



# Hamilton

September 2009

Dear Friends,

I returned to campus in July after a research sabbatical of six months, which I spent chiefly in my former home in Durham, North Carolina. There I took advantage of the rich holdings of the Duke University Library in my field of study – 18th-century French literature and culture – and of Philip’s willingness to cook all our meals so that I could finish writing my book. Those six months were, for me, sustaining. By making it possible for me to reconnect with my scholarly life, the sabbatical provided the intellectual sustenance that will, I hope, enable me to do my job with renewed insight and zest.

As I look around our beautiful campus, even more beautiful in my eyes after a few months’ absence, I feel strongly the responsibility to sustain this place and the experience it provides. And so I ask myself again, as I often have in the past, “What does it take to be a sustainable campus, a sustainable college?” The answer is, frankly, especially complex in stringent times, and entails intersecting matters of education, finances, construction, people and choices – endless choices.

Let me evoke one such recent choice. The summer months were, as usual, busy with renovation, repair and construction projects, for a campus the size and expanse of Hamilton – 113 buildings spread over 1350 acres – requires a continuous round of maintenance. One of the first discussions in which I participated centered on the renovation of Emerson Hall (originally built in 1928 and known as ELS) into a student center. This is a project many of us have long wanted to bring to fruition, for it responds to needs for meeting, office and activity space that have been consistently expressed by students over the years. It will house our wonderful campus activities staff and provide a central place for the work of the numerous student organizations that form so essential a part of the Hamilton College experience. But the specific subject of the conversation that I was called on to moderate was solar panels. Should we or should we not put them on the roof of the renovated building? On the one hand, it was argued that they would be a visible sign of our commitment to being “green,” mirroring not only the solar panels recently installed on the renovated Kirner-Johnson Building but also the windmill on the Kirkland side of campus (a gift from the Class of 1991), and resonating with other initiatives of the last few years such as geothermal heating systems, Zipcars, a community garden, our food service’s farm-to-fork program, and even the use of commencement regalia made of recyclable materials. On the other hand, the energy generated by such panels would be small and the payback long – perhaps 40 to 50 years, during which time the technology will evolve – and there are countless competing needs to which we must attend. Do the actual contributions to preserving the planet and the symbolic contributions to Hamilton’s image outweigh the decades-long timeframe necessary to recoup the expense?

Other questions are more diffuse. How do we sustain Hamilton as a premier institution over the long term, keeping the liberal arts education we offer relevant and affordable, ensuring that our faculty members are supported in their scholarly as well as teaching endeavors, making certain that the fiscal health of the College is maintained despite recent endowment losses, and identifying the resources necessary to conserve and update our physical plant? Such questions demand constant and sometimes difficult assessment and re-assessment of needs and aspirations.

The answers are shaped partly by choices made in the past. Throughout its modern history, a Hamilton education has been rooted in the liberal arts tradition. To sustain that practice, our curriculum, facilities and equipment have had to evolve to keep pace with new ideas, new areas of knowledge and new pedagogies. Over time, we have added programs in computer science, environmental studies, neuroscience, women's studies, Africana studies and sociology – to name some examples – and modernized buildings and equipment in order to make possible new methods of teaching and learning. Regardless of the discipline, however, teaching the liberal arts a century ago was fundamentally similar to teaching the liberal arts today: honing the ability of students to think, analyze, explore and create. In other words, encouraging students to engage actively in the classroom, in the laboratory, in the studio, on the stage, on the field – and in the world. Underpinning those efforts at Hamilton has been an emphasis on writing and speaking, so that the knowledge acquired can be shared broadly and effectively. Sustaining Hamilton academically means responding to new challenges, while holding fast to those attributes that define the College's mission and equip our students for today's working world.


The educational framework provided by the curriculum and the innovations enabled by new and modernized facilities are merely the means of bringing together minds of promise and achievement. Supporting our faculty ensures the vitality of the classroom. Grants to encourage effective pedagogy and to support sabbatical projects, funds for travel to professional conferences, a program to recognize outstanding teaching and scholarship, and an unambiguous expectation that Hamilton's teachers are also active scholars or artists all serve to enrich a student's academic experience.

Just as we pursue all these methods to sustain the College and its faculty for the benefit of its students, the members of each incoming class bring new energy to campus. Their diverse views, experiences and backgrounds add depth and vitality to a community that increasingly reflects the world in which our students will make their voices heard. In short, they push Hamilton toward greater relevance, as evidenced in the new programs and activities that are both basic and essential for a student population that is more geographically, ethnically and socioeconomically diverse than the generation that preceded it. Our effort to achieve fully need-blind admissions is an example of how we are seeking to keep a Hamilton education accessible.

Of course, the students who enroll at Hamilton subsequently graduate and further inspire an alumni body known for its loyalty – or, staying with my theme – its interest in sustaining its alma mater. It may go unsaid because it is such a formative part of Hamilton's history, but it should never go unacknowledged that our alumni have played a crucial role in making Hamilton all that it is today. New facilities, new programs for students, professional development activities for faculty and scholarship aid for students – these all exist because of the discernment and commitment of our alumni and their families. I believe that our graduates experienced at Hamilton something they felt was worth preserving and passing on to others.

History has also demonstrated that important decisions were made in past generations that have positioned Hamilton to thrive, even in today's economy. But that economy, of course, poses serious new challenges and requires that we assess priorities in budget, staffing, programming and facilities. We will continue to make decisions not just thoughtfully, but passionately, with some of us doubtless arguing one side and some the other of virtually every question we face. The choices we make today will help to keep Hamilton relevant not only for those we have the privilege of serving in the short term, but also for those our Oneida Nation neighbors call "the faces not yet born," so that we can preserve and sustain Hamilton for seven generations into the future. Our new student center will be a magnificent resource for our residential campus. It is unlikely to boast solar panels (at least not yet), but our commitment to the environment and to environmental education will endure.

Sincerely yours,



Joan Hinde Stewart