five years have brought about real change—in facilities, in IT investments, in program offerings, in enrollment strategy, and in financial aid—even though the planning and budgeting processes are not formally linked, as presented. As reviewers, we find this satisfactory, as it is indicative of good, natural decision making from an executive team and faculty with a clear understanding that these processes are fundamentally tied at both a strategic and tactical level. Moreover, the new executive leadership and difficult economic times makes for an institutional climate in which separation of planning and budgeting would be virtually impossible, such is the tone from the top. Still, it may be wise to memorialize the ways in which this happens to protect against the potential in the future that such engagement may languish and management decisions may be made without the appropriate financial considerations in hand.

VII. Conclusion

Teacher’s College has clearly been in a progressive and positive chapter over the last five years, with inspired new leadership at the executive level and continued strong standing in the higher education community.

In writing this report, consistent with the areas addressed by the College through the PRR, we have alternately celebrated and provided counsel on various facets of the unique and highly functioning community that is Teachers College. While clear and thoughtful effort was put into the PRR, for which we are grateful, far more important has been the effort made over the last five years to continue the tradition of excellence that the College has built over the last 124 years. Securing that change in a pervasive way
will be necessary in the coming five years, consistent with the mandate set forth by the President. The four explicit recommendations from the 2006 decennial review have been embraced at a senior level, and in fact have fit in well with President Fuhrman’s emphasis on a strengthened business model and data-driven institutional decision making. Progress in each area has clearly been made, while some acceleration will be necessary over the next five years, notably in the cascading into individual programs and especially course-level articulation of learning outcomes and documented use of assessment measures in progressive and continuous improvement. As has been noted here and in the PRR, each faculty member of Teachers College would do a profound service to the higher education community by role-modeling best, student-centered practice in this regard, consistent with the President’s vision.

In sum, we find no issues that rise to the level of formal recommendation. We have summarized the handful of suggestions offered in this PRR report below:

The administrative and faculty leadership should . . . highlight the best practice of those units where the full planning and assessment cycle, as outlined in the AIE, is used in a sequential and ongoing fashion, for continuous improvement. This will undoubtedly be a focus area for the next decennial review. (page 2)

While the College has evidently embraced issues of the articulation of learning outcomes at the institutional and program level, th(e) course-level recommendation appears to require further progress—perhaps outright and minimally in documentation for the 2016 review—in the coming five years. (page 3)

One aspect of the review that might be improved is the use of broader evaluations of teaching effectiveness. The PRR indicates an over-reliance on student evaluations of teaching quality of the faculty. (page 3)

As presented, and as noted previously, there is the concern that universal commitment to (assessment of learning outcomes), while supporting local strategies unique to each program, must be a focus in the coming years. Ensuring that the plan is being used across the College to document and improve student learning will certainly be a focus of the next decennial review. (page 4)

The planning and assessment grids provided for the 2016 decennial review should offer some clear indication of year-over-year progress and actual measures—beyond types of measures—for critical indices of progress. (page 7)
It may be wise to memorialize the ways in which (an integrated planning and budget process) happens to protect against the potential in the future that such engagement may languish and management decisions may be made without the appropriate financial considerations in hand. (page 7)