Decanal Structure Review and Recommendations
Ad Hoc Review Committee on the FAS Decanal Structure

March 2021
Ad Hoc Review Committee on the FAS Decanal Structure

Steven Berry (Chair)
David Swensen Professor of Economics, Department of Economics; Jeffrey Talpins Faculty Director of the Tobin Center for Economic Policy at Yale

Jennifer A. Herdt
Gilbert L. Stark Professor of Christian Ethics, Senior Associate Dean of Academic Affairs, Yale Divinity School

Vivian Irish
Chair and Daniel C. Eaton Professor of Molecular, Cellular & Developmental Biology and Professor of Ecology & Evolutionary Biology, Department of Molecular, Cellular and Developmental Biology

Stephen C. Murphy
Vice President for Finance & Chief Financial Officer

Frances McCall Rosenbluth
Damon Wells Professor of Political Science, Department of Political Science

Ramamurti Shankar
JW Gibbs Professor of Physics, Department of Physics
1. Overview

This committee was asked to review the structure and functioning of Yale’s new FAS Deans system, including the new “Three Deans” structure involving independent Deans of the FAS, the College and the Graduate School, each reporting to the Provost. These Deans replaced an older system in which the current responsibilities of the Three Deans were shared by the Provost, the Dean of Yale College and the Dean of the Graduate School. Under the older system, day to day management of the FAS was also shared by ladder faculty who served part time as Divisional Directors (on the more purely academic side) and by career Deputy Provosts (on the more budgetary side). These latter positions have been replaced by full time divisional Deans, reporting to the new Dean of the FAS.

Our committee conducted extensive conversations with faculty, administrators, and staff. Individually and as a full committee, we talked to individual members of the FAS faculty, to leaders of the FAS Faculty Senate and to current and past FAS department chairs. We solicited electronic comments and suggestions from the entire FAS faculty. On the basis of this work, we have concluded that the new structure is an improvement over the old in significant ways. However, some further adjustments—in some cases adopted gradually over a number of years—could improve the system’s effectiveness.

A big challenge, not entirely addressed in the new structure, is that Yale, like every large and complex institution, requires both a centralized authority that can allocate and reallocate resources for the benefit of the whole institution as circumstances evolve as well as decentralized authority for attending quickly to local needs. A classic principle is that decisions should rest at the level where the best information resides. Decisions should be pushed down to the local level (which has more detailed information) when the decisions affect primarily local concerns, but should be pushed up to a higher level when broader institutional concerns are involved. We do not delineate highly specific demarcations between the two priorities, but we do suggest some areas where the University might consider shifting the balance between the two.

2. Remaining Issues with the New System

The new system relieves the Provost to focus on university-wide initiatives and it puts faculty hiring and faculty salaries more firmly in the hands of FAS leadership. The Deans of Yale College and the Graduate School, relieved of their shared burden to act as co-deans of the faculty, are able to focus on their respective domains. This change moves in the direction of placing decisions where the best information and incentives reside and so the change strikes us (and almost everyone we talked to) as a clear improvement.

There is no “perfect” system and many different systems can be made to work given sufficiently talented individuals operating with goodwill and common purpose. However, a system should not depend on unusually talented individuals, even if such individuals occupy those positions currently. We highlight three potential remaining issues with the new system.
a. The FAS’s Place in the University

The new structure raises some questions about the FAS’s place in the University. The “mid-level” and constrained position of the Three Deans creates a risk that the excellence of the FAS will not remain at the center of the University’s priorities. This should rightly be of concern to all, given the centrality of the College to public perceptions of the excellence of the University. There is a danger that the new system gives the FAS neither the autonomy of a large self-support school (such as Medicine, Law or Management) nor the direct personal authority and responsibility of the Provost and President (which was a given under the old system).

There is also some question about the adequacy of current levels and composition of FAS staffing. In the old system, the FAS was a core interest of the Provost and her/his “Steering Committee” was made up of the Yale College and Graduate School Deans together with the career deputy and associate provosts. The current system, which removes the FAS from the Provost’s office and staff, requires six administratively talented faculty members to act as full-time deans (the “Three Deans” plus the three Divisional Deans.) The advantages of deans drawn from the faculty are their understanding and connection with the missions of teaching and research; disadvantages are varying levels of continuity and competencies. While we have been lucky in finding sufficient talent to date, it is well known that neither administrative ability nor administrative interest are widely distributed among those who choose an academic life. We are concerned that continuity in budgetary and operational know-how are not systematically built in to the current FAS staffing structure.

b. Three Deans Structure and Priority Tradeoffs

The system of Three Deans with overlapping authority and in some cases insufficient authority places on them a large burden of coordination—many meetings, and the need to make frequent one-off agreements about allocative decisions. For example, because faculty hiring is under the authority of the FAS Dean while long run curriculum planning for Yale College falls under the purview the Yale College dean, the ability to make tradeoffs across these priorities is encumbered. We heard some concern that the long run curricular direction of the College, which must to some degree be responsive to the interests and prospects of students, risks being disconnected from the faculty hiring decisions of the FAS. Coordination among the Three Deans helps with this, to be sure, but the negotiated outcomes may be more labored, fragmentary, and incomplete than they should be.

For the same reason, tradeoffs are not easily made across areas such as ladder faculty hires and retentions, graduate student allocations, administrative budgets, non-ladder faculty, and college life. Siloed decision-making makes tradeoffs more difficult to see and also makes tradeoffs more difficult to implement. There is no single authority who can offer “more of X but less of Y.”

In areas in which tradeoffs are unnecessary, the Three Deans system has the advantages of mission clarity and legibility. But in many other areas that require longer run shifts in
resources, the ability to make tradeoffs is an essential competency for a globally competitive institution of higher learning.

c. Constraints on Departments with Urgent and Routine Needs

Chairs report that various aspects of faculty recruitment can face delays or require multiple levels of approval. In departments without dedicated endowment funds allocated at the partial discretion of the Chair, small decisions that might best reside at the department level require Chairs to navigate a complicated landscape of higher level Deans with different responsibilities. Without forgoing flexibility to deal with long run shifts in intellectual and curricular priorities, the University could gain efficiency by delegating to departments appropriate levels of authority to facilitate their routine functions.

Faculty recruitment in the sciences in particular often involves multiple dimensions, including faculty salary, research budgets, graduate student funding, and lab space. Science chairs report that the system has frequently required time consuming negotiations with overlapping administrative levels for even straightforward decisions.

3. Suggestions for Improvement

Near-term possibilities

- The budgetary responsibilities of the Three Deans could be further integrated, allowing for easier trade-offs and better coordination. The units already coordinate their budget presentations and share a lead administrator. A short-run move in this direction would be to present a single coordinated budget to the Provost and the Budget Advisory Group, including a more integrated set of goals, priorities, and budget requests.

- The Yale College Dean could assume a greater role in the coordination of faculty hiring around the long-term curricular needs of the College. By relieving the College Dean of some budgetary planning, as would occur with a more consolidated budget, the Dean would have more time to focus on the intellectual environment of the College. For example, the College Dean might make formal presentations to the Divisional Committees and/or the Faculty Resource Committee about desired trends in undergraduate course demand and how these can be coordinated with faculty hiring (both ladder and non-ladder.) This would make the College Dean’s responsibilities more intellectual and less budgetary. In accordance with our principles as stated above, however, the College Dean should still effectively control some budgets that relate exclusively to College matters, including an appropriate level of discretionary funds. One overall goal should be to reduce the amount of time needed for budget negotiations.

- The level and composition of the staffing model in the FAS Deans office could be reviewed to assess the total staffing level as well as the mix of faculty and more permanent, specialized staff. Permanent staff might better handle some routine matters as well as some more specialized expert functions. Such high level staff should have
expertise sufficient to meet budgetary responsibilities, particularly if those responsibilities increase. We do not, however, endorse a proliferation of lower level administrators.

- Given the importance of the FAS and the College to the overall teaching and research missions of the University, it is important that the decision-making process for important long-run decisions of the University, such as capital campaigns and long-run space planning, be anchored in intimate knowledge of the FAS and College. In many areas, the FAS Dean should have the same level of (shared) representation in long-run planning (and associated leadership and decision-making bodies) as is granted, for example, to the Dean of the Medical School. A short-run move in this direction could be to add the FAS Dean to any appropriate leadership groups.

- We understand that on certain topics, such as the allocation of new or shared space, it would not be reasonable to grant full control to the FAS. But even with complicated issues like space allocation, it may be possible to implement the principles we discuss to design greater effective FAS control in routine circumstances that do not implicate the broader institution.

**Longer-term possibilities**

- A longer-run strategy could be implemented at a time of personnel turnover. At this point, a larger share of the joint budgets of the FAS and the College could be consolidated under a further modified structure. Several suggestions along these lines were made to the committee. One suggestion that attracts some support, but also concern, would be to consolidate College and faculty leadership under a single dean, who might be titled “Dean of Yale College and the FAS”. This would reflect the fully interconnected Yale missions of research and teaching, as was true in the prior system when the College Dean served as academic co-Dean of the faculty. One could go so far as to also put the budget for FAS PhD students under the Dean of Yale College and the FAS and then transform the position of the Dean of the Graduate School into (for example) a Vice Provost for Graduate Education, responsible for the university-wide regulation of graduate student (and, possibly, postdoc) affairs. Any such steps would only be taken after further careful consideration and, to be clear, the committee is not recommending these steps at this time.

- In further stages, one might consider how much of the budgets of the residential colleges and other FAS-specific space, undergraduate dining, undergraduate financial aid and other College-oriented activities might be consolidated into the unified College-FAS budget. Clearly, some of these activities would also be co-determined with the Provost and President.

- In a similar way one might consider how to give the College-FAS leadership more input into the discussion of budgets that substantially benefit the College-FAS such as the library and athletics.
• Any new responsibilities for the Deans, in areas such as budget management or space planning, would have to be accompanied with appropriate administrative and financial support.

Possibilities for Science Planning and Funding

• In the area of science funding, a general principle is that “normal” budgetary decisions for FAS research funds, graduate students and lab space should not involve excess levels of oversight from outside the FAS. The FAS should be able to make trade-offs within its own realm, while still recognizing that science is an activity that occurs across the university and so that important levels of university-wide coordination are also necessary.

• Beginning in the summer of 2019, a series of changes were put in place that we hope will significantly improve the situation. The new science steering committee may allow more streamlined communication and coordination, while permitting an appropriate degree of autonomy over FAS-specific decisions. These changes should be monitored and (as appropriate) be adjusted to obtain further improvement.

• The current experiment of unifying under one person the jobs of the FAS divisional Dean of Science and the Dean of SEAS seems worthwhile. The future excellence of SEAS may depend on effective coordination with other FAS sciences and the position of the FAS (and science generally at Yale) may be enhanced by tighter bonds.

4. Conclusions

Endowing departments with adequate levels of funding for routine decisions, and empowering the FAS Dean’s office with a broader remit and appropriate staffing, would align resources and information more effectively than is currently the case. Changes in this direction would improve the functioning of the FAS and Yale College, units that are central to the University’s overall reputation and mission.

At the same time, a more appropriately organized and empowered FAS/Yale College would improve FAS’s relationship with the rest of the University. The FAS, so situated, would be able to engage more productively with the sciences in the Medical School, and with the scholarly expertise and teaching capacity of the other professional schools as well. A closer alignment of FAS and Yale College resources, information, and mission strengthens the whole University.

As is traditional, we encourage further “five year reviews” of the evolving FAS decanal structure.

Note: this report was largely written in the early spring of 2020, but its presentation to the President was delayed by the pandemic crisis. The President received a “final” version of the report in October 2020. Prior to broader distribution in the spring of 2021, for the purpose of clarification the committee made some minor edits that did not affect its conclusions.
Appendix

The original FAS Deans committee report can be found here:

https://fas.yale.edu/ad-hoc-committee-decanal-structures-report-january-24-2014

In addition to its important recommendations, that report includes an extensive review of decanal structures at other institutions as well as past structures at Yale. This review informs our discussion as well.