An Open Letter on the Recent Plans Fiasco

Dear Todd,

I’m writing to you to express some thoughts, opinions, and ideas with regards to the recent Plans fiasco. I expect that you’ve seen many of these ideas before, but I also thought you might appreciate a different perspective and that you might learn something new.

I’m taking the time to write because I think highly of you. You work hard to improve the institution and, in all my dealings with you, you’ve listed well to my ideas and tried to find ways to help with my initiatives. I also very much appreciate your effort to involve the alumna/alumni community in this discussion and your speed in putting together the administration-sanctioned mailing list.

The title of the mailing list, virtualcommunities, suggests a rather narrow perspective on the issue. To many of the students, staff, and faculty that I’ve talked to, the abrupt shutdown of Plans and creation of a new policy are not the real issues. The real issue is that the administration acted without consulting any students, faculty, or alums. To students and alums, this kind of action is a clear violation of the principle of self-governance. (To a subset of those, any action that restricts the behavior of Plans would be a violation, since students govern Plans, but most simply would have wanted more open discussion.) To faculty, it’s also a violation of faculty governance. Hence, the concern is less that you relay concerns to ITS, than that you relay concerns to Osgood and the rest of the administration.

To some, the Plans fiasco is an example of ITS’s lack of understanding of how people on campus use or want to use technology. (The laptop proposal of a few years ago was another example.) Yes, they’re upset that ITS shut down Plans. They’re more upset that ITS thought it was a reasonable thing to do. Many also believe that it’s an attempt by ITS to co-opt Plans for commercial software.

On an unrelated issue, I’ve even heard concerns about your mailing list as an example of administrative failings at Grinnell. While I appreciate you taking the time and effort to set up the mailing list, there were already at least two mailing lists about these topics (plans-for-plans@math.grinnell.edu is the main one; Mark Miller is also setting up one). Many wonder why you could not have simply listened to that mailing
I have also heard concerns about the way you intend the mailing list to operate, in which people post to the list and you then “summarize” the concerns. While such summaries are often how hierarchical systems operate, many of us have had bad experiences having our words summarized. Summaries tend to weaken points. Summaries may not forward all important points. As a particular example, I was chatting with Bill Francis a few weeks ago about things I perceive to be flaws in various pieces of software that ITS supports. Bill told me that he had not previously heard those complaints, which suggests to me that the people I reported them to did not forward them on (or those above them didn’t).

As you probably know, there are now over 700 signatures on a petition that opposes the dismantling of Plans, available at http://www.petitiononline.com/grinplan/petition.html. All those signatories have indicated that they will not donate to Grinnell in the next year. I find that incredibly concerning. I also posted an early message saying that I thought that people should not stop supporting the institution just because of this action. Unfortunately, I failed to convince others. I will, of course, continue to donate to the College.

You may have heard that I’m going to try an alternative route. With some students and alums, I’m planning to start a non-profit, tentatively named Independent Grinnell, to which people who are uncomfortable donating to the College because of various actions (not just the Plans action) can still donate and indirectly support the College. The non-profit will support Plans. It will also support other activities for the betterment of Grinnell College that might not otherwise be supported. We are still working on particular details.

I’d be happy to talk to you about any or all of these issues. I will also try to keep you posted about activities of interest.

Regards,

Samuel A. Rebelsky

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