

February 3, 2023

To: The Williams College Faculty and Senior Staff

From: The Ad Hoc Committee on Winter Study Teaching and Learning

Report on the Committee's Work, February-December 2022

Introduction: Charge, Approach, and Process

The Ad Hoc Committee on Winter Study Teaching and Learning was formed in Spring 2022. The Committee was charged by the Faculty Steering Committee to, “consider and recommend changes to the structure of Winter Study that would allow it to better address a wide range of needs as well as capitalize on the teaching interests and expertise of our whole community. The committee should consider the needs of our academic curriculum (for example thesis and foreign language teaching support, and make-ups for course deficiencies), specific student needs (for example addressing differences in student preparation, improving student health and wellness, and career preparation), and co-curricular needs and goals (athletics, performance, service, etc.).”

The Committee began meeting in February 2022. We began a research and outreach process as a way of gaining some concrete data and common ground from which to begin discussing potential recommendations. The Committee conducted a survey of department and program chairs, requested data from Institutional Research, looked into similar programs in other institutions, and reached out to other offices on campus with stakes in the Winter Study Program, such as the '68 Center for Career Exploration, Office of College Relations, Spouse/Partner Resources, and the Center for Learning in Action. In May 2022, the Committee presented its preliminary recommendations at the Faculty Meeting and collected further feedback from faculty. The Committee has also conducted two surveys of students, one of graduating seniors in the Spring of 2022, and one of current sophomores, juniors, and seniors in the early fall of 2022. We have also surveyed staff and alumni instructors, and we have consulted with others on campus with stakes in the program.

Through our work, the Committee learned that Winter Study is a far more complicated entity than many of us had imagined. The program means different things to different constituents, and serves many different purposes across campus. These complexities made it more challenging than we initially imagined it might be to advocate sweeping changes that would impact those constituents in different ways and potentially undermine some of those purposes. The Committee's charge outlines both the possibility of significant changes to the program as well as the consideration of many smaller and often more concrete issues. Because of what we have learned in the process, our recommendations focus on two broad changes to the administration and staffing of the Winter Study Program. Briefly, they are

1) Moving toward a system that eliminates the obligation for faculty to teach “regular” Winter Study courses every other year and invites faculty to opt-in to this form of Winter Study teaching for a modest incentive.

2) Appointing a Winter Study Program Director and centralizing the process of recruiting, vetting, appointing, and supporting non-faculty Winter Study instructors. Faculty oversight over the Winter Study curriculum will be maintained through the Winter Study Program Committee

Each of these recommendations is discussed in Sections I and II below. These ideas were formulated in a very different financial environment than the current one. Given budget constraints and significant administrative time needed to implement these changes, we anticipate that they will need to take place gradually over a number of years. This also constrains the implementation of the smaller and more concrete recommendations and changes to the Winter Study Program that resulted from the Committee’s research and deliberation, but these are outlined in Section III in hopes that the relevant units and committees across campus can take them up when possible.

I. The Role of the Faculty in Winter Study Teaching

Winter Study exists both as a stand-alone curriculum and also as a curriculum that is deeply entwined with the curricula of departments and programs. The Committee recognizes that faculty offer courses during Winter Study that fill a broad range of curricular goals. These include:

- Courses that students take to fulfill Winter Study graduation requirements but that carry no additional academic credit. For the purposes of this report, we call these “regular” Winter Study courses. These courses can be closely connected to units’ curricula (academic courses in the unit’s area; introductions to research or other methodologies, practica); and can also be courses that are in areas of interest to the faculty but are not part of the unit’s curricula or the faculty member’s academic expertise.
- Courses that take place during Winter Study that students take for both Winter Study and semester credit (intensive courses that allow students to make up for deficiencies)
- Courses that are required as part of a course or an honors thesis;
- Courses in language sustaining programs that are required for students but do not count as a winter study course.
- Faculty supervised 99’s or independent research

The Committee believes that the college’s current practices for staffing the “regular” Winter Study Curriculum (described in the first bullet point above) are the most problematic. The Committee recommends moving toward a system that eliminates the obligation for faculty to teach “regular” Winter Study courses every other year

and invites faculty to opt-in to this form of Winter Study teaching for a modest incentive.

The Committee notes that the Faculty Handbook (11-J) includes an obligation to remain on campus in January to fulfill committee, departmental, advising, or administrative responsibilities. Although we recognize that this particular section of the Faculty Handbook may need to be updated to reflect current conditions (e.g., the possibility of discharging these responsibilities remotely), we believe it is important to remind faculty that absent the obligation to teach Winter Study every two years, there are still formal work obligations during the Winter Study period. Therefore, we recommend that faculty plan to continue work such as advising individual theses, overseeing Winter Study 99's, and fulfilling college and departmental service obligations during January as part of this obligation.

The Strategic Plan and this Committee's charge make clear the college's commitment to Winter Study. We believe that a program incentivizing interested faculty to teach regular Winter Study courses is preferable to the current system in that it preserves opportunities for faculty who are committed to Winter Study teaching while transforming it from an obligation to a supported curricular initiative that can be undertaken when research, teaching, and service commitments allow. Other forms of Winter Study teaching that are closely associated with unit curricula, such as thesis seminars, introductions to research, and language sustaining programs should be staffed by their home units on a rotating basis. Courses that allow students to make up deficiencies would continue to be staffed by the Dean of Faculty's Office under existing forms of compensation for these courses.

Rationale:

The longstanding system through which college faculty are contractually obligated to teach Winter Study every other year has attenuated to the point that Winter Study teaching duties are not distributed evenly among the faculty. Several factors have contributed to this situation, including faculty who have been exempted from Winter Study teaching for some part of their career, faculty who have obtained releases from Winter Study teaching in exchange for various service obligations, and academic units that employ disparate practices to account for their Winter Study teaching obligations. Unlike the oversight of faculty leave patterns, there is no central system of accounting for the Winter Study teaching obligation. Unit chairs, who rotate regularly, must track and enforce it. Many who responded to our survey expressed frustration with lack of clarity in the requirements.

The impact of these practices is visible in the decline of the proportion of faculty-taught Winter Study courses relative to those taught by staff and adjuncts. This trend was evident prior to the pandemic, but pandemic conditions have exacerbated it: in 2021 pre-tenure faculty (with start dates in 2019 and 2020) were exempted from Winter Study teaching until the submission of their tenure materials in order to

mitigate the effects of the pandemic on this cohort. Although the expectations for units to contribute to the Winter Study curriculum were not officially reduced, faculty participation in Winter Study teaching has declined even further during the 2022 and 2023 Winter Study Programs.¹

Finally, the college's most recent accreditation review determined that Winter Study teaching hours are no longer necessary for accreditation.

We believe that the attenuation and uneven distribution of the teaching obligation is evidence of multiple, often competing claims on faculty time during the Winter Study period, and thus it is preferable to offer faculty the choice of teaching a regular WSP for an incentive rather than to look for ways to enforce the obligation.

Complications:

- 1) The Committee arrived at this recommendation in a different financial environment than the present one. The present budget reductions complicate the question of how to structure and implement the incentive for WSP teaching. We recognize that it may require waiting for improved financial conditions or different planning to fund this initiative.
- 2) The Committee is also aware that this change will remove the "Winter Study Release" from the repertoire of forms of compensation offered by the Dean of Faculty in exchange for some types of service, and may also present complications for the current staffing practices of some academic units. The feedback the Committee has received about its proposals highlights several "gray areas" around questions of compensation that need to be worked out between individual academic units, the CAP, and the Dean of Faculty. For example, some forms of (current) Winter Study teaching that are integral to unit curricular and are very time-intensive, such as supervising research students in

¹ Our data is from Institutional Research for WS 2015-2019. We do not have data for WS 2020 and 2021 (cancelled), and data from WS 2022 and 2023 is from the Winter Study Program. Please note that Institutional Research data does not distinguish between "regular" WS teaching and intensives, honors courses, and 99s. In WS 2015, staff/adjunct instructors taught 46% of courses while faculty taught 54%. After several years (2016-2018) of splitting the share of courses roughly equally, this proportion was reversed in WS 2019, with staff/adjunct instructors teaching 55%, and faculty 45%. Institutional Research data from this year shows that faculty courses accounted for only 40% of WSP enrollments. For WS 2022, staff/adjunct instructors offered 57% of courses compared to faculty's 42%. Taking out intensives, honors, and independent research courses taught by faculty, faculty taught only 25 "regular" courses out of the total of 253 taught in this year. Registration for WS 2023 was ongoing at the time of writing, but the course package shows staff/adjunct instructors teaching 67% of the courses offered, and faculty 33%.

the sciences. Some faculty who work with research students receive Winter Study teaching credit while others do not. Instructors of thesis seminars in some units also get credit for teaching Winter Study for the January portion of these seminars. These practices raise the question of whether such courses should be treated as “regular” Winter Study courses (and thus be eligible for an incentive), receive some other form of compensation, or be treated as part of a normal, year-long teaching load for faculty in these units. Of course, advising theses and mentoring student research is part of the job of all faculty members. But those responsibilities are not always evenly distributed or counted across or within units. We believe that answering these questions will require a broader discussion of how academic units and the college should account for obligations outside of the 2-2 course load, such as advising individual theses, independent studies, and independent research during both the Winter Study period and the semester. Additionally, we expect that the research and discussion among units, the CAP, and the Dean of the Faculty necessary to answer these questions will take significant time to accomplish.

In sum, we understand that implementing our recommendations will take time, possibly several years. As we move toward a different system envisioned here, we would like to see the college consider whether pre-tenure faculty should be exempted from teaching “regular” Winter Study courses, and the implications of that decision.

II. Administration and Staffing of the Winter Study Program

1. Appointment of a Winter Study Program Director

The complexity of the Winter Study Program—which involves recruiting, hiring, and training a growing number of adjunct instructors and coordinating offerings among academic units—requires substantially more administrative support than currently exists. If we move toward a system in which faculty participation in Winter Study is voluntary, the administration of the program will require an even greater degree of oversight and coordination. We believe that this support and supervision will be best achieved through appointing a Director of the Winter Study Program. The Director will take a leadership role in the stewardship and development of the curriculum, the promotion of the program and new curricular initiatives for it, and the recruitment, training, and support of adjunct and staff instructors. The Director will work closely with the Winter Study Program Committee to review course proposals and evaluate instructors.

As described in the preceding section, the research and planning involved in making faculty participation in Winter Study voluntary will take time. Nevertheless, the Committee believes that the immediate appointment of a Winter Study Director is necessary. Other recommendations for the program cannot proceed without someone in a position to oversee the program and coordinate closely with the many

different constituencies across campus with stakes in Winter Study. Although we are aware of the current financial climate and budget constraints, we place highest priority on the Director's position.

2. Centralize and coordinate of the process of recruiting, vetting, appointing, and supporting non-faculty Winter Study instructors.

Staff, alumni, spouses/partners, and community members express strong interest in Winter Study teaching opportunities. Staff and adjunct instructors are already doing an increasing share of Winter Study teaching--as much as 67% in WS 2023. If we move to a system in which faculty teaching is voluntary, this group of instructors will need to be expanded and cultivated. Currently, the Committee's research reveals considerable dissatisfaction among these instructors with the processes by which they are recruited, hired, and oriented for Winter Study teaching. To address this problem, the Committee proposes:

- a. Centralizing the process of hiring non-faculty instructors by allowing them to propose courses directly to the Winter Study Director and Winter Study Program Committee, rather than obtaining sponsorship through an academic unit.
- b. The Director take charge of improving communication with these instructors, lengthen the timeline for development and submission of course proposals, normalize expectations for teaching time and student workloads, and organize programming around syllabus development, classroom dynamics, and equipment/technology needs for Winter Study courses.

Rationale

Currently it is the responsibility of unit chairs to submit a course package to the Winter Study Program Committee. Non-faculty instructors (staff, alumni, spouses/partners, and community members) must approach and secure the approval of an academic unit in order to propose a Winter Study course. Under this system, obtaining the sponsorship of an academic unit presents a barrier for some (e.g., a spouse/partner concerned about making a request to their partner's home department), whereas other instructors obtain sponsorship with academic units with which they have personal rather than academic connections (e.g., the proposed course has no academic relationship to the sponsoring unit). The intermediary role of the academic unit thus can discourage some potential instructors in the first case, while undermining presumed academic oversight of the Winter Study curriculum in the second. Centralizing the appointment of these instructors under the Director and the Winter Study Program Committee will relieve chairs of academic units of this responsibility, and allow the Director and the Committee to shape the curriculum in response to curricular initiatives and student interests.

The Director's role in recruiting and supporting these instructors will make Winter Study teaching more accessible and aid them in setting up their courses. A longer time frame will allow these instructors to take advantage of programming and orientation provided, and ease the transition to teaching in the short, concentrated context of Winter Study.

Complications:

Although there is interest and enthusiasm among staff and adjunct instructors for Winter Study teaching, there are several concrete challenges to further expanding their role in the program.

Adjuncts: One of the biggest problems in broadening the pool of adjunct instructors for Winter Study is the shortage of local short-term housing. The lack of housing for the Winter Study period restricts recruitment to those who live in town, own houses in town, or can otherwise reliably access local housing. The Winter Study Program offers travel and housing stipends of \$500-\$750 on top of the \$2700 teaching stipend to adjuncts. This level of compensation certainly presents an obstacle to some potential adjuncts, but our discussions with staff from the Office of College Relations who work with alumni instructors revealed that even those willing and able to come to campus to teach had difficulty finding housing. This problem restricts the pool of adjuncts and constrains diversity within that group.

For adjunct or alumni instructors who work, the daytime teaching schedule of Winter Study is also a constraint. A broader pool of adjunct instructors might be brought in to participate in Winter Study teaching if 1) remote teaching was an acceptable form of instruction and 2) if they could participate in shorter, more concentrated forms of teaching or programming than regular Winter Study courses.

Staff: It is difficult to treat staff as a single category of Winter Study instructors as their circumstances are diverse. Some staff contracts come with an obligation to teach Winter Study each year, while other exempt (salaried) and non-exempt staff must negotiate time away from their regular responsibilities if they wish to teach a Winter Study course. Some staff report being discouraged by a manager or an academic chair from proposing a course, while others indicate that their manager's support has allowed them to teach Winter Study on a regular basis. The Committee sees significant potential in recruiting all types of college staff to teach in the Winter Study Program as they could contribute a wide range of skills-based, creative, and academic courses to the program. College staff cannot receive the stipends offered to adjuncts for Winter Study teaching and current instructors express some frustration that the time they spend in preparing and teaching courses is uncompensated and unrecognized, and often done while they are managing their regular responsibilities. The Committee would like to see the Winter Study Director publicize teaching

opportunities for staff more clearly, support staff in developing courses, and work with managers on campus to find ways for interested staff to offer courses.

3. Oversight of the Winter Study Curriculum

The current role that academic units play in connecting non-faculty instructors with the Winter Study Program—at least in theory—allows for faculty oversight over the Winter Study curriculum. In other words, the chair and faculty of a particular department can reject a course proposed by an adjunct instructor if they believe it inappropriate or insufficiently rigorous. The centralization of review proposed above removes that layer of faculty oversight. The Committee recommends retaining a degree of faculty oversight over the Winter Study curriculum through a slight expansion of the role of the Winter Study Program Committee.

The Director and the Winter Study Program Committee will review proposals for all Winter Study courses and take responsibility for reviewing the course evaluations of non-faculty instructors. The review process will necessarily involve some conversations with academic chairs, but will not impose the administrative oversight of the adjunct hiring on those chairs.

The Faculty Handbook mandates that the Winter Study Program Committee contain representatives from all three divisions of the college, providing a means for faculty oversight over the Winter Study curriculum. For proposed courses with academic/disciplinary content, the representative of the appropriate division will be tasked with considering the proposal's merits. In cases in which a more expert opinion is needed, the Program Committee will consult with the relevant department or individual on campus. We also note that the composition of the Program Committee includes representation from the Dean's Office, IT, Libraries, and CLiA; these representatives should also ensure that proposals meet appropriate standards in their areas of expertise. We imagine that instructors could propose courses under the current categories of the Winter Study mission statement: Experiential, Self-Expression, Exploration, and Wellness. When appropriate, instructors could designate an additional academic category under which their course falls—art, history, computer science, etc—to aid in the review process.

Once finalized by the Winter Study Program Committee, we recommend that the faculty vote upon the Winter Study curriculum. Although the Committee was not unanimous in the recommendation for a faculty vote, the rationale for it is that it makes the Winter Study curriculum review process similar to that for the regular curriculum.

III. Changes to the Winter Study Program

The Winter Study Curriculum

The Committee finds that the current Winter Study Program mission statement—developed by the Spring 2021 Winter Study Ad Hoc Working Group and the Winter Study Program Committee—captures the breadth and variation possible within the Winter Study curriculum.[1] Data collected from both of our surveys of students indicate that students value a wide range of educational experiences during Winter Study, with no single type of course or experience emerging as a clear preference. At the same time, student survey responses show that students overwhelmingly appreciate the Winter Study period as a time in the year when they can relax and socialize on campus, getting a “mental reprieve” from the rigors of the semester

Student surveys call for expanded access to certain areas of the current curriculum, namely travel, creative, and hands-on/skills-based courses. The Committee interprets these findings as supporting the breadth of the curriculum outlined in the Program mission statement. We also emphasize the space and scope within this curriculum for more traditionally academic pursuits, in contrast to the perception that we have heard from many faculty that all Winter Study courses must be experiential or that faculty must teach their hobbies. Winter Study teaching may take different forms and use different types of assessments from those of regular semester courses, but academic exploration and research remain important components of the curriculum.

Proposed Initiatives for the Winter Study Program

The Committee believes that the proposed shift to new modes of staffing and administering the Winter Study Program must be accompanied by initiatives that promote Winter Study and foster campus-wide discussions of Winter Study teaching and the potential for the Winter Study period to contribute to the “year-round learning” articulated in the Strategic Plan. Such initiatives might include:

1. A general Winter Study teaching initiative that clarifies the purpose and criteria for Winter Study courses and presents models of successful courses of all types. The Winter Study Program could partner with the Rice Center on creating regular workshops or discussions on developing Winter Study courses, open to faculty, staff, alumni, spouses/partners, community members, etc.
2. An initiative to develop Winter Study programming, separate from courses. This programming could take many forms. One idea is short workshops created by different offices on campus and targeted to students by class year: academic skills workshops (First Days) for first years, Study Away workshops for sophomores, career exploration workshops for juniors, etc. Academic units may also sponsor workshops, speakers, film series or other events that raise student interest in their programs.

3. An initiative to encourage academic units to develop Winter Study courses that complement or enrich their regular semester curricula. Some units already have such courses, but all academic units should be encouraged to think of whether the Winter Study period might allow them to offer experiential courses or introductions to basic skills that do not fit into the regular semester. Courses of this kind could be staffed by faculty members or adjuncts.

Concrete Changes to the Current Winter Study Program

The Committee's outreach has revealed calls for change in some aspects of the current organization and administration of the Winter Study Program. Recognizing that many of these suggestions require greater study and consideration than this Committee has been able to give them, we list them here in order of "most easily achieved" to possibilities to be considered by future Winter Study Program Committees or other units and college committees.

1. Clarify the language around the "10-page paper" assessment for WSP courses to convey that such a paper is not *required* for WSP courses and instructors can determine the most appropriate means of assessment for their courses.
2. Loosen the current guidelines for student-proposed 99's in order to encourage more students to pursue independent research projects during Winter Study.
3. Incorporate discussion of Winter Study opportunities into first-year and sophomore advising.
4. Consider a return to the "ranked choice" system for Winter Study registration. Students voice strong support for a ranked choice system in which they can be placed in another course of their choice if dropped from their first choice. Some on the Committee recall that this used to be the method of registration in the past, and we are not sure why it was changed.
5. Consider delaying the start date of the Winter Study period by several days to allow students to take advantage of lower transportation costs for travel to campus. A consistent complaint from students is that Winter Study begins too early after the New Year, forcing students to travel to campus at a time when airline tickets are especially costly. Such a change would require careful study and consideration to assess its impact on all types of courses and co-curricular activities.
6. Consider offering shorter, more intensive courses at different times over the Winter Study period. Students could take two or more intensive "modules" for Winter Study course credit, and it would make it easier for some staff, adjuncts, and alumni to participate in

Winter Study teaching. Along with this change, some consideration should be given to the acceptability of remote teaching during Winter Study (assuming normal teaching conditions).

7. Consider replacing the current grading system (P, PP, F) with a simple Pass/Fail grading system. The Committee is not unanimous in this recommendation, but some consideration of the system could be taken up in the future.

[1] <https://winterstudy.williams.edu> "The Winter Study Program provides students a change of pace, emphasizes individual student initiative, and opens new horizons for students to explore. During this interlude between semesters, students have time to immerse themselves in an interest of their choosing. Winter Study offerings promote one or more of the following:

- Experiential, hands-on learning (craft, literacy, fluency, research);
- Self-expression (art, performing arts, and languages);
- Student Exploration (academic, global, career, independent projects, research); and
- Wellness (mindfulness, health, life-planning)

Students can travel across the globe; intern or apprentice in a field of interest; pursue independent research; or enroll in on-campus courses on topics not covered during the regular semester. Most offerings do not have prerequisites, so students can interact and collaborate with peers who hold different perspectives and interests. Students will also have the opportunity to encounter new subjects, skills, and ideas that may ignite lifelong passions.

[AR1]