



James B. Abbott

Planning for Eminence in the Arts and Sciences

BY DEAN REBECCA W. BUSHNELL

DEAN'S COLUMN

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In recent years, the School of Arts and Sciences has gained a reputation for excellence unprecedented in its history. This reputation is grounded in our superb faculty and students, who are intellectually ambitious, inventive and versatile. Our faculty move nimbly across disciplinary boundaries to address emerging questions and ideas. They are known for their eagerness to innovate in teaching and research, and to engage with local and global communities. The School attracts exceptional students who thrive on the challenges and opportunities they find on campus, in Philadelphia and around the world.

Our current strength derives from a strategic plan devised in 1999, under the leadership of my predecessor, Sam Preston. When I became dean, I quickly realized it was time for a new plan. The University had a new president with fresh ideas, and the School would encounter new opportunities to prosper in the coming decade. We needed to build on the School's momentum and shape a future that would bring it to new heights of eminence.

In forging a new strategic plan, I asked faculty, students, overseers and alumni to step back and think big. I also met with deans from Penn's other schools. The result is a set of goals and priorities that will guide our decision making over the next five years. Here are some highlights.

For the School to prosper, we must increase faculty size to expand into new areas of knowledge, to innovate in education and to achieve critical mass in key disciplines. To recruit and retain top scholars, we must also attend to the time, funding and facilities that support teaching and research. Most critically, the School will pursue a long-range facilities plan that includes new construction projects, such as phase II of the Life Sciences Building, as well as extensive renovation of classrooms and laboratories.

The School is home to almost half of Penn's students and plays a central role in the education of nearly all undergraduates and many graduate and professional students. A more flexible general education curriculum, approved by the faculty this past spring, will be implemented for the Class of 2010. The new undergraduate curriculum emphasizes interdisciplinary learning and global awareness, and it will be sustained by improved mentoring and advising. The School's Ph.D. programs, which are essential to Penn's standing as a world-class research university, are small and highly selective. To enhance their quality, we will hold individual graduate groups accountable for performance when allocating resources, provide incentives for graduate programs to obtain external funding, and simplify the tuition structure and

course requirements. In response to evolving needs of lifelong learners, the College of General Studies will review its bachelor's and master's degree programs to ensure continuing excellence and to explore promising new directions.

We also believe a Penn education should be accessible to the very best students, regardless of ability to pay. The School will make fundraising for endowed undergraduate scholarships and the identification of new sources for graduate fellowships a high priority.

All these efforts will be coordinated with targeted investments in five cross-school, multidisciplinary initiatives that engage numerous University partners in a common cause. We believe that many of the world's most pressing problems and its most compelling questions demand multidisciplinary responses. These initiatives – genetics, neuroscience and behavior, nanoscience, cross-cultural contacts, social dimensions of health, and democracy and constitutionalism – will build on existing strengths at Penn and engage faculty and students in vital global issues.

It is an ambitious plan, but I am confident that achieving its goals will secure for the School a position of even greater prominence in the world and enhance our ability to use the knowledge we create for the greater good. ■